UPLAN

UNITED PARENT LEADERS
ACTION NETWORK

Policy Recommendations for Real Family Engagement

A Parent-Led Policy Agenda from UPLAN

Companion to

Families Know What's Needed:
Parent Voices on Our Children's Education

2026

INTRODUCTION

Real family engagement is more urgent than ever. It is not about using parent voice to divide communities or deny students' rights. It is about centering all families as true partners in educating and supporting every child.

As federal education protections and funding remain under threat, families cannot afford to lose ground. We need strong public systems that protect every child's right to education and make real partnership with families possible.

That is why UPLAN, alongside partners such as the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE), opposed efforts to weaken or dismantle the Department of Education and called for stronger protections for students, families, and communities.

At the same time, many of the changes families are asking for must happen closer to home. The recommendations below are directed primarily to state leaders and school districts, who have the power to remove barriers, ensure resources, and build real partnership with families.

Parents have continued organizing to protect and strengthen public education. Together, we are:

- Speaking out against threats to federal education protections and programs
- Demanding protections for immigrant families' data in schools and districts
- Fighting to keep education programs fully funded

These actions show that parent leadership is ongoing and responsive to today's challenges.

Real family engagement is more than attending events or getting updates. It means families and school staff working as equal partners to support children's learning, growth, and well-being. It means families having a real voice in shaping the systems and decisions that affect our children every day.

These recommendations are based on the stories, concerns, and ideas shared by parents and caregivers during listening sessions UPLAN held in 2023 and 2024 with over 100 participants. They reflect real experiences and offer practical ways to make engagement possible for all families, regardless of race, language, income, or ability.



Companion Brief

To learn more about what families shared in the listening sessions and the four themes that shaped these recommendations, read our brief: ***Families Know What's Needed: Parent Voices on Our Children's Education***.

WHY THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

Las familias necesitan políticas fuertes e inclusivas que protejan nuestros derechos y centren nuestras voces, especialmente ahora que el apoyo federal para la educación sigue siendo incierto. Estas recomendaciones proporcionan una guía clara para que los líderes estatales y locales fortalezcan el involucramiento familiar, protejan a los estudiantes y apoyen a todos los niños.

WHAT FAMILIES ARE ASKING FOR

Families across the country want schools to be inclusive, safe, and well-resourced. We want our children to receive the support they need, and we want a true partnership. These policy recommendations reflect what parents say we need most: real partnership, safe schools, and support for all children.

But policies alone are not enough. Lasting change requires a shift in who holds power and how decisions are made.

KEY PRIORITIES



Real Family Engagement



Health & Safety in Schools



Special Education Services

CREATING REAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

We want to be equal partners in our children's education. But many of us face unclear processes, poor communication, and little transparency. State and federal leaders have the power to fix this and build systems that reflect families' lived realities.

We recommend:

- States should clearly define family engagement in reporting requirements for districts that receive state and federal funds. This definition must include real family involvement in decision-making and be supported by staff training.
- When monitoring districts for compliance, state and federal agencies should evaluate how schools ensure access and participation across all families, including those facing language, literacy, or other barriers. Reviews should look at PTA documents, school invitations, and how families are encouraged to shape decisions.
- State funding for family engagement must include support for communication in multiple languages and accessible formats, such as texts, voicemails, and online portals. These tools should go beyond classroom updates and be evaluated for how well they connect all families to real decision-making.
- Training on effective family engagement should be required for all school staff, including principals, aides, counselors, coaches, and front office staff. Training should be ongoing, informed by families, and regularly evaluated for effectiveness.
- School districts must make family engagement plans public and open to family feedback. Public comment periods must be scheduled at accessible times and clearly communicated.
- Districts should report on outcomes of engagement, such as what activities were offered, how many families participated, what materials were shared, and what changed because of family input.
- We need clear, ongoing training on how to engage with school budgets, programs, and decision-making processes.
- Families must have real influence in shaping school programming and budgets. Districts should document how family voice shaped the final decisions.
- States should fund central Offices of Family Engagement in every district, with staff and resources to help families navigate school systems, special education, budgets, and more.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Real engagement starts with schools that are safe, clean and welcoming. We want to know that our children are protected and supported.

We recommend:

- State and federal leaders should implement best practices that center health and safety as a core requirement for receiving funding.
- States must ensure that budgets include resources for janitorial staff and clean facilities. Districts should report regularly on cleaning schedules for bathrooms, classrooms, public spaces, and playgrounds.
- Schools should communicate publicly and on time about staff shortages and leadership changes, and how these affect classrooms and budgets.
- States should require schools to show how outdoor play is built into daily schedules, with inclusive activities for all ages and abilities.
- States should prohibit withholding recess as a discipline method, regardless of student behavior. All students need space for physical exercise and unstructured play.

SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

Families of children with disabilities and learning differences face extra challenges when working with schools. Real family engagement means ensuring all families have access to services, information, and support, especially when navigating IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), IFSPs (Individualized Family Service Plans), or 504 plans.

We recommend:

- State and federal agencies should include whether IEP meetings and implementation happen on time in compliance monitoring. Guidance on “timely” should ensure families are not waiting months for services.
- States should provide free and accessible methods (online, in person, text, or phone) for families to report concerns about special education services.

SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES, CONTINUED

- States should require interpretation services for all IEP meetings, including ASL, multiple languages, and support for families facing literacy challenges. This must cover every step of the process: planning emails and phone calls, evaluations, classroom communications, and all materials families need to be true partners.
- States should monitor whether schools provide transition plans when children move between schools. Guidance must define what timely, supportive transitions look like, who is responsible, and how parents can give feedback.
- Districts should require schools to inform parents of alternatives when IEPs are not fully implemented due to staffing or funding shortages.

These recommendations come directly from families across the nation. We call on leaders and allies to act now so that real family engagement becomes the standard, not the exception.

LEARN MORE

Read the companion brief elevating the perspectives of over 100 parents who participated in UPLAN's listening sessions: **Families Know What's Needed: Parent Voices on Our Children's Education**.

UPLAN

We are a network of parents and parent leadership organizations building collective power across the country through organizing, influencing policy, and impacting systems to drive lasting change.

Together, we share knowledge, build leadership, and advocate on the issues impacting our families.

CONNECT WITH US

unitedparentleaders.org

uplan@unitedparentleaders.org