



Family Engagement Policy Recommendations

September 13, 2016





ONE Atlanta is...

ONE Atlanta is a coalition of LEE (Leadership for Education Equity) members, parents, educators, religious leaders, students, and other community leaders who advocate for policies and practices that expand educational opportunities for Metro Atlanta students.

We Are Organizing For Education in Atlanta.

ONE Atlanta's Mission...

To create a thriving, region changing; citizens education and empowerment organization that works collectively for our community .

Introduction/Background

ONE Atlanta's History

A year and a half ago current and former teachers and school leaders decided that listening to community – regularly and skillfully - was the best way we would advance what's best for our children. ONE Atlanta is a coalition of LEE (Leadership for Education Equity) members, parents, educators, religious leaders, students, and other community leaders who organize for policies and practices that expand educational opportunities for Metro Atlanta students. Unique to One Atlanta is data obtained primarily through face-to-face, intentional listening – regularly and frequently holding space for the community to express their perspectives, thoughts, feelings and ideas for change. Over 18 months, ONE Atlanta hosted face-to-face conversations engaging nearly 600 stakeholders and launched a parent and family engagement team for action on this issue. This policy brief is based in the community narratives concerning family and community engagement.

Process

We refined the policy positions in this paper after speaking with leaders in the parent engagement field, policy makers and officials within the district and state. There is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders to ensure we engage in meaningful ways to move students forward. Throughout this process, ONE Atlanta has been committed to ensuring the community voice is represented in any policy making decisions.

According to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement study, “in the U.S., 64 percent of the differences in achievement from one school to another were attributable to ‘home’ variables including ‘parental support for academic achievement’ and ‘socioeconomic status.’” Similar results were found in all 39 countries studied. There is clear and often cited consensus in the importance and role of family engagement with schools. Investments in family engagement programming and best practices in implementing policy create great returns throughout the educational experience of a student.¹

While it is clear that engagement matters and will move students forward toward student achievement there has been a disconnect between schools and the communities they serve. This policy recommendation will offer solutions derived from the common themes based in the community's narratives.

Problem Statement

Family and school engagement has not included the voices of ALL to empower student achievement. Specifically, historically disconnected parents have been underrepresented in family engagement efforts in Atlanta Public Schools.

Process



Objectives

In addressing this problem, we sought to:

- Identify and listen to voices and stories of parents, teachers and community members traditionally not represented, through education conversations and house meetings.
- Engage 300 stakeholders in the community through education conversations and house meetings, focus parental engagement within Douglas Cluster.
- Give specific and actionable policy solutions for the district's consideration in any parent engagement strategy
- Partner with the district, other community and civic organizations to advance engagement best practices.

Options / Recommendations

- **Provide funded mandatory district level training, resources, rubrics and toolkits for school administration and staff to effectively implement parent engagement best practices. Make ongoing training and coaching a critical piece of the parent engagement policy, including the use of organizing culture and tools.**

Rationale – Meets themes concerning leadership in schools and principal culture-setting as the bridge to families

- The greatest percentage of feedback and stories were directly tied to school culture.
- Training principals, teachers and families in best practices around engagement along with providing technology tools and resources would build pathways to parent partnerships.
- Teachers and Principals were very clear about receiving mandates without resources and stressed the importance of having the resources, coaching and mentorship to implement policy goals.
- We're in Year 1 of the charter system. In year 2 our GO Teams will be charged with creating a family engagement team, this is an excellent opportunity to shift school communities.

- **Secure commitment from transportation companies like Marta, Uber, and Lyft to pilot family incentive programs in APS offering free and reduced rides as parents visit APS schools.**

Rationale – Meets themes concerning poverty, incentives and removing the transportation barriers

- A common narrative around accessibility to the physical school location and divide
- Majority of the 23.58% of households have no vehicles and are living in poverty
- Eighty percent of Atlanta's African-American children live in communities with high concentrations of poverty, compared with 6 percent of their white peers and 29 percent of Asians
- Consider under-resourced families choice between household expenses and purchasing transportation to schools for events.

