

Being in Community:

Understanding Family-School Engagement at MHS

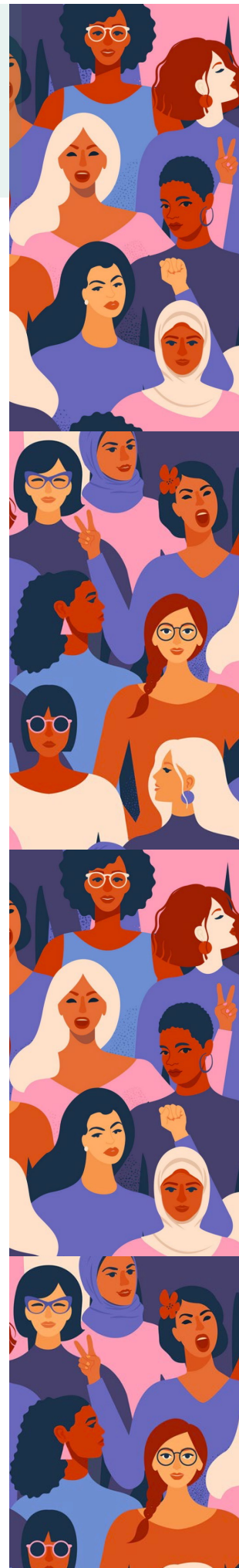
OVERVIEW

This study focused on parent and family engagement at Melvindale High School (MHS), with particular attention to Arabic and Spanish-speaking families. The intention was to find ways to enhance community building, family connection and involvement, and communication with the school. Drawing on interviews with parents, students, and school staff as well as school-based observations, we explored what family engagement means to various actors; how students and families want to be involved; how MHS connects with families; and the challenges that hinder meaningful communication and connection. Although our data collection was limited by access to parents and our inability to communicate in their home languages, our findings reveal the following:

- It is clear that MHS wants to foster a sense of belonging for students and families through culturally relevant programming like after-school activities and celebratory events such as Culture Day.
- Inclusive practices such as translating emails and messages into Spanish and Arabic are positively received by MHS families.
- Though parents appreciate positive feedback about students' progress and areas of growth, most school communication centers on academic and behavioral issues of concern
- Some parents expressed desires to initiate, volunteer, or actively contribute to MHS events and programming, but lacked information or connections to get started.
- Parents not attending school events does not indicate a lack of familial interest or engagement in their children's education. Families emphasized their trust in the school and their child(ren) as shaping their level of involvement.
- Some families are separated by national borders, and family members cannot physically attend school events. However, these family members may be integral to students' support systems.
- Structural barriers related to transportation, time constraints, and language, and relational barriers, which encompass feelings tied to communication patterns and intercultural competencies, can challenge families and school staff in fostering meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging.
- Family engagement is shaped by individual preferences and constraints, as well as pre-migration experiences and expectations for school-family connections in countries of origin. In some cases, navigating an unfamiliar educational environment risks families not accessing accommodations and resources to support their children's education. It can also lead to misalignments in various actors' definitions, expectations, and goals for school-family engagement.
- There are many communication tools and platforms used in a variety of ways, and there is inconsistency in how these are used, which may further overwhelm and fracture parents' attention. Most of these tools are used to establish unidirectional communication patterns, leaving few opportunities for multidirectional communication.

Based on these findings, we offer several recommendations for MHS to consider to further investigate (mis)alignments in the aims and usage of communication and tools, how families can and want to be in community at MHS, and how language and cultural competence are opportunities to strengthen family engagement, community connection, and belonging.

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BACKGROUND ON THE COLLABORATION

This collaboration aims to build an equitable, reciprocal, and sustainable partnership between Melvindale High School (MHS) and the University of Michigan (U-M) Marsal Family School of Education. The foundation of our collaboration is rooted in a shared commitment to creating schools that are welcoming and inclusive for migrant students and families with diverse identities and experiences. Our goals for this collaboration are multiple. U-M graduate students gain an opportunity to design and practice qualitative research methods in the context of an authentic school space, supporting graduate students' learning of concepts and skills. Meanwhile, the research inquiry is constructed collaboratively, centering on issues of importance to MHS. Our hope is that the research generates an opportunity for MHS participants and leaders to reflect upon current practices, as well as identify areas of strength and openings for continued dialogue and improvement. We appreciate how these sentiments are echoed as MHS faculty, staff, and administration seek feedback for positive change in the school. Previous collaborations took place in 2020, 2021, and 2023. [Artifacts can be found here.](#)

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted between September and November 2024 at MHS. Drawing on ethnographic methods and community-engaged approaches, our research was driven by the following questions:

- 1) What does school-family engagement mean to students, families, and MHS actors?
- 2) How do MHS actors connect with and involve families? How do students and families want to be connected to and involved with their school?
- 3) What challenges impede meaningful connections?

