Parent Organization Network

Breaking Through Barriers

TIDES

TRANSFORMATIVE INQUIRY DESIGN FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMS

# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA:

## Achievements and Challenges Identified from the 2021 Priority 3 Self-Reflection Tool

June 2022

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The report was prepared by Transformative Inquiry Designs for Effective Schools (TIDES) for Parent Organization Network (PON). TIDES team members include Janet H. Chrispeels, Ed. D.; Margarita Gonzalez Zaske, Ph.D.; and Pamela Long, M.A.

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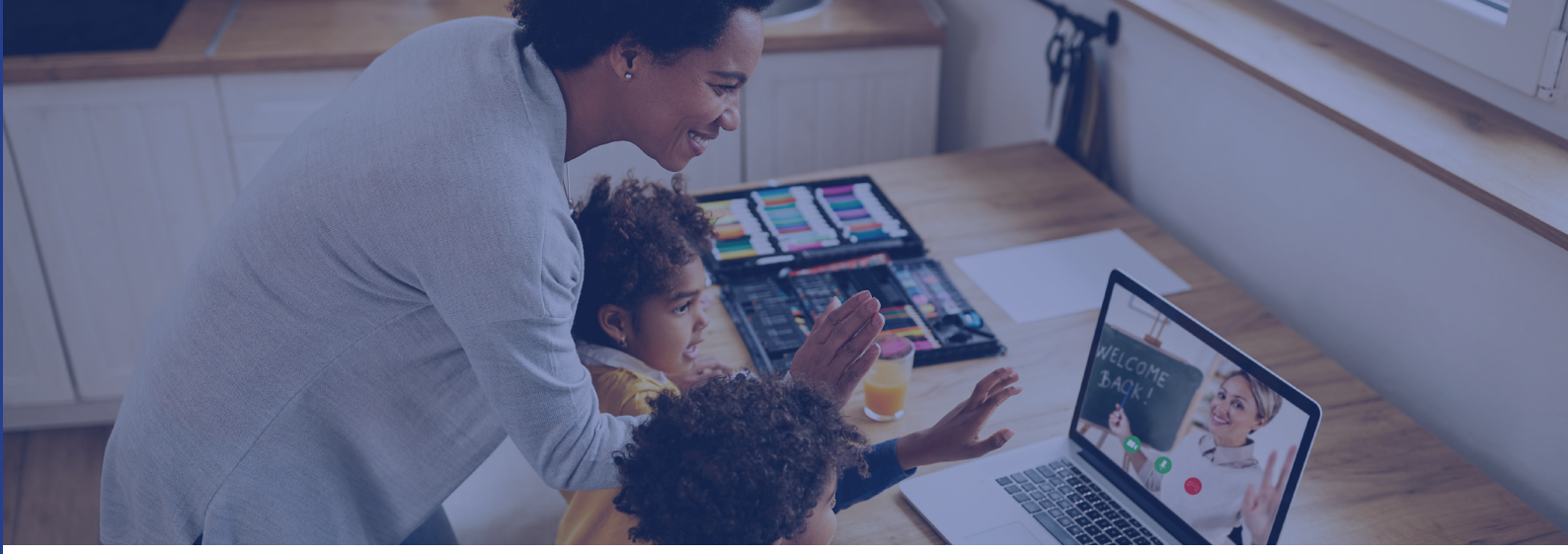
**About PON**: PON was founded in 2005 in Los Angeles. PON unites the power of underserved parents to break through barriers in public education, so parents and educators can effectively partner to ensure equity and excellence for all students.

**About TIDES**: TIDES is a nonprofit organization founded in San Diego in 2009. TIDES enable districts, schools and education-focused organizations to transform leading and teaching through data-rich guided evaluations and professional development.




# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA:

Achievements and Challenges Identified from the 2021 Priority 3 Self-Reflection Tool

## Take-aways from District Self-Reflections on Family Engagement

### *ACHIEVEMENTS*

1. On the Family Engagement Self-Reflection Tool, 50% of the 213 districts reviewed indicated a higher level of implementation on the 12 research-based family engagement practices. A T-test showed this increase was statistically significant on 11 of these practices (i.e., the change was greater than chance).
2. 55% of the 115 district narratives reviewed mentioned using virtual tools to stay connected to families, including parent-teacher conferencing, providing parent education on how to support children's learning and social-emotional needs, and linking families to community resources.
3. 28% of these districts explicitly mentioned their efforts in addressing issues of equity in student learning during the COVID pandemic.
4. Districts reported hiring new counselors, social workers, and bilingual outreach staff. Partnering with other agencies was also a strategy to meet growing family needs.

### *CHALLENGES*

5. The Dual-Capacity Framework represents new thinking about how parents and teachers can be engaged to enhance student learning, however, few districts have embraced it.
6. Family Engagement can play a role in closing student learning gaps, if there is more professional development for teachers on how to examine instructional practices for bias and how to build partnerships with families focused on student achievement.
7. LCFF Priority 3: Family Engagement was not abandoned and, in many cases, was enhanced during COVID-19; however, to close the learning gap, more coordination is needed between Family Engagement activities and the other LCFF priorities.

# BACKGROUND

In October 2020, TIDES (Transformative Inquiry Designs for Effective Schools) at the request of the Parent Organization Network (PON) conducted a qualitative study of the implementation of the 2019 Priority 3 Family Engagement Local Indicator Data. The study analyzed the narrative data from the Family Engagement Self-Reflection Tool for Priority 3, using a stratified sample of 248 school districts from all 11 regions in the state of California. The sample included K-6/K-8 elementary, high school, and unified districts from urban, suburban, and rural districts. The Self-Reflection Tool consists of 12 research-based practices in three areas of family engagement: Building Relationships between Staff and Families, Building Partnerships for Student Achievement, and Seeking Input in Decision Making (see Appendix A for the ranking scale and questions included under each area).

All Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in California were asked to complete the Self-Reflection Tool for the first time in 2019, which involved self-rating their implementation stage on each of the 12 practices using a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from Exploration and Research Phase to Full Implementation and Sustainability. (See California Department of Education for the statistical analysis completed by WestEd in 2020.) In addition, the districts completed a narrative prompt to describe their strengths and progress in each of the three areas.

## The **248** School Districts Represent

**26.6%**
of all district self-reflection tool responses

**55%**
of students

**47** of **58**
counties

**11** of **11**
state regions

This stratified sample includes school districts from each of the CCSESA- identified state regions. Within each region, all three types of districts were selected: elementary, secondary or high school, and unified, with attention given to selecting rural, suburban, and urban school districts.

In 2021, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) completed the Self-Reflection Tool for a second year. TIDES was again asked by the Parent Organization Network (PON) to conduct a comparative analysis of the Self-Reflection tool data collected in 2019 and 2021 from the sample of 248 districts it had previously studied. Thirty-five of these districts did not complete the self-reflection tool in 2021 and were thus removed from the study. **This report includes the findings from the data analysis of the remaining 213 districts.** The study included a quantitative analysis of the districts' self-ratings as well as a qualitative analysis of their narratives in 2021.

**Although districts were not explicitly asked about the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic, the research team explored how district narratives reflected actions specifically taken during the pandemic year from March 2020 to October 2021.** We know all districts shifted quickly to online teaching. We wanted to know if they also used online tools or other strategies to engage with families when face-to-face contact was curtailed. **We explored this theme in the 213 districts by using the search terms "pandemic, COVID, virtual, equity, and social-emotional and professional development."**

In Regions 4, 5, and 9, one or more of these terms was found in 68% of districts (48); in regions 1, 3, 7, 11 the terms surfaced in 59% of districts (41); and in regions 2, 6, 8, & 10, in 41% of districts (26). Thus, for the qualitative analysis, 115 of the 213 districts' narratives were reviewed to gain insights about their activities during the pandemic. Results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are the focus of this brief report.

