

(Re)Building relationships: Family engagement after a pandemic

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Introduction

- Family engagement has long been high priority for educators, policymakers, and researchers
- Correlated with a range of indicators ranging from academic achievement to teachers' job satisfaction
- Authentic and responsive forms of engagement continue to elude many educators
- Deficit perspectives about families from nondominant backgrounds persist

(Epstein et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2025; Ishimaru, 2019)

Introduction

- COVID-19 presented additional obstacle to family engagement and, in many cases, harmed relationships between families and educators
- Families took on more responsibility for children's learning when moved online
- Contestation over pandemic-related mandates heightened tensions
- Educators adapted their family engagement practices to overcome barriers

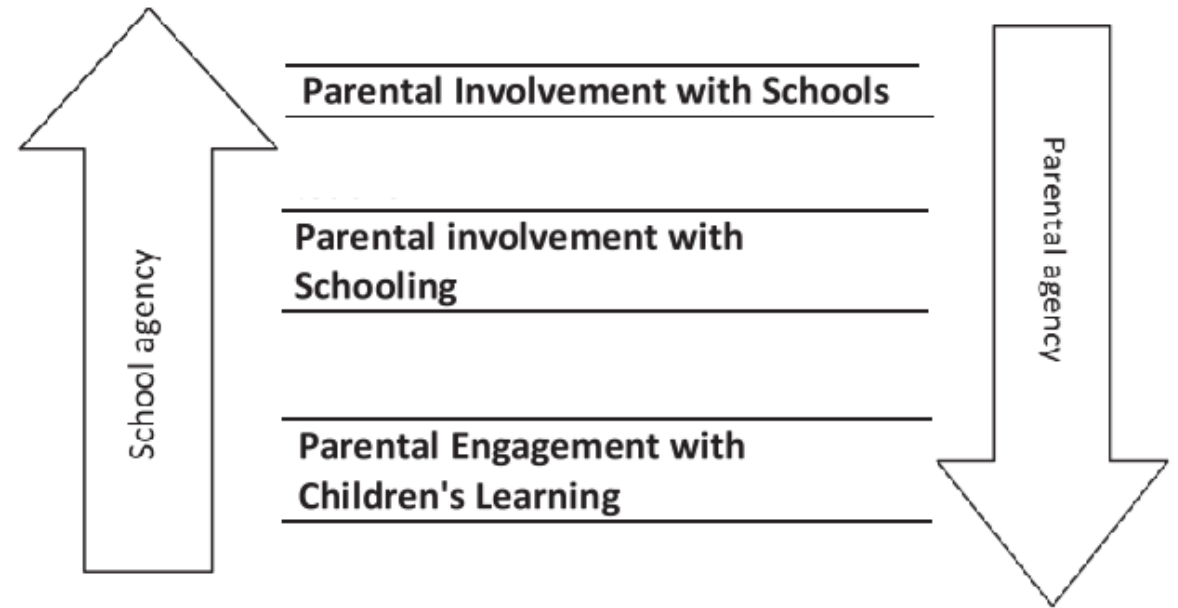
(Leo et al., 2024; Levickis et al., 2023; Mapp & Bergman, 2021)

Introduction

- More scholarship is needed to understand how educators have built and rebuilt relationships with families and communities in the post-pandemic moment
- We draw on data gathered among 161 educators and 21 family members at seven secondary schools located across New York State
- Schools selected for this study due to their higher-than-predicted graduation outcomes among economically disadvantaged students.

Theoretical Framework

- Family “involvement”: school-centric relationship in which educators define family members’ roles and the scope of their participation.
- Family “engagement”: equitable distribution of power between schools and families.
- When educators engage families, they foster family members’ agency and empower them to take an active role in their children’s learning experiences.



Adapted from Goodall &
Montgomery (2014)

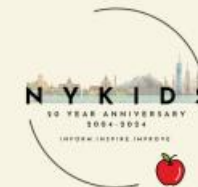
Methods



Paper drawn from larger study developed to understand the adaptations and innovations made by educators and leaders in response to shifting changes both proximal (e.g., community and demographic shifts) and distal (e.g., global pandemic and social justice issues) contexts.