These questions emerged from initial conversations with MHS leadership, shaped by the needs and priorities identified by the school, and were further refined through the process of the study. To explore these questions, our team conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal interviews with students, families, and staff. The team conducted 82 hours of participant observations, which took place at MHS during the school day and some after-school events and clubs, including Parent-Teacher Conferences. We also conducted 26 interviews with 11 MHS staff members, 8 students, 5 parents, and 2 district staff members. The semi-structured interview protocols aligned with the overarching themes of the research project, allowing participants to surface their experiences and perspectives on school-family engagement. We recruited MHS participants after our team's initial school visit and through recommendations from administrators and teachers. We recruited parent and family participants at Parent-Teacher Conferences, and relied on staff and parents to identify additional participants. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using inductive codes, meaning the research team identified themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Throughout, we remained sensitive to "local meaning," attending to members' perceptions rather than imposing our own views (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

LIMITATIONS

Due to the difficulty of reaching out to parents, we relied heavily on the perspectives of staff and students to understand the family experience, which risks further validating existing assumptions that underlie current practices. The parents who did participate may not be representative of the larger MHS community because of the small sample size and potential selection bias. That is, parents willing to share their views may have more positive or negative experiences with the school. Additionally, our team could only speak with English and Spanish-speaking families and students, while MHS has a large Arabic-speaking population that we were unable to access. Our team also struggled to recruit newcomer parents in particular, resulting in the exclusion of a valuable subset of parents whose voices would be especially relevant to the study.





RELEVANT LITERATURE

Meeting the needs of students in culturally relevant and sustaining ways is crucial, given the growing (im)migrant populations in schools. School staff often function as critically important “resource brokers and navigators” for students (Rodriguez et al., 2020). However, (im)migrant families frequently encounter challenges in engaging with US schools due to “cultural misalignments” (Cuevas, 2023). These may arise from differing perspectives on educational systems, family roles, and educators’ responsibilities, as well as unfamiliarity with expectations and academic calendars and schedules. Language barriers further complicate effective communication and collaboration between families and teachers, potentially alienating newcomer families.

Cultural misalignment can negatively impact (im)migrant students, contributing to “home-school dissonance” (Mwangi, 2019), where students struggle to align their cultural identity and assimilated school identity (also see Sarroub, 2005). This dissonance can lead to feelings of being between worlds, which can complicate students’ educational experiences. However, schools can actively work to “elevate the significance of minoritized youths’ multilingual and multicultural knowledge and experiences, decenter the monolingual and limited cultural ways of learning around which schools have historically organized their practices. . .[design] learning environments that center multiple ways of knowing, of doing, and of taking from the world” (García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2019, p. 3).

While decades of research confirms that family engagement with schools leads to more positive outcomes for young people (Henderson & Mapp, 2022), studies also show that families that speak English at home tend to participate more than those with other home languages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). **Building strong relationships with migrant and multilingual students’ families needs to begin with positive, asset-oriented mindsets**, acknowledging and valuing the cultural and linguistic strengths of migrant families (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It also involves developing a **shared definition of family engagement** to align school and home expectations effectively and “establish trusting partnerships to support student learning” (McCauley et al., 2023, pg. 13). These approaches **recognize families as active partners with the agency to define their relationship to the school**, rather than as passive participants expected to follow school-initiated events.

An asset-oriented approach, which views these challenges as opportunities for improvement, can overcome the “crisis of connection” (Noguera, 2019) between school and home, transcending barriers, such as nationality, race, and social class to act affirmatively on common interests. With this in mind, it is important to understand current practices at MHS that are fostering meaningful connections for teachers and families, as well as areas that highlight misalignment.

