



# Getting Down to **FACTS**

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## Family and Community Engagement in California: Requirements, Capacity, and Relationships

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## Introduction

California’s education system creates many formal opportunities for families and communities to engage with schools and districts. School site councils, composed of educators, families, students, and other stakeholders, are a hallmark component of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), enacted in 2013. Schools with more than 21 English learners are required to form English Learner Advisory Committees (ELACs) at the district and site levels. California’s recent \$4.1 billion investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) continues the state’s commitment to engagement by requiring students, families, and community partners to participate in the development and implementation of community schools.

Formal engagement structures alone do not ensure meaningful family and community engagement (FCE). Prior research on community engagement through LCFF found that many districts relied on shallow forms of democratic engagement, characterized by one-way communication from districts to families and communities rather than deliberative decision-making (Marsh et al., 2018). Broader FCE research also points to the potential of families’ and communities’ insights, experiences, and wisdom, while documenting persistent barriers related to capacity, awareness, trust, language access, and resources.

This brief draws on Getting Down to Facts III technical reports to examine the current state of family and community engagement in California. The studies reviewed here echo concerns raised in Getting Down to Facts II (Marsh et al., 2018): California has maintained a strong policy commitment to FCE, but implementation often remains fragmented, capacity-constrained, and limited in its ability to support meaningful participation, especially when FCE is not an integral dimension of a whole school transformation strategy.

Across the technical reports, three patterns stand out: limited organizational capacity for democratic engagement, misalignment between school and district approaches to engagement and families’ priorities and experiences, and evidence that authentic partnerships with families and communities can strengthen student success, school climate, and trust.

## Key Findings

1

**California has many formal family and community engagement requirements, but limited capacity can make implementation fragmented, duplicative, and procedural rather than meaningful.**

Across California education policies (e.g., LCFF), there are substantial opportunities for family and community engagement at the school and district level. Yet, educators' ability to conduct meaningful engagement with school and district stakeholders is heavily dependent on the extent to which LEAs have the organizational capacity for robust FCE, including interpretation services, amid a growing number of policies that require community input (i.e., developing LCAPs, approving site-level budgets, developing school plans for student achievement). Given this reality, FCE in many schools can be limited and performative rather than deliberative and informative for community-driven educational decision making.

2

**Families and communities are engaged in students' education, but school and district engagement structures often do not reflect families' priorities and experiences.**

The ways families and communities engage with schools are shaped by the realities facing racially minoritized and marginalized communities, including concerns about safety, language access, work schedules, immigration enforcement, displacement, school closures, and inequitable educational structures. Despite these challenges, California families maintain key connections with their school communities, creating opportunities for deeper engagement and collaboration.

3

**Authentic partnerships with families and communities may support stronger student outcomes, school climate, and trust.**

Evidence from culturally rooted community partnerships and community schools shows that engagement can move beyond one-way communication when families and community partners help identify needs, shape decisions, and build relationships with schools.