Embedded study research question:

- *In what ways are educators building (and rebuilding) relationships with family members in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?*



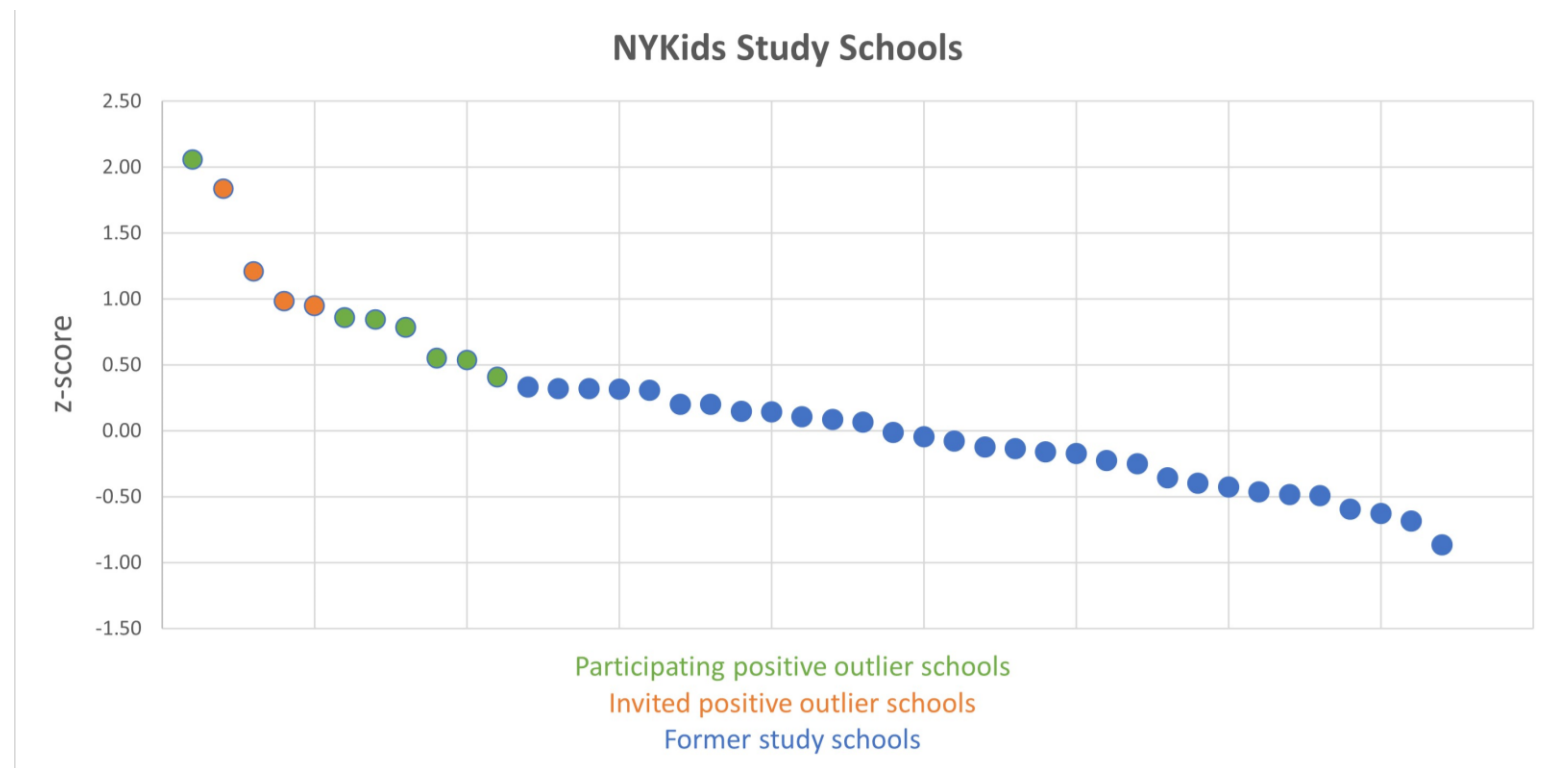
Study Sample

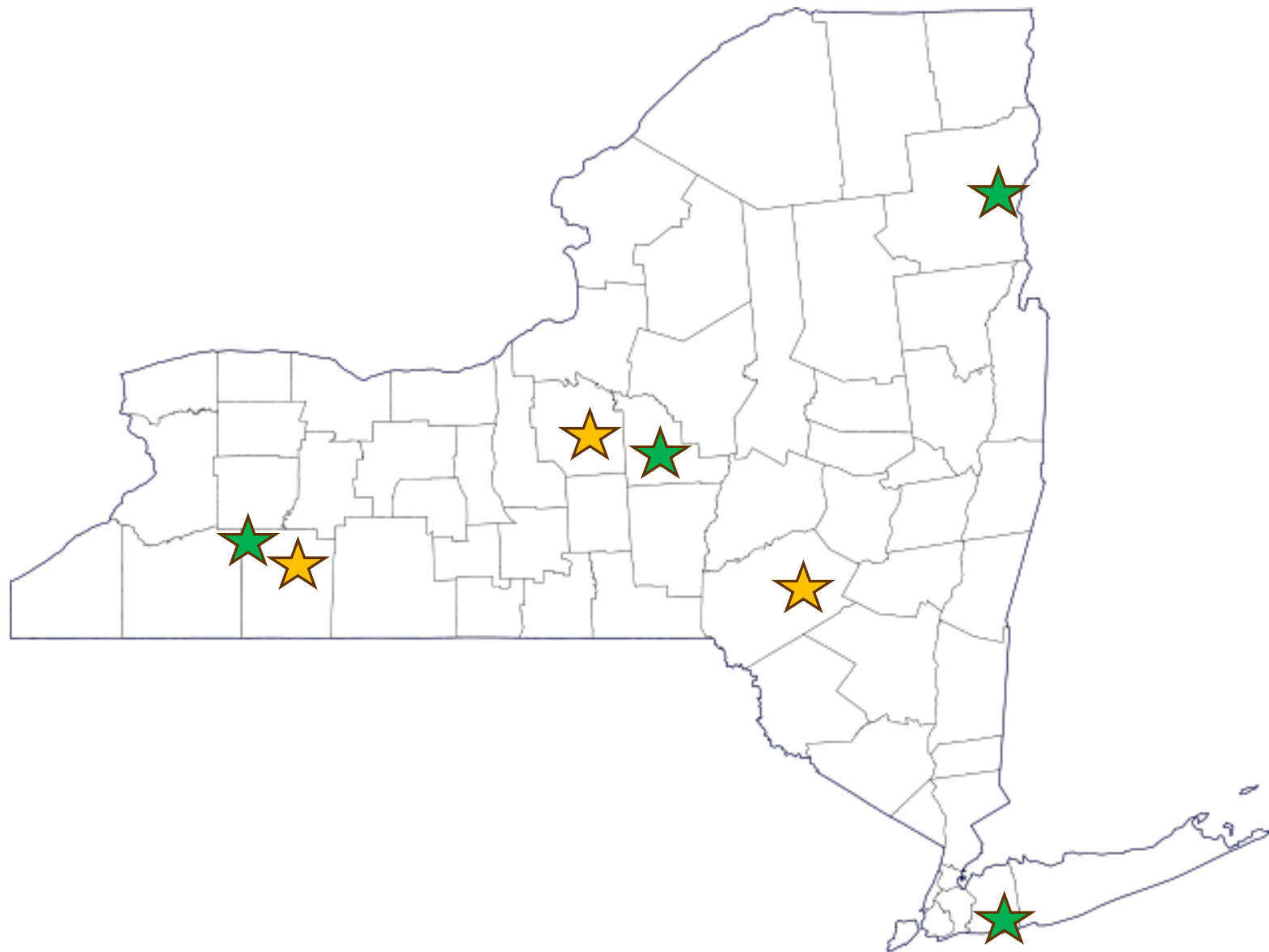
What are positive outliers and how do we identify them?