# Quantitative Analysis: Self-Reflection Tool Ratings

The quantitative analysis includes the findings from the data analysis of the 213 districts that completed the self-reflection tool in both years, 2019 and 2021. The findings are organized in two sections: **1) Changes in Self-Rating Scores from 2019-2021, and 2) T-Test Analysis of Differences in Mean Scores from 2019-2021.**

## *1. CHANGES IN SELF-RATING SCORES FROM 2019-2021*

We conducted a comparative analysis of the districts' self-rating scores from 2019 and 2021 to identify those that rated themselves at a higher level of implementation (for example, from Initial Implementation to Full Implementation), those that remained the same, and those that indicated a lower level of implementation (for example, from Beginning Development to Exploration and Research phase). Overall, half of the districts increased their rating in 2021, particularly in the first section of the Self-Reflection Tool, "Building Relationships Between Staff and Families." About one-third of the districts did not change their self-ratings in 2021, and 20% decreased. **The findings suggest that while half of the school districts reported moving forward in their implementation of research-based family engagement practices during the pandemic, 20% of the districts are still struggling and may need support during these challenging times. Table 1 below shows the number of districts with changes in their self-rating scores in 2021.**

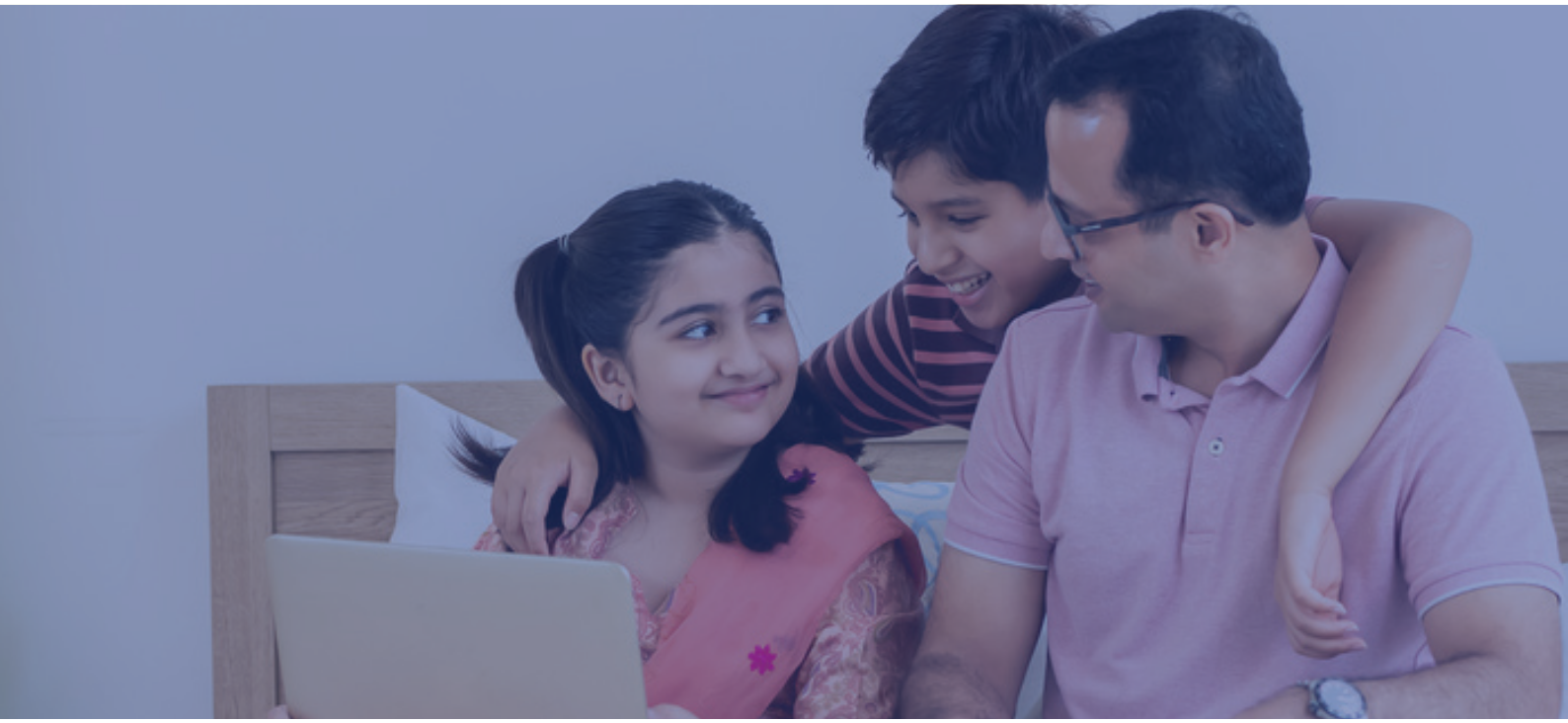


**Table 1.** **Changes in the Districts' Self-Rating Scores from 2019 to 2021**

| Self-Rating Changes | Section 1 Building Relationships between Staff and Families | Section 2 Building Partnerships for Student Outcomes | Section 3 Seeking Input for Decision Making |
|---|---|---|---|
| # Districts with increased ratings | 106 (50%) | 98 (46%) | 99 (46%) |
| # Districts with decreased ratings | 43 (20%) | 45 (21%) | 44 (21%) |
| # Districts that did not change | 64 (30%) | 70 (33%) | 70 (33%) |