## The Evidence Behind These Findings

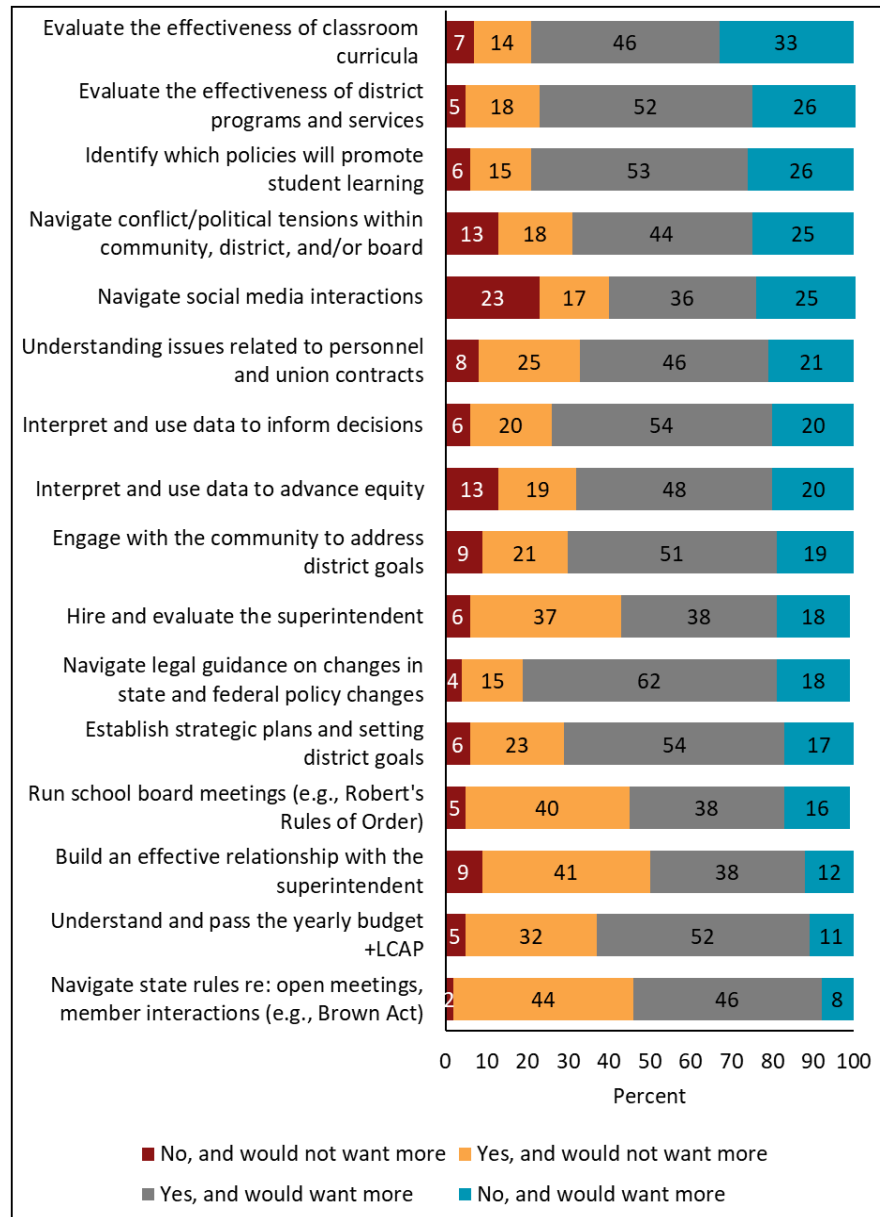
**California has many formal family and community engagement requirements, but limited capacity can make implementation fragmented, duplicative, and procedural rather than meaningful**

California's commitment to local control in educational decision making is evident through the many required engagement activities that exist within TK-12 schools. Across a wide variety of programs and initiatives, LEAs are consistently tasked with engaging their communities to inform the development of accountability plans, budgetary decisions, and school culture and climate concerns. Some major engagement opportunities are coordinated at the district level (e.g., the LCAP development process), with others primarily functioning at the school site level through School Site Councils (SSCs). As new state-level policies are developed, there is often a related expectation that local implementation will be informed by the unique needs of local communities. For example, LEAs who sought California Community Schools Partnership Program Implementation Grants were required to demonstrate early, ongoing engagement with multiple site-level stakeholders (e.g., families, students, and community partners) in order to be eligible for CCSPP funding. This approach is expected to continue as family and community engagement are hallmarks of the community schools strategy. However, as discussed in Hernández et al., these efforts, while building important engagement capacity at school sites through technical assistance and direct staffing resources (e.g., a community school coordinator), have not yet fully aligned to existing, required engagement opportunities through the LCAP or SPSA development processes.

Despite state-level expectations that LEAs will conduct meaningful engagement opportunities, evidence from the Getting Down to Facts III technical reports suggests limited capacity to do so, in part because of the increasing, often duplicative nature of documentation and compliance with such requests. As Willis identified, much of the time spent on compliance with these requirements has significant impacts on the time that educators might actually be able to leverage to do the work of strategic planning or direct support for teachers and students—tasks that are intended to be informed by family and community engagement.

Capacity concerns also extend beyond time and administrative burden. Marsh et al. find that California school board members expressed a strong desire for more training and support in community engagement, including support for navigating conflict and political tensions. Notably, 70 percent of board members indicated that they would want more training on engaging with their communities to address district goals.

