

# REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnerships

## Executive Summary

Julie Webb, Suzanne Abdelrahim, Soha Mahmoud-Tabana, Leslie Banes

University of California, Davis  
Resourcing Excellence in Education (REEd)

### Introduction

Research shows engaging families in the education of their children results in positive academic outcomes for students in general, and for bilingual students in particular.[1,2] However, many teachers report feeling unprepared for the complexities of effectively working with families.[3] Studies document that families of all income and education levels, and from all linguistic and cultural groups, support children's learning at home in myriad ways. White, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking families, however, tend to be more involved at school, and families remain a largely untapped resource when it comes to improving learning for bilingual students.[4,5] Developing strong bilingual family-school partnerships is a crucial strategy for addressing the opportunity/achievement gap.

Developing and sustaining the rich, mutually supportive partnerships we envision is a complex task, and one that often falls largely on teachers. Educators and researchers at Resourcing Excellence in Education (REEd) at University of California, Davis set out to design a framework and corresponding resources to support teachers and school leaders in fostering and fortifying family engagement efforts, with a specific focus on families of emergent bilingual students.\* Family-school partnerships are most effective when a multifaceted approach is used to engage stakeholders across the system, with teachers, support staff, and administrators working in tandem with families and communities. To develop the framework, we reviewed other available frameworks and the research on family engagement to cull the most promising practices for engaging bilingual families.

We define family engagement as **a process used to build positive, goal-oriented relationships with families**. To be effective, family engagement must a.) be mutually respectful, b.) sustain families' cultures and languages, and c.) include genuine efforts to understand each family's beliefs, values, and priorities. In order to engage bilingual families, educators must first understand the institutional barriers and personal biases that could be contributing to a lack of family engagement in schooling. They also must hold asset-based views and deeply believe that *all* families want their children to learn and succeed in school. This shared goal underpins the REEd Framework and tools.

Educators who use these resources should continuously ask themselves and discuss:

1. *How can the framework and tools help us create and sustain more effective partnerships with bilingual families, given the specific needs of our school?*
2. *How can we leverage family and community linguistic/cultural resources and bilingual ways of knowing to support student learning and well-being?*

\* We use the term emergent bilingual instead of English learner to refer to students who are in the dynamic process of developing bilingual competencies and to emphasize the value of bilingualism.[6] Positioning students as emergent bilinguals suggests value in their linguistic and cultural background, their ways of knowing and communicating, as important contributions to the classroom and resources for learning.

