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Strategy 7: Go Out Into the Community to Empower Families ●

The research on family and school systems that genuinely empower families is limited. This is particularly true for schools serving families in low socioeconomic neighborhoods. It is rare for this type of collaboration and partnership to occur because it requires the administrator to be comfortable relinquishing some of their power and authority.

The following vignette illustrates how Principal Camaj successfully implemented systemic changes to empower families by meeting them where they were to engage them in conversation in an open, transparent way—bringing the school to families, using that feedback to create further forms of engagement that were flexible and culturally responsive, and then implementing more systemic practices to move families from engagement to empowerment. The vignette illustrates that with the right action plan and follow-through, schools can ensure that families who were once silent observers become active voices in shaping the school's future.



Three Essential Ingredients for Meaningful Engagement

At DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York, there were constant struggles with low family engagement. Parent-teacher conferences had low attendance, and school events rarely saw more than a handful of families. The school's administration, led by Principal Martini Camaj, recognized that they needed a different approach—one that not only invited families into the school but also actively met them where they were and empowered them in the process.

Determined to move from traditional involvement to authentic engagement and empowerment, Mr. Camaj and his team launched a bold initiative: *Los Tres Golpes Con El Director*.

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This new engagement model, inspired by the Dominican breakfast known as *Los Tres Golpes*—which consists of mangu (mashed plantains), queso frito (fried cheese), and salami—was designed to nourish, strengthen, and sustain relationships between families and the school. Each meeting focused on three essential “ingredients” for meaningful engagement:

- Ingredient 1: Information & Transparency: Sharing critical updates and resources in an accessible, culturally responsive way.
- Ingredient 2: Dialogue & Partnership: Creating two-way conversations where families share their concerns, aspirations, and ideas.
- Ingredient 3: Action & Empowerment: Providing families with concrete roles and opportunities to shape school policies and decisions.

Instead of expecting families to come to the school, Principal Camaj and his team took *Los Tres Golpes* directly to the community to strengthen families’ confidence in getting involved.

Step 1: Bringing the School to Families

One afternoon, families in a predominantly Dominican and Latino neighborhood gathered at Doña Carmen’s Café, a small but lively restaurant known for its mangu and café con leche. They were there for the very first *Los Tres Golpes con el Director* session.

As families settled in with plates of traditional Dominican breakfast, Principal Camaj greeted them warmly. He spoke in English and Spanish, making sure every family member felt included. “*Hoy estamos aquí para hacer lo que hacemos mejor en nuestra cultura—comer juntos y hablar juntos,*” he said (We are here today to do what we do best in our culture—eat together and talk together). Rather than presenting a long list of school policies, Mr. Camaj started with a simple question: “What do you want for your children’s education?”

Families, some of whom had never spoken directly with a school leader, initially hesitated. However, as the discussion progressed, they began to open up. One mother, Vera, shared that she never attended school herself and often felt intimidated when visiting. Another father, Miguel, explained that he worked two jobs and struggled to keep up with his daughter’s grades. Listening intently, Mr. Camaj reassured them: “*La escuela no puede hacer esto sola. Necesitamos que ustedes sean parte del equipo. Pero también entendemos que necesitamos*

facilitarlo para ustedes" (The school cannot do this alone. We need you to be part of the team. But we also understand that we need to make it easier for you).

Step 2: Flexible & Culturally Responsive Engagement

From the feedback at that first meeting, DeWitt Clinton High School implemented new engagement pathways:

- ✓ School in Your Neighborhood meetings at local barbershops, laundromats, and churches, so families did not have to travel to the school.
- ✓ A WhatsApp group for direct communication with teachers and administration, making it easier for families to ask questions.
- ✓ Family advocates, trained by the school to serve as liaisons, help bridge gaps for families who feel disconnected.
- ✓ Evening and weekend family workshops for working families, covering topics like college readiness, financial aid, and accessing student grades online.