## *2. T-TEST ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCES IN MEAN SCORES FROM 2019-2021*

A Paired Samples T-Test was performed to compare the mean scores of the districts' self-ratings between 2019 and 2021. Overall, the mean scores for each of the research-based practices in the self-reflection tool were higher in 2021, between 3.46 and 3.95 from a scale of 1-5 (1=Exploration and Research Phase, 5=Full Implementation and Sustainability). An analysis of the ratings in each of the 12 research-based practices revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in 11 practices in 2021. "Supporting staff to learn about each family's strengths, cultures, languages, and goals for their children" was the equity-focused research-based practice that showed more significant improvement in 2021. It is important to note that while "creating welcoming environments for all families in the community" did not show a significant improvement in 2021, this practice had one of the highest ratings in both years.

**Table 2.** **T-Test Analysis of Differences in Mean Scores from 2019 to 2021**

| Research-Based Practices (Questions 1-12) | 2021 | | 2019 | | Difference | | T-Test Two-Sided Alpha Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** | |
| **1.** Building Trusting Relationships | 3.88 | 0.803 | 3.63 | 0.834 | 0.244 | 0.775 | **0.000 |
| **2.** Creating Welcoming Environments | 3.92 | 0.837 | 3.88 | 0.786 | 0.038 | 0.812 | 0.500 |
| **3.** Supporting Staff to Learn Family Cultures, Values & Language | 3.51 | 0.839 | 3.15 | 0.916 | 0.352 | 0.918 | **0.000 |
| **4.** Two-Way Communication | 3.95 | 0.814 | 3.78 | 0.837 | 0.169 | 0.771 | **0.002 |
| **5.** Educators Professional Learning on how to Work with Families | 3.46 | 0.844 | 3.28 | 0.914 | 0.183 | 0.824 | **0.001 |
| **6.** Resources to Support Student Learning | 3.86 | 0.749 | 3.62 | 0.807 | 0.244 | 0.769 | **0.000 |
| **7.** Implementing Partnerships to Enhance Student Learning | 3.83 | 0.847 | 3.71 | 0.890 | 0.122 | 0.755 | *0.019 |
| **8.** Family Legal Rights and Advocacy | 3.65 | 0.947 | 3.50 | 0.940 | 0.150 | 0.924 | *0.019 |
| **9.** Developing Staff Capacity to Engage Families in Decision Making | 3.92 | 0.776 | 3.69 | 0.866 | 0.225 | 0.787 | **0.000 |
| **10.** Building Family Capacity for Decision Making | 3.87 | 0.836 | 3.70 | 0.892 | 0.169 | 0.841 | **0.004 |
| **11.** Family Input, including underrepresented groups, in Decision Making, | 3.77 | 0.823 | 3.51 | 0.899 | 0.258 | 0.865 | **0.000 |
| **12.** Opportunities for collaboration among all stakeholders in planning/ evaluating family engagement activities. | 3.50 | 0.925 | 3.37 | 0.984 | 0.136 | 0.844 | *0.019 |