[1] Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006

[2] Durand, 2011; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012

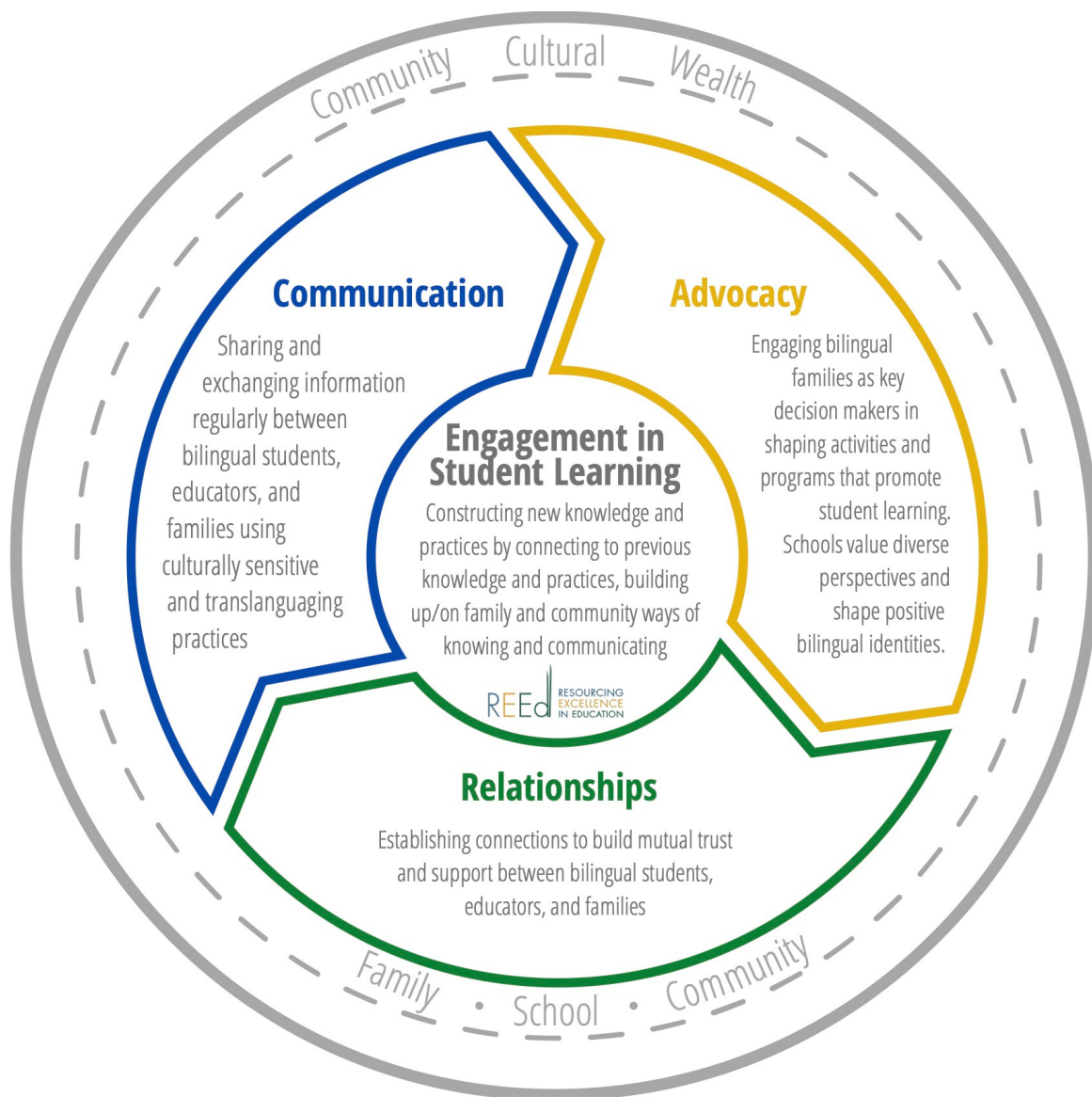
[3] Evans, 2013

[4] Henderson & Mapp, 2002

[5] Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2014

[6] García, 2009

**Figure 1**  
**REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnerships**



*Note. The REEd Framework prioritizes leveraging and respecting bilingual families' home languages and cultures to build relationships, communicate, and involve families as key decision-makers. Communication, Advocacy, and Relationships work synergistically to enhance student learning. When schools connect home languages and cultures to language and learning at school, the result is increased student achievement.*

### **Translanguaging as a Vehicle for Developing Partnerships to Support Student Learning**

The REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnerships (Figure 1) conveys a dynamic approach to family engagement that promotes reciprocal communication, empowering advocacy efforts, and trusting relationships in service of student learning. By creating practical tools that align with a research-based framework, the REEd Framework offers a bridge from theory to practice. A unique feature of our framework and tools is that we have infused a translanguaging approach throughout.

Translanguaging is the “process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages”. [7] Linguists have determined that bilinguals are not “two monolinguals in one.” [8] Rather, they have one internal linguistic repertoire that stores the features of all their languages. They select from this repertoire the language practices and forms that best serve each context and purpose, sometimes selecting features of just one language, other times selecting features of both languages simultaneously. Thus, bilinguals are always connecting their languages, even when they don’t do it out loud. Importantly, we can create opportunities for bilinguals to connect their languages out loud and use this natural bilingual process as a resource for learning. Recent research on translanguaging demonstrates the following benefits: a.) promoting deeper understanding of content, b.) developing new language practices and cross-linguistic connections, c.) improving students’ skills in both of their languages, d.) developing strong, positive bilingual identities, and e.) facilitating communication and collaboration between school and home contexts. [9] Beyond simply translating school documents for parents, the REEd framework and tools leverage translanguaging as a powerful way to invite students’ and families’ whole selves into our family-school partnerships, including their bilingual identities and linguistic resources in support of student learning, and we demonstrate how to do this even when teachers themselves are not bilingual.