**Figure 1. Have You Received Training on the Following and Would You Want More? (n=545)**

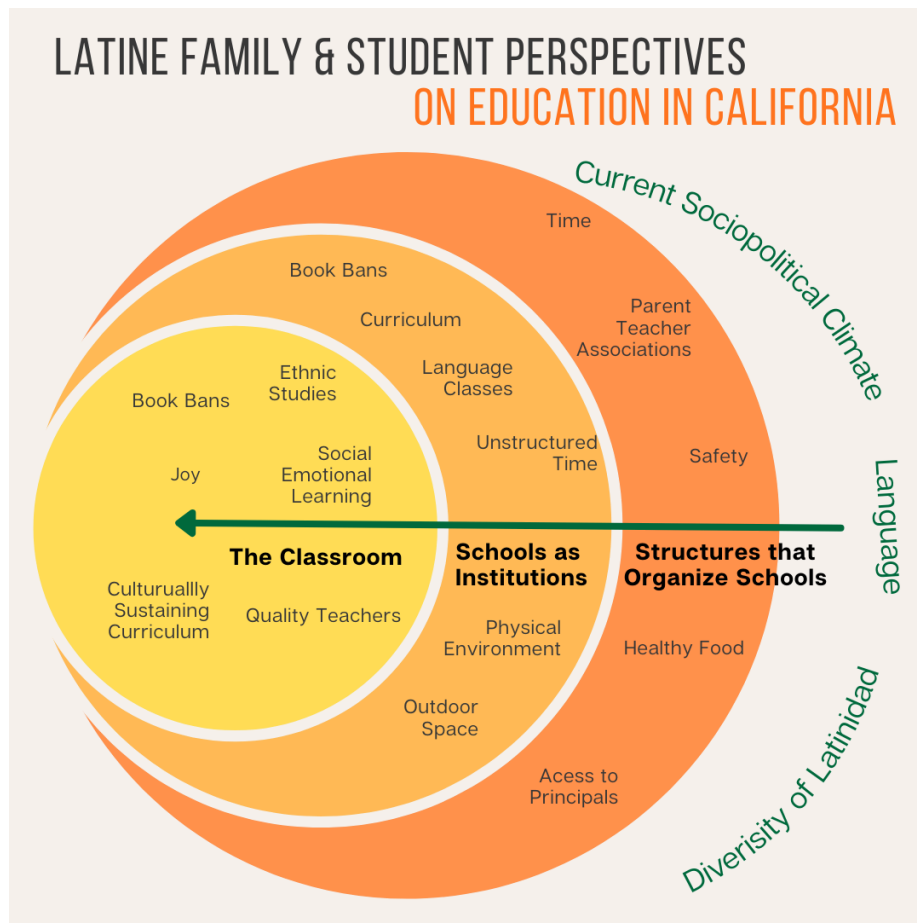


**Families and communities are engaged in students’ education, but school and district engagement structures often do not reflect families’ priorities and experiences**

Narratives about family disengagement often obscure the barriers families face in navigating schools. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of family and community engagement and identified FCE strategies as a key lever for student success. Research by Garcia et al. and Winn et al. adds evidence on both the power of engagement and the challenges that shape its potential.

There are more than 3 million Latine students in California public schools, comprising a majority of the student population. Yet Garcia et al. note that the perspectives and experiences of Latine students and families are often missing from policy discussions about education—or at best, limited to discussions around standardized test performance, graduation rates, or English language proficiency classifications. Their work shows that Latine student experiences and outcomes are shaped by the broader sociopolitical context in which education occurs.

**Figure 2. Latine Family and Student Perspectives as shared in Garcia et al.**



For example, they note Latine families, particularly in the current context of increased federal immigration enforcement and anti-Latino political rhetoric, are consistently faced with questions of safety, belonging, cultural identity, and civic participation. While discussions of engagement often center educators’ desires for students and families to be physically present for daily instruction and school events, Garcia et al. illustrate how many Latine families are forced to consider whether school is the safest place for their children. In particular, study participants often described fears of immigration

raids and deportation threats as increasingly concerning for their communities, demonstrating the interconnected nature of national politics and local realities.

Winn et al. describe distinct, but related, concerns as they describe how Black children’s educational futures are increasingly under threat by the national political context including attempts to dismantle the federal Department of Education, school closures, and significant efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools. They also describe the marked decline in the number of Black California residents due to gentrification and displacement in historic urban neighborhoods (insights also raised by Makori and Noguera). Yet Winn et al. also highlight the resilience of Black communities throughout the state and the emergence of a wide array of Black-led community organizations with robust partnerships between families and communities to advocate for equitable resources and culturally affirming learning environments. These findings complicate narratives that Black families lack interest in schools. Winn et al. find that Black families believe in the transformative power of education while also describing the need for caution and “school survival tactics” in a system they argue has historically failed to protect Black children.

