

# Washington Statewide Family Engagement Center Asset Mapping Executive Summary

## Goals and Background

The Washington Statewide Family Engagement Center (WASFEC) conducted interviews and focus groups with family leaders, organizations, and agencies across the state to better understand family engagement, build relationships, and learn how WASFEC can better support families, students, and educators. Eight family leaders participated in focus groups and 19 statewide organizations and agencies were represented in focus groups.<sup>1</sup> WASFEC staff members then analyzed the interviews and focus groups to identify themes and high-level takeaways.

In addition, WASFEC administered a survey to district leaders to develop a better understanding of districts' family engagement practices and needs. The survey was sent to 314 school districts, charter schools, and Tribal schools, and 139 leaders responded (44% response rate). Findings from the interviews, focus groups, and survey are presented below and will inform WASFEC's future work.

## Summary of Findings

Washington has incredible assets related to family engagement. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are providing critical services, advocacy organizations are building family leaders' agency in shaping the education system, and schools are increasingly acknowledging the importance of family engagement. At the same time, there are enduring inequities related to accessibility, inclusion, culturally responsive practices, and equitable power sharing in schools. Families deserve schools that are inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-ableist and educators who value family expertise and equitably collaborate with families and the community. There is much work to be done and WASFEC can support systems change across the state.

### Participants made the following recommendations to WASFEC:

#### Bring people together

for relationship- and coalition-building to make systems equitable.

**Support or lead** professional development and capacity-building for educators and families.

**Provide resources for families** to navigate the education system and share or develop resources regarding equitable family engagement for educators and system leaders.



Washington Statewide

Family Engagement Center

FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, and COMMUNITIES in PARTNERSHIP

## Family Priorities

WASFEC conducted virtual focus groups with caregivers who have participated in an advocacy or leadership training. Families discussed their experiences with schools and the challenges they face when engaging with educators. Families identified the following priorities for schools and educators.<sup>2</sup>



**Build trusting relationships**



**Engage in two-way communication and follow through**



**Value expertise of all families**



**Ensure accessibility and equitable power sharing**

## Relationships and Coalition-Building

In interviews and focus groups with statewide organizations and agencies, participants shared both the importance of relationships and coalition-building as well as the barriers to building trusting relationships. To accomplish the systems change needed for equitable family engagement, families, educators, and others need to build coalitions that advance family priorities and reshape systems.<sup>3</sup>



### **Increasing awareness of the importance of strong educator-family relationships**

Schools and districts are increasingly discussing the importance of strong family engagement but are not sure how to approach it.



### **State agencies and CBOs often work in silos**

Statewide agencies and organizations rarely collaborate, limiting their effectiveness. Systems change and accountability are needed to realize equitable family engagement statewide.



### **Inequitable systems**

Schools and statewide agencies reproduce racism and are not designed to be accessible or inclusive, especially for families of color and multilingual families.



### **Families trust CBOs**

CBOs that have established trust in their communities provide critical support for families, but their impact is often limited by a lack of resources.

Some district leaders (25%) report that their district fully partners with local CBOs to engage and support families, most (56%) are in the early stages of partnering with CBOs, and few (6%) do not partner with CBOs at all.

# Professional Development, Capacity-Building, and Sharing Resources

In the district leader survey and through interviews and focus groups, participants shared that schools need support and resources to implement equitable family engagement practices. In addition, resources that support strong family-school relationships are needed.<sup>4</sup>



## While most districts have a clear vision for family engagement, many do not invest in it

Most districts (70%) report having a clear vision for family engagement and the majority (61%) have a family engagement policy.

Less than half of districts (45%) report having family engagement in their district strategic plan.

Only 37 percent of districts report that they dedicate more than a single full-time position to promoting family engagement in their district.



## Districts are not including families in decision making

Only 36 percent of districts report that they fully implement two-way communication strategies with families.

Few districts (14%) report that they engage families in district planning and decision making and even fewer (11%) engage families in school planning and decision making.



## Professional development is an area of growth for districts

Few district leaders (12%) report that their district is fully providing professional development to district staff members to better engage families, most (66%) are in the early stages of providing professional development, and 9 percent of districts do not provide professional development on this topic. Rates are similar for professional development for district staff members and principals.

Most districts are not implementing family engagement data strategies, with only 14 percent using data to assess and strengthen family engagement in schools.



## Impact of advocacy trainings

In focus groups, family leaders who have participated in fellowships or advocacy training described the positive impact and ripple effect of these efforts—demonstrating the need for this work. They also reported a need for additional training and support, especially related to special education, discipline, and how to advocate for their child.

# District Challenges

Districts<sup>5</sup> reported the following as the three biggest challenges for engaging families:

- Funding** family engagement staff and activities
- Providing educators with time** for planning and facilitating family engagement activities
- Building the capacity** of school and district staff members to engage families

## Next Steps for WASFEC

Based on these findings and recommendations, WASFEC plans to prioritize the following next steps:

<b>Increase local capacity through coalition-building and fostering cross-community relationships</b>	<b>Center family voice through the WASFEC advisory board</b>
<b>Share equity-focused resources, tools, and strategies with families, educators, and system leaders to promote equitable partnerships between schools and families</b>	<b>Provide professional development, school-based coaching, and district communities of practice to strengthen equitable family engagement</b>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Participants included representatives from the following organizations or agencies: Fatherhood Council, Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment (PAVE), Parent Teacher Association (PTA), The Arc of Washington, Washington Head Start and ECEAP, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA), Washington Education Association (WEA), Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD), Association of Washington Student Leaders, Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), Department of Health, Office of Educational Ombuds (OEO), Washington Communities for Children (WCFC), Washington State Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs, Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs, Washington State Commission on African American Affairs, Washington State Board of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Based on two focus groups with eight family leaders.

<sup>3</sup> Based on focus groups and interviews with eight family leaders and 19 organizations and agencies as well as a survey of district leaders (n = 139).

<sup>4</sup> Based on survey of district leaders (n = 139) and two focus groups with eight family leaders.

<sup>5</sup> Based on survey of district leaders (n = 139).