One parent, Fatima, a refugee from Syria, had never attended a school event before. However, when a multilingual staff member personally invited her to a WhatsApp orientation, she agreed to join. Within weeks, she felt confident enough to attend a School Advisory Council meeting, where she shared ideas on how to support multilingual families.

Step 3: From Engagement to Empowerment

As families grew more engaged, their role in school decision making increased. *Los Tres Golpes* was no longer just about attending meetings; it was about leading change.

- A family-led advocacy group successfully lobbied for multilingual counselors to better support families of emerging multilingual students.
- Families collaborated with the school board to introduce a career mentorship program that connected students with local professionals.
- Families helped shape new policies on homework expectations and grading transparency, ensuring families had a voice in academic decisions.

One of the biggest victories came when families successfully advocated for free evening English language classes at the school. This empowered families to build their language skills and better support their children's education.

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At the end of the school year, Principal Camaj stood before a packed cafeteria—not for a traditional school meeting, but for a celebration of family–school partnerships. Families who had once been silent observers were now active voices in shaping the school’s future.

As he looked at the crowd, he smiled and said: *“Cuando empezamos, muchos me preguntaban qué era Los Tres Golpes en la educación. Ahora, ustedes son la respuesta. Son el sazón, la energía, y la fuerza de nuestra comunidad escolar”* (When we started, many asked me what ‘Los Tres Golpes’ meant in education. Now, you are the answer. You are the seasoning, the energy, and the strength of our school community). And as the families cheered, they knew this was just the beginning. ●

The benefits of shifting from family passivity to family empowerment are profound for schools and families. Families have unique skills, perspectives, and experiences that will enrich the nuances of schools. When schools intentionally involve families as partners, they invest by relying on the expertise of the people who know their students’ needs better than anyone else. This can lead to academic and social-emotional goals that are better tailored to a student’s unique needs (Angell et al., 2016).

It takes confidence and leadership to cultivate and actively seek out empowered families. It can be disconcerting to have members of your decision-making team who do not report directly to school-sanctioned authorities and who operate with greater independence than school personnel. It is not easy to honor all voices and perspectives, especially when those voices might be voices of dissent. However, the pay-off can make an unforgettable difference in the lives of families and students who are often ignored by the system. The following Action Steps provide guidance to move from involvement to engagement to empowerment.

ACTION STEPS



For Progressing from Involvement to Engagement to Empowerment

| LEVEL | DEFINITION | KEY ACTIONS FOR SCHOOLS | EXAMPLE TOOLS/ STRATEGIES |
|-------------|---|---|--|
| Involvement | Families participate in one-way communication activities (e.g., receiving updates or attending events without active input) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share timely, transparent information • Ensure communication is culturally inclusive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create multilingual family newsletters and fliers • Host parent–teacher conferences |
| Engagement | Families participate in two-way communication with schools, sharing feedback and collaborating on small-scale initiatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host flexible events tailored to family needs • Facilitate culturally responsive conversations • Create opportunities for dialogue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet families at their convenience during neighborhood events • Post on social media groups for direct communication • Provide family liaisons |
| Empowerment | Families lead and cocreate decisions, policies, and initiatives that shape the school community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign decision-making roles to families • Provide training and tools to support active participation • Foster systemic, sustainable partnerships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain family advisory councils • Facilitate family workshops (academic support, leadership training) • Create advocacy groups lobbying for systemic improvements |

Strategy 7: Self-Analysis Questions to Plan Your Actions



1. If you had to guess, what percentage of families in your school would you say fall into Tier 1 (Involvement), Tier 2 (Engagement), or Tier 3 (Empowerment)? What steps can you start taking now to move families up to a higher tier?
2. Who do you know in your local community who could help you organize a family meeting in a location outside of school? Who on your staff do you know who could help you come up with a catchy promotional hook that would be familiar to families, pique their interest, and encourage them to attend?
3. What can you do in your school to create a space where more families can exercise their leadership skills for the benefit of the school and the community? ●

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