POSITIVE PRACTICES

MHS has demonstrated a strong commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment. Notably, multiple staff members emphasized their hopes that families feel a sense of belonging. For example, one teacher stated that they would like families to know, *“This is your school . . . I would like people to feel like . . . you are welcome here.”* Ms. Amit Qwfan, the district’s bilingual secretary, spoke about her aspirations to become more involved in family engagement beyond enrollment, sharing that, *“connecting with the community is a huge part of how well we are able to help these kids”* (Interview, 11.1.24). Mr. Khaled Harhara, a parent at MHS, confirmed that the school’s efforts have created a welcoming environment. As he stated, *“When I walk to the school, I feel like I’m welcome to the school”* (11.7.24). These reflections highlight how MHS’s commitment to inclusion is not just a stated goal but a lived experience for many of its members.

Furthermore, MHS offers culturally relevant events and programming that have resonated with students and families alike. Many participants spoke about their meaningful experiences and the pride they felt participating in Culture Day. One student shared that they thought Culture Day was “the perfect event” for families to learn about the school community, emphasizing the way she felt valued for her cultural identity.



I feel special that day, because [my friends] like what I made. They like what my family made. They like what I did. . . Because they say that they have never tried it before, and that they like it, so I feel like it's special, and it was a pleasure to share it with my friends.” - Student, 10.21.24

Additionally, the students we spoke with highlighted the personal recognition and encouragement they receive from individual staff members. For example, one student shared that *“there is one teacher who makes the effort to create assignments that allow us to connect to our culture. Like sharing about our food, countries. And we have a project due Wednesday where we were tasked with preparing an easy dish from our country and provide the recipe in English.”* The extracurricular activities that celebrate student diversity, including afterschool programs like Diversity Club and Steps to Change, further exemplify the school’s commitment to inclusivity.

Overall, the families we encountered expressed positive sentiments. Several parents we met at Parent-Teacher Conferences did not feel a need to talk with us because they thought their experience with the school was going well. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the feedback did not fully capture the perspectives of harder-to-reach families, who may face significant barriers. These insights underline the importance of continued efforts to ensure all voices are heard and supported at MHS.

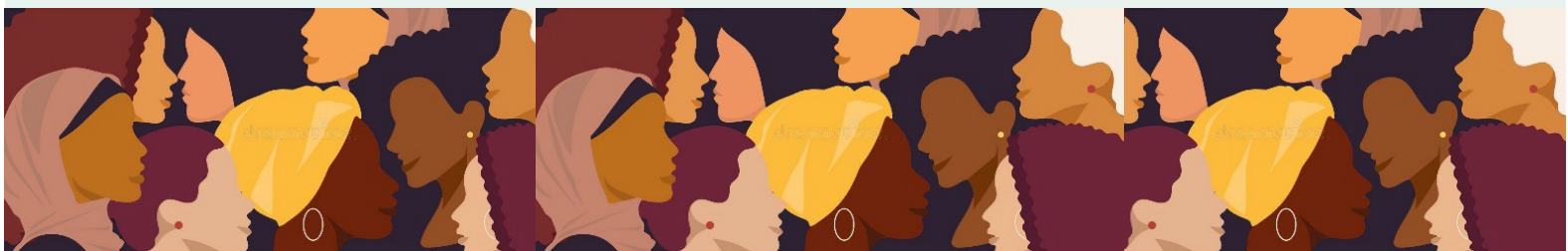
FAMILY VALUES AND DESIRES FOR CONNECTION

Parents appreciate positive feedback about students, whether it comes directly from a teacher, or is communicated via one of the school applications. In an interview with Ms. Alata, we learned that sharing student *“areas of growth and where they’re shining”* is something parents like to hear. She makes an effort to include successes in her conversations with families, ensuring that feedback is balanced and asset-oriented (Interview, 10.25.24). A Spanish-speaking parent of an 11th-grade student who recently moved from Mexico, expressed feeling good about being able to check her daughter’s grade freely through the portal. Several multilingual parents expressed their contentment with the regular texts and emails that they receive from the school, which are accessible in Spanish and Arabic. Although parents are not asked to respond or interact with the messages, they like staying informed with the school’s happenings and feeling a sense of connectedness to their child’s education.

We also found that parents are enthusiastic about occasions where they or their children are recognized and affirmed. This enthusiasm is manifested in the popularity of events like Cultural Day and the graduation ceremony. It also illustrates why families whose children perform well academically tend to be more likely to attend parent-teacher conferences than families of lower achieving students, a pattern that teachers emphasized as a challenge.