**Statistically Significant at p<.05 and **p<.01*

# Qualitative Analysis: Self Reflection Tool Narratives

The closure of schools posed an enormous challenge for boards of education, superintendents, and the entire school community, including students. The scramble to get computers in the hands of all students as well as access to the internet was often the first order of business. Yet ensuring that teachers knew how to "do distance teaching and students how to engage in distance learning" was even more formidable. Staying engaged with families, LCFF Priority 3, became essential for most districts as they worked to prevent learning loss. Key words such as pandemic, COVID-19, virtual, equity, professional development, and social-emotional were used to search the narratives filed by the districts with the California Department of Education in 2021.

Several types of responses emerged from analyzing the narratives of how districts worked to stay connected with families. Many explicitly mentioned they shifted activities to the virtual realm and implemented new platforms to enhance communications and connections with families. Ten districts indicated that their outreach and initiatives were slowed by the pandemic and were now focused on reviving their engagement efforts. A few districts repeated their 2019 narratives in 2021.

## *STAYING VIRTUALLY CONNECTED*

In addition to the use of virtual technologies to teach students, they were also used to support parent and community engagement. To keep relationships strong, Zoom and other virtual technologies were used for:

- emailing parents
- conducting parent-teacher conferences
- offering coffees with the principal or superintendent

- continuing back-to-school nights
- conducting parent and staff workshops
- conducting classroom walkthroughs followed by debriefs with the principal to answer parents' questions (a unique use only mentioned once)

Families were informed via Facebook, electronic newsletters, district websites, and social media of school or community resources where they could "drive through" to collect food, clothing and other essentials. Other districts delivered essential services such as books, chrome books, school supplies, and meals. Counseling resources were also offered virtually one-on-one to students and families. **Many districts mentioned the key role of their Family Partnership Coordinators, counselors, Bilingual Family Resource Liaisons, and social workers in organizing and leading virtual parent education workshops and providing support to families electronically. In some cases, additional personnel were hired.** Districts also mentioned focusing on how to help parents support their child's learning at home. About a third of the districts indicated there was increased parent contact because of all the ways that districts, schools, teachers and other staff were reaching out. The lack of face-to-face contact with students and parents, of course, necessitated much more one-on-one contact.

**Zoom or Google Classroom also facilitated the district and school continuing efforts to involve families in decision-making. Districts and schools held virtual advisory committee meetings, and Town Hall meetings.** Electronic surveys were used by district to solicit input. Districts continued, and in some cases expanded, technology to connect families to student data, progress reports, report cards, assignments, support two-way parent teacher communication, and solicit input on issues related to the pandemic. **Over half the districts explicitly noted using or adopting platforms to host more parent meetings and trainings, virtually and remotely,** during the pandemic using Facebook Live sessions, Zoom Chats, Online Discussions, Focus Groups, Google Classroom for parents, Blackboard, Parent Square, Canvas Learning, Class Dojo, iReady, Online tutorials, etc. **In addition, districts also reported adopting virtual simultaneous translation services to assist teachers in communicating with parents in their home language (e.g., Language Line).** This latter change allowed teachers to be able to reach and communicate with the diverse language communities that comprise the school's population. One district reported it would continue to use Zoom and other tools in the future as it seemed to offer a way to expand participation. Another reported interest in adopting hybrid modes of communication and engagement more permanently. Others also recognized that new audiences had been reached.

## *VIRTUALLY PREPARING THE LCAP PLAN*

In the 2019 LCFF, responses indicated that almost all districts are using electronic surveys to gather input from students, parents, community, classified staff, teachers, and administrators. Some districts indicated responses went up and a few indicated lower response rates during the pandemic. Nevertheless, all districts noted the importance of the surveys in soliciting input for the LCAP plan. Virtual meetings of advisory committees were also another important means of engaging the school community in giving input to LCAP planning for 2021-22.

## *SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND STUDENTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONAL NEEDS*

Another theme that emerged in the 2021 narratives was the ways districts were working to address social-emotional needs, which were particularly exacerbated by the pandemic and the challenges of distance learning. Three types of activities seem to be prominent.