- **Create District Cabinet Level Position for Parent Engagement**

Rationale - Meets theme of the parent engagement office as “orphaned child,” as lacking accountability and priority in the district

- Research Action Meetings gave a clear narrative, there was a lack of clarity around engagement and the office movement in the district structure
- Parents asked for an “owner” to hold accountable, clarity and a consistent set of standards, tools and establishment of a new culture around parent engagement.
- Ensures a serious commitment to engagement through a Cabinet level operational leader who can partner with the Board's Community Liaison to develop a district wide community engagement plan with special emphasis on schools currently failing to ensure students with disabilities have the supports they need.



Analysis

- **Training**

- Over 40% of respondents had stories directly related to school culture around engagement.² Respondents were almost equally split among the experiences, some expressing stories of positive interactions and others negative.² The Harvard Family Research project documented the key role the district plays in family engagement strategies, any strategies must “ensure that is it part and parcel of supporting student learning. This includes superintendents and senior leadership linking family engagement to their district’s instructional goals, the creation of an infrastructure that elevates and communicates about the importance of family engagement, and mechanisms to assess progress and performance along the way.”³
- School Leaders and Teachers were clear that any training program must increase school and principal capacity through providing resources from the district level to enable the work at the schools and communities. Through ongoing professional development and coaching we can lift and support schools capacity to carry out family engagement strategically.

- **Transportation**

- About a third of respondents told stories around transportation and transportation issues. Many respondents to our question asking about what resources they would provide for schools and districts referred to transportation both for teachers to go into the community but also options for parents to come into the school space.
- We have seen hospitals and other public services build meaningful partnerships with ride sharing companies like Uber and Lyft. Exploring partnerships like these, and others with public transportation companies would relieve parents struggling with making it to the schools physical building. According to Brookings Institute report on Atlanta’s urban growth the majority of the 23.58% of households have no vehicles and are living in poverty.⁴ Eighty percent of Atlanta's African-American children live in communities with high concentrations of poverty, compared with 6 percent of their white peers and 29 percent of Asians.⁵

- **Accountability**

- When family and community engagement is a priority within the district, we can strategically implement programming focused from cradle to career. The creation of district level cabinet position ensures that all district staff have a clear and direct line of contact and central place to share and create resources and practices. This position can set the vision and drive the mission of engagement in all projects and activities.
- In districts like Houston ISD and District of Columbia Public Schools – these cabinet level positions have mandates to both meet engagement deadlines and have mandates around establishing strategy teams including the voices of parents, students and any effected stakeholders.⁶ Our teachers and leaders can have a tremendous burden lifted from their daily load when there is a consistent place for resources training and best practices.



Closing

We believe in these recommendations as an essential piece of any policy, program and investment coming from Atlanta Public Schools. Building pathways to partnerships with families will only increase our students successes and ‘create a caring school culture, where all students are graduating ready for college and career.’

We at ONE Atlanta in the spirit of collaboration and partnership are excited and willing to work with the district as we move as a community towards a more meaningful engagement policy and strategy in the district.

References

⁴⁵ Bertaud, A. (2003). Clearing the air in Atlanta: transit and smart growth or conventional economics?. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 54(3), 379-400.

² Leon, J. (Interviewer) & “Jane”, D. (Interviewee). (2016). ONE Atlanta Education Conversation [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from ONE Atlanta Google Site: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B0YfXELicTIWUW11RFRJUURVbE0>

¹ Wherry, J.H. (2010). Parent involvement: Nine truths you must know now. The Parent Institute. Retrieved online from: <http://www.esc16.net/users/0020/docs/NineTruths.pdf>

³⁶ Westmoreland, H., Rosenberg, H. M., Lopez, M. E., & Weiss, H. (2009). Seeing is Believing: Promising Practices for.