## Community Contexts

Home, school, and community contexts represent overlapping spheres of influence, and these spheres act upon children, conditions, and relationships. The families, schools, and communities that are most effective at educating children have shared goals around children’s learning and development. We consider the community in which educators and families live and work to be integral to the engagement process. Therefore, across our framework and tools, we encourage the use of community resources to partner with families and support student learning.

Community cultural wealth refers to the knowledge and skills developed and nurtured in communities of color that often go unrecognized or underappreciated by educational institutions. [10] We include in our suite of tools resources to support educators in taking a hard look at themselves and their students to examine and view in new light the knowledge and skills students bring to the classroom. Resources support educators and families in coming together to learn how these can be acknowledged, valued, supported, extended, and leveraged for learning. Families are crucial partners in this work. As educators, we need to tap into the knowledge, practices, and beliefs of families if we are to create meaningful connections between home and school. [11]

## Framework Components

The REEd Framework for Bilingual Family-School Partnerships consists of three key components: communication, relationships, and advocacy. These interrelated components serve as levers to foster student learning.

## Communication

Families and schools can support student success by engaging in regular communication. By communication, we refer to the sharing and exchanging of information regularly between bilingual students, educators, and families using culturally sensitive and translanguaging practices. The basis of a school’s or district’s overall communication strategy should be to establish personal connections with students and families. Educators should strive to establish rapport with caregivers in a welcoming school environment and use culturally sensitive communication practices.

To meet families’ specific needs, schools should first conduct a needs assessment and identify different modes of communication, including technology tools, that families can use to contact staff. This process includes developing a clear and effective system of regular, two-way communication between teachers and caregivers. Technology tools allow families and teachers to be more connected than ever before, making

[7] Fu, Hadjioannou, & Zhou, 2019

[8] Grosjean, 1989

[9] García, 2009

[10] Yosso, 2005

[11] Amaro-Jiménez & Semingson, 2011

sharing what children are learning easier and more efficient. Many of today's technology tools provide translations in other languages. Schools and teachers should review multilingual accessibility features of any tools they consider for family engagement, and ensure teachers and families receive the training necessary to use them for maintaining school-family communication across languages. Schools must also make teachers and families aware of the times official human translation or interpretation is required by law, and the district process for accessing it.

Although utilizing technology for communication purposes is expected today, a crucial concern for school-family communication that engages bilingual families is digital equity. Digital equity includes making sure students and families have equal access to technology, like devices, software, and the internet. Having digital technologies in the home provides families with options that open lines of communication between school and home. Our suite of tools includes resources for regular communication between schools and families including translation and interpretation guidelines, at-home language and literacy activities that promote meaningful conversations, and a social media toolkit for educators.

## Relationships

Few can argue the importance of establishing relationships between educators and the communities they serve. School relationships require establishing connections to build mutual trust and support between bilingual students, teachers, and families. Teachers and administrators should have knowledge of their students and families including an understanding, and value of, their language, backgrounds, and cultural traditions, as well as the necessary training in order to engage diverse families and communities. Educators should recognize their families as a vital part of the school community. In addition, educators must also acknowledge that not all families are homogenous and will likely require different strategies to engage them in their child's education.

Using flexible approaches, like using translanguaging practices to communicate in and across languages, may help families feel valued and encourage their participation. Trusting relationships between educators, students, and caregivers can positively impact family engagement. Trusting relationships are necessary for successful recruiting and organizing of families as partners to support school initiatives, and likewise can improve student learning by helping families create home environments that best support their students. Once positive relationships are built, families feel respected, cared for, and are better able to share their ideas and concerns, thus reinforcing their value to the school community. Our suite of tools includes resources for building and sustaining relationships including caregiver surveys, staff reflection guides, and videos to help families support language and literacy learning at home.

## Advocacy

Schools and districts can partner with families in more meaningful ways that go beyond traditional roles, thus giving them opportunities to be true advocates. Family advocacy is a process of engaging bilingual families as key decision makers in shaping activities and programs that promote student learning. Schools should value diverse perspectives and shape positive bilingual identities. Educators should consider the kinds of decisions families can make and how teachers and schools can elicit and incorporate their input. Family advocacy can include giving advisory and mentorship roles to families. Some examples of empowering families as advocates in their child's education include involving them in parent focus groups, committees, and utilizing family feedback to inform decision making at all levels.