- One was providing professional development for staff and teachers on how to better meet these needs. A few districts mentioned developing or adopting a social-emotional learning curriculum.
- Another approach was offering parent workshops or providing information on how parents could better meet their children's social-emotional needs.
- A third strategy was connecting students, especially high school students, and families with school or community counselors, hotlines, support groups, and trainings during the pandemic such as "Let's Chat" Emotional Support Sessions for students to support their mental health and well-being. High school students were also assisted with college and career preparation,

often through virtual meetings and events. Districts mentioned drawing on counselors, bilingual liaisons, social workers, and classroom assistants to reach out individually to families virtually, or in some cases in person, to support those in greatest need.

### *ADDRESSING EQUITY*

Although only about 28% of the districts explicitly mentioned addressing issues of equity, those who did are engaging in important ways to increase the equity in student learning outcomes. **One prominent way is providing professional development for staff/teachers to be more informed about the language and culture of their students and how to build stronger culturally relevant pedagogy and partnerships.** They also indicated learning strategies for reaching out to homeless, foster, and other underserved communities. One district mentioned engaging in Courageous Conversations, another district worked with the Anti-Racism Coalition (ARC) to promote equitable instructional practices and relationships with families, and another had teachers review lesson plans and instructional practices for bias. **For many of these districts, equity work was initiated before the pandemic and reported in 2019 Self-Reflection narratives, yet importantly these districts seemed to be finding ways to continue to work with their staff, often virtually.** In addition, districts noted that they still needed to find better ways to increase their outreach and engagement with underserved families, which was a need cited in each of the three narratives.

## Discussion

Given the pandemic and the chaos that ensued for many districts, schools, teachers, and families, it was somewhat surprising to see that 50% of the 213 districts rated themselves at a higher level of implementation. The narratives help to explain these higher ratings. It seems that when districts had to pivot to online teaching, they also saw the potential to use these same tools to connect teachers for professional development, parents to online parent education, and to connect teachers to families.

However, the technology and access gaps were soon apparent. Without access, leaders recognized that the learning gaps of their underserved students would increase and connections to those families would suffer. Thus, not only did districts distribute chrome books to students, but they also scrambled to set up hot spots for computer access for families and provide training on how to use the technology. In addition, **the narratives revealed that many of the districts in this sample adopted new or enhanced platforms to be able to connect with families, such as Canvas or Parent**

**Square, which also has translation capabilities. These technology efforts, although not always effective, did seem to increase access to a broad range of families according to district narratives.**

**Another important theme in the narratives was descriptions of efforts to meet social-emotional needs of students and families. There was some recognition of this need in the 2019 narratives and an acceleration of efforts in 2021.**

**Missing in these short narratives, however, was any discussion of how districts would work with families to address student learning loss.**

# Conclusions & Recommendations

## *CONCLUSIONS*

The Family Engagement Self Reflection Tool became a part of the state multiple measure system in 2019, making it the first time that family engagement has been assessed in California. The annual Self-Reflection Tool represents new thinking in terms of supporting locally driven continuous improvement, as suggested by districts indicating higher levels of implementation. Progress:

- Districts are providing important professional development for teachers on how to build relationships with families.
- Despite COVID lockdowns and school closures, many districts provided parent education programs virtually, and some indicated they were reaching more parents through the online workshops.
- More professional development is needed on how to partner with families to enhance student learning (e.g., establishing Parent-Teacher Academic Teams).

- Family engagement can play a role in closing the achievement gap if family-teacher partnerships are greatly expanded and focused on student learning.
- Because of COVID, districts came face-to-face with inequities in student access and resources that contribute to lower levels of student achievement.

## *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:*

- The 20% of the 213 districts that gave their implementation efforts a lower rating may need more support from regional and state agencies to be able to enhance their family engagement efforts.
- Adding a sign-off page for the district's stakeholder family engagement team, who completed the Self-Reflection Tool, would give assurance that family engagement activities are fully representative of all stakeholder perspectives.