### **Authentic partnerships with families and communities may support stronger student outcomes, school climate, and trust**

Both Garcia et al. and Winn et al. highlight the importance of culturally responsive and affirming educational environments, particularly in a sociopolitical context where diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in schools are under attack. Garcia et al. explain that some Latine families are worried about efforts to restrict discussions of race, identity, and history within schools, and participants connected these concerns to longstanding struggles for culturally relevant curricula and ethnic studies. Families also expressed interest in helping shape school-based decisions, but many described feeling excluded from formal organizations, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, because of language barriers, conflicting work schedules, and perceptions that these spaces were “not for them.” As a result, families emphasized the value of culturally rooted community partnerships that create more accessible opportunities for connection and participation.

Winn et al. similarly describe the importance of partnerships with culturally specific, community-based organizations focused on strengths-based approaches and academic success. Hernández et al.’s early findings on community schools are consistent with this broader emphasis on relational, community-connected approaches. Because family and community engagement is a core feature of the community schools strategy, CCSPP provides one example of a statewide effort to build this kind of infrastructure. Early evidence suggests promising associations with engagement, school climate, attendance, and achievement, especially for historically underserved students, but these findings should be interpreted as suggestive rather than definitive.

## Implications for California

The research points to three key areas where the evidence has direct bearing on decisions California is now facing.

### Coherence across engagement requirements

California's growing number of family and community engagement requirements across policies, initiatives, and categorical grant programs creates many formal opportunities for participation. The evidence also points to a risk that multiple engagement requirements can add burden for schools and districts when those processes are duplicative or weakly aligned. This issue may be especially salient for smaller districts and rural communities with limited institutional resources and smaller pools of community partners and families. Existing documentation of family and community engagement efforts appears unevenly useful to schools and districts, with some evidence of what Willis and Loeb describe as "performative documentation" that is more procedural than substantively useful. Hibel and Beberman's work on LCAPs using generative AI also points to the possibility of better understanding the types of family and community engagement strategies districts use and where state-mandated reporting requirements may be better aligned to reduce unnecessary duplication.

### Capacity for democratic engagement

California school districts face complex challenges in the coming years, including uncertain federal funding, politically contentious labor disputes, declining enrollment, chronic absenteeism, increased attention to school choice policies, and lingering mistrust of public institutions from the pandemic era. These conditions make community conflict and public engagement central features of educational leadership. Makori and Noguera describe enrollment decline as an ongoing and dominant reality for many districts, with nearly two in three reporting declining enrollment. Their findings indicate that contentious discussions about school closures or mergers may become more common. These patterns highlight the importance of capacity-building for collaborative decision-making with families, from the school board level to the school site level, so that consequential decisions for neighborhoods and communities are developed through more authentic and less performative engagement.

### Leveraging the wisdom, strengths, and relationships of families and communities

Traditional approaches to family and community engagement often rely on a unidirectional model in which families are recipients of engagement rather than active contributors to decision-making. Across

the studies, families and communities express interest in being more involved in school and district decisions. Garcia et al. highlight the importance of language access, including translation and interpretation services, for multilingual families' participation in decision-making spaces. Winn et al. show how Black families and communities have worked within and outside traditional educational contexts to secure adequate and affirming educational opportunities for their children. Their work points to the value of collaborative spaces that validate parents' knowledge and deepen connections between families and educators. Community schools funded through CCSPP provide one current, statewide mechanism for this approach. However, CCSPP was established as seed funding rather than an ongoing resource stream, raising questions about sustainability over time. Sustaining and learning from these approaches will require more systematic evidence about implementation, costs, and outcomes over time. The 2026-27 budget includes a proposal to provide ongoing funding for CCSPP through Proposition 98, which would scale the program from approximately 2,500 schools (about 25 percent of schools in the state) to approximately 6,000 schools (about 60 percent of schools in the state). More systematic study of existing relational approaches to family and community engagement could help the state identify which models are most feasible, sustainable, and effective across contexts.

## Conclusion

California has created many formal opportunities for family and community engagement, and the evidence reviewed in this brief shows that formal opportunities alone do not guarantee meaningful participation. Engagement requirements can become fragmented, duplicative, or procedural when schools and districts lack the time, capacity, trust, and support needed to make them deliberative.

The studies also show that families and communities are not disengaged from education. Many are navigating schools while facing concerns related to safety, language access, immigration enforcement, displacement, school closures, and inequitable educational structures. Family and community engagement is strongest when these realities are recognized and when families and community partners help shape decisions that affect students' daily experiences.

California's central challenge is ensuring that engagement requirements are supported by the time, capacity, trust, and decision-making structures needed for meaningful participation. Community schools and culturally rooted partnerships offer examples of what deeper engagement can look like. The evidence points to the importance of making existing engagement opportunities more coherent, usable, and connected to the decisions that shape students' learning conditions.

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