Procedure: multiple regression analysis

Data used:

student outcome measure
+ % low income/econ.
disadvantaged
+ % student sub-groups (by
ethnicity & language
background) = z score





**Locations of
persistent
and
emergent
positive
outlier
schools**

Sample Demographics

School	z-score	Enrollment	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Students with Disabilities	% ELL	% American Indian / Alaska Native	% Black/ African American	% Hispanic Latino	% Asian/ Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	% White	% Multiracial	PPE
Crown Point Central School	0.85	301	K-12	Rural distant	57	20	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	\$28,511
Malverne Sr High School	0.55	627	9-12	Suburb large	46	20	1	0	49	28	7	15	1	\$30,708
Fillmore Central School	0.54	589	K-12	Rural remote	61	15	0	0	1	1	1	96	0	\$16,620
LaFayette Jr-Sr High School	0.41	323	7-12	Rural fringe	43	12	9	28	1	2	1	66	2	\$24,672
Roxbury Central School	0.78	212	K-12	Rural remote	42	18	0	0	1	2	0	92	4	\$20,980
Brookfield Central School	2.06	195	K-12	Rural distant	78	24	0	0	1	0	0	99	1	\$24,226
Alfred-Almond Jr. Sr. High School	0.86	272	7-12	Rural fringe	45	15	0	0	0	5	4	88	3	\$21,361
NYS Average	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	58	19	10	1	16	29	10	40	3	\$26,571

Study Data

	Crown Point*	Malverne	Fillmore	Lafayette	Roxbury	Brookfield	Alfred Almond	Total
Interviews	17	3	6	18	17	2	7	70
Focus Groups	2	10	8	2	2	8	11	43
Documents/photos	48	33	47	89	37	10	97	361
School Tour	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	4
Interpretive Memos	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Participants	21	32	29	21	20	18	41	182

*School names used with IRB approval and school/district consent

Findings

- Educators developed two-way communication strategies which welcomed family members' input and engaged them in decision-making processes
- Use of open lines of communication with families through a range of tools such as email, phone calls, and, when needed, home visits.
- Several schools solicited feedback through surveys and apps like Thought Exchange

They [Malverne educators] were so intentional about getting information from the general population as to what the needs are, what's important to the community, what are some of the positives as well as the negatives so that they can improve on them.

- Malverne parent

Findings

- Educators used relevant and responsive curricular and extracurricular programming to engage both students and families.
- Educators often aimed to include the voices and perspectives of historically marginalized groups

[W]e are one of the only schools left in the area that has a really big agricultural base. So we wanted to really capitalize on that. It's what kids are interested in; they love it. – Brookfield leader

There are certain [Onondaga] families that have an ingrained distrust with the education system, just based off generational trauma... [so we are] trying to continue to build that relationship with our Onondaga Nation and make sure we're being culturally responsive. – LaFayette support staff

Discussion

Two general strategies for family (re)engagement were outlined briefly in this paper:

- 1) Approaches which elicited the voices of family members and sought to incorporate their opinions into meaningful decisions about students' education.
- 2) Use of responsive and relevant curricular and extracurricular programming that reflected community resources and interests.

Through the lens of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) framework, these schools have moved away from school-centric forms of "involvement" specifically by fostering family members' agency and yielding power to them



Native American literature section in LaFayette Jr/Sr HS library

Discussion

- These data serve as useful examples of engagement strategies which other educators may emulate as they seek to meet the needs of students and families amid new and challenging contexts.
- Cannot overlook the challenges, tensions, and difficulties with which educators in these schools grappled.
- Family engagement should be conceived as an ongoing process, not a task which can be simply checked off a list.
- Moreover, as each school and community represent unique contexts, educators must adopt appropriate engagement practices rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach

(Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020)

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Thank you!



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