

A System Leader's Guide to Relationship Building



Why Building Relationships Matters

Trusting relationships between educators and families are the foundation for open, ongoing communication and strong academic partnerships. When families and educators see each other as partners, they are better able to share information, solve problems together, and provide consistent support for children both at home and at school.

While relationships are most critical at the school and classroom level, system leaders create the conditions for those relationships to grow and thrive. Through the priorities they set, the culture they cultivate, and the systems they design, leaders signal what matters and promote and enable authentic partnerships with families.

As a System Leader...

Start with positive mindsets.

Relationship-centered systems begin with a shared belief that every family wants the best for their child and has valuable knowledge, experiences, and strengths to contribute. Before you can build meaningful family partnerships, your system must first embrace and live out these core beliefs. These foundational principles should be shared by all system leaders and guide the behavior, decisions and actions when it comes to families.

Leaders reinforce these beliefs through the language they use, the stories they amplify externally to school boards and other audiences, and the expectations they set for system staff, both school-based and central office. When families are viewed as partners rather than participants, trust becomes the foundation for everything that follows.

Put it into action!

One of the most powerful ways to shift mindsets is through firsthand experiences. Real-world experiences help decision-makers truly feel the impact of family engagement, making it more likely they will value the work, invest in it, and sustain it over time.

Use this resource to help create experiences to build buy-in, strengthen leadership support, and demonstrate the impact of family engagement on your system.

Build a systemwide culture where relationships are valued and celebrated.

All families should experience the same sense of belonging regardless of which school they attend or who they interact with. Leaders create this consistency by making relationship-building a shared responsibility across the system, not the work of a single office or a handful of passionate educators. Recognizing strong partnerships, celebrating successes, and communicating clear expectations help make relationship-building part of the organization's culture.

Put it into action!

At Flamboyan, we have seen, and research shows, that families play Five Essential Roles in their children's education. All families deserve access to the information and connections they need to play these roles well. We also recognize that family engagement is the responsibility of every member of a school system – from families to teachers to system leaders. Each person in a school system plays a critical role in helping families gather access and information to support their child.

[Learn more](#) about how educators, school leaders, and system leaders all support Family Engagement.

Design processes and policies that support partnerships.

Even the most committed educators cannot build strong relationships without time, support, and resources. Leaders create the conditions for partnership by protecting time for proactive outreach, investing in communication and translation supports, removing barriers that make engagement difficult transportation, childcare or scheduling and embedding family partnership into strategic plans, budgets, and professional development offerings. Sustainable relationships require systems that prioritize them.

Put it into action!

At a time when districts are making difficult trade-offs, family engagement is not a “nice to have”—it is a strategic lever for improving student outcomes. When families and educators work in true partnership, students are more likely to succeed academically and socially. Investing in family engagement helps schools build the relationships and conditions necessary for that partnership to take hold.

[Use this resource](#) to help assess new and existing resource allocations across your system. Use the discussion guide with your cabinet to help surface assumptions, identify resource gaps, and strengthen alignment and understanding across all divisions.

Model the partnership you want to see.

Leadership behavior shapes organizational culture. Families notice when leaders listen with curiosity, communicate transparently, follow through on commitments, and seek input before making decisions. Staff notice these behaviors, too. By modeling trust, responsiveness, and shared decision-making, leaders demonstrate what authentic partnership looks like in practice. This could look like attending a home visit, holding a focus group with educators and families to hear about their shared experience, or building in time at school leader pre-service development to reflect and speak about family engagement.

Put it into action!

Listening to families is a critical first step in building family-school partnerships and shifting mindsets about families' role in their child's education. Deep listening strengthens relationships and helps school systems build true collaborative partnerships with families.

[Use this resource](#) to explore the Flamboyant Foundation's listening philosophy and learn how to cultivate a culture of listening within your own district.

Reflect and improve.

Building relationships is ongoing work. As with any improvement of effort, leaders should regularly reflect on whether families feel welcomed, respected, and heard, and whether staff have what they need to build meaningful partnerships. Family feedback, staff reflection, and continuous learning help ensure that relationship-building remains a central part of how the system serves students and families.

Put it into action!

Strong family engagement systems are built not only on relationships—but on the ability to listen, learn, and improve over time. Measuring how families experience communication, trust, and partnership is a critical step in moving from intention to impact. Panorama Education has created the Family-School Relationships Survey as a practical tool for districts seeking to gather actionable feedback from families. Importantly, the survey's question bank is available open-source, allowing school systems to adapt, customize, and use the questions in ways that align to their local context and priorities.

[Use this resource](#) to better understand family perspectives, identify strengths and gaps in your engagement strategy, and build a continuous improvement cycle where family voice directly informs decision-making at the school and system level.



Strategies that Work

1

Start by reviewing the [Beginning of Year Relationship Building Toolkit](#). Designed for educators as well as school, district, and LEA leaders, this tool offers guidance on building intentional, thoughtful relationships with families at the start of the school year. It supports smooth transitions for students—whether they're entering school for the first time, changing schools, or moving to a new grade, by helping ensure they have what they need for a strong start and long-term success. Use this to help schools prioritize relationship-building at the start of the year. Leaders can align district expectations and support principals with ready-to-use strategies.

2

Then, get to know your families through [Family Listening Sessions](#). Listening to families is a critical first step in building family-school partnerships. Authentic family engagement is rooted in continuous, genuine listening to families. Deep listening strengthens relationships and helps school systems build true collaborative partnerships with families.

3

Establishing a practice of teacher [Welcome Phone Calls](#). A brief, positive phone call at the beginning of the school year helps teachers get to know each family, establishes open lines of communication, and sets a welcoming tone before challenges arise. System leaders can support this practice by providing guidance, templates, and dedicated time for educators to connect with families.

4

Deepen relationships through [Relationship Building Home Visits](#). Once a culture of trust has been established, consider piloting Relationship Building Home Visits. These voluntary visits allow educators and families to connect in a more personal setting, build mutual understanding, and strengthen partnerships that support student success.