Practices such as translanguaging may encourage families to join in on decision making endeavors because they can draw upon their own, and other team members', linguistic resources to improve communication and understanding, and to help solve problems. Using language as a resource allows families to be intellectually engaged and become active participants. Empowering families through advocacy sends the message that their input is valued and is not simply a mechanism for approving of the decisions already made by school staff. Administrators should try to give families the support they need and discover ways to empower them to participate in the school and the broader community. Families can be the school's best allies. Our suite of tools includes resources for fostering family advocacy such as discussion protocols for more inclusive meetings, mentorship program guidelines, and webinars to support educator advocacy efforts.

## Engagement in Student Learning

The literature is clear that families are rooting for their children to succeed, but their engagement with schools can have greater influence than encouragement alone. It's important for educators to understand and acknowledge that families and caregivers want their children to be successful, and are motivated to help them achieve academically. Research shows families understand that their engagement with school matters for their child's chances at success.

While student learning is backgrounded in many other frameworks for family engagement, student learning is at the core of the REEd Framework. Communication, relationships, and advocacy should be developed cohesively to work in service of student learning. We view learning as the process of constructing new knowledge and practices by connecting to previous knowledge and practices, building up/on family and community ways of knowing and communicating. It consists of making connections between prior and new knowledge, developing independent and critical thinking, and the ability to transfer knowledge to new and different contexts.

Caregivers can support learning in many ways, such as assisting with homework and engaging in meaningful conversation with their children. The connection between home and school can be further enhanced when educators incorporate the experiences of students and their families into their school day. Teachers can build on students' background knowledge to support their understanding of content and to foster language development.

An important aspect of student learning is student identity. The way students see and position themselves (e.g. as smart or not, good at school or not) and their personal investment in learning are essential both to success in school and to the process of acquiring another language in particular. The ways educators engage with families and in what language, as well as the ways home language and language practices are welcomed, valued, and discussed in school, should intentionally create opportunities for students to learn about and develop their own bilingual identity. Our suite of tools includes a refrigerator magnet for supporting conversations at home, language and literacy games for improving vocabulary, and a crosswalk between our framework and California's English Learner Roadmap.

## Conclusion

All stakeholders should commit to establishing and maintaining family-school partnerships for the benefit of all students. Positive family engagement can be a driving force for student success, particularly among bilingual families. When families are given the opportunity to be active participants in their school communities, the result is increased student learning and overall student success. School districts can use the REEd Framework to foster and sustain family engagement and strengthen relationships, communication practices, and opportunities for family advocacy.

*This work was supported by a National Professional Development (NPD) grant [award #: T365Z160292] administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA).*

## References

### Introduction

- Durand, T. M. (2011). Latino parental involvement in kindergarten: Findings from the early childhood longitudinal study. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 33(4), 469-489.
- Evans, M. P. (2013). Educating pre-service teachers for family, school, and community engagement. *Teaching Education*, 24, 123–133. doi:10.1080/10476210.2013.786897
- Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, C., Perry, M. A., & Childs, S. (2004). Multiple dimensions of family involvement and their relations to behavioral and learning competencies for urban, low-income children. *School psychology review*, 33(4), 467-480.
- García, O. (2011). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Annual Synthesis, 2002.
- Weiss, H. B., Kreider, H., Lopez, M. E., & Chatman-Nelson, C. M. (2014). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological framework*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

### Translanguaging as a Vehicle for Developing Partnerships to Support Student Learning

- Fu, D., Hadjioannou, X., & Zhou, X. (2019). *Translanguaging for emergent bilinguals: Inclusive teaching in the linguistically diverse classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- García, O. (2011). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Grosjean, F. (1989). Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person. *Brain and language*, 36(1), 3-15.

### Community Contexts

- Amaro-Jiménez, C., & Semingson, P. (2011). Tapping into the funds of knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. *NABE news*, 33(5), 5-8.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69-91.