Parental absence does not equal lack of engagement. Students expressed having engaged parents or guardians who were not necessarily physically present at school events. Despite the physical distance between family members, students shared feelings of support, providing examples of how their parents remained connected to their schooling experience. For instance, during her time as an MHS student, one alumni spoke to her mother daily on the phone. She explained that her mother who remained in Yemen was *“more involved”* than her father who lived in Melvindale (Fieldnotes, 11.7.24). Another student shared how her mother returned to her country of origin to help provide income for the family. Although her mother was living in another country, this student still considered her part of the household and very much part of her support system. These instances align with studies that establish transnational connections through care and support for migrant students’ education (e.g., Oliveira, 2018). Though some teachers emphasized that *“I don’t want to say that if you don’t show up, you don’t care”* (Interview, 10.25.24), others worried aloud about low attendance at school events and wondered if students felt sufficiently supported.

Parents are advocates for their children, though this advocacy can take various forms. Another way that families may support their children without attending school activities includes advocating for their children’s autonomy and developing their child’s self-advocacy skills. Many teachers at MHS assumed it was natural to see lower parental engagement as children entered adolescence. Conversations with parents confirmed that there is a developmental trajectory playing out. As one parent reflected, *“I like the idea of the kids doing more and being involved and also having opportunities, because I feel like that will potentially carry with them as they become parents and become adults.”*



Parents want to gain a deeper sense of belonging through school-family engagement, which means deepening connections between families and MHS staff, as well as connections amongst families. **Some parents expressed a desire to initiate, volunteer, or actively contribute more to school events, not just passively participate in them.** As one parent shared during an interview, they “*wanted... some influence as a parent,*” though they worried “*that people don’t know what or how to do it*” (Interview, 11.8.24). Limited opportunities to contribute can sometimes lead to frustration and discouragement, as illustrated by a Latine mother who wanted to organize a school-family event for parents to get to know one another better, but she did not feel sufficiently connected to the school to initiate a project. She lamented, “*If they don’t listen to me, I feel isolated. I feel less important, and I know that I am valuable and I know that I can contribute a lot*” (Interview, 11.15.24). Another (Spanish-speaking) parent shared how meaningful it is for her to have someone who speaks the same language among the school staff, even if it was only to greet her.

In some cases, parents identified information that they felt the school could provide, which would allow them to better support their children’s education. For parents who are unfamiliar with the US educational context, navigating higher education can be particularly overwhelming. One parent expressed a desire to support her child’s aspirations to pursue post-secondary education, but lacked the tools and resources to enact this support. She expressed wanting “*some type of detailed information that says ‘there is this program you can look into’ but in Spanish.*” She recognizes that her child can ask in English, but greatly desires the ability to support her daughter in the journey as her mother. Similarly, another parent worried that she had to rely on her child as a language broker to interact with school teachers and staff to avoid negative experiences. As an example, she explained how she and her daughter coordinate who will call the school to communicate absences, “*So she helps me call on the phone. But it is not her responsibility... So my daughter is annoyed and says to me, ‘Mom, this is not my responsibility.’ She is right, it is not her responsibility, and I don’t want her to have to do this*” (Interview, 11.15.24). Even as these same parents intend to support their children’s autonomy at school, these examples show ways that family members would like to be more actively involved, but need additional resources and support.

BARRIERS TO SCHOOL-FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AT MHS

Our data shows that there are various barriers that hinder some families from fully engaging in the MHS community in the ways that they value and desire. Below, we distinguish between **structural barriers**, which relate to transportation, time constraints, and language; and **relational barriers**, which encompass feelings of communication, negative communication patterns, and uneven cultural competence. We also account for ways that some of these barriers are experienced by teachers and MHS staff.


Structural barriers

- **Limited access to reliable transportation** prevents families from attending school events and meetings. For instance, parents without a driver’s license or a reliable vehicle face significant challenges in attending activities if dependable public transportation is unavailable.
- **Time constraints** pose a significant challenge for families. Several students mentioned that their parents have work schedules or younger children to care for during school activities, limiting their availability. For example, an 11th grade student explained, “*my parents are not like that [able to attend many events]... they’re like more busy with work and stuff at home*” (10.21.24). Another student noted that their father’s work schedule made it hard for them to share time as a family. “*My dad usually work like lots. So we don’t, we don’t even see him*” (12th Grade Student, 10.28.24). A parent attending a parent-teacher conference noted his exhaustion given his work schedule, which necessitates sleeping during the daytime (Fieldnote, 11.7.24).
- For school staff, competing responsibilities can make it difficult to prioritize and dedicate individualized attention to each student’s family. Teachers referenced large numbers of students and families to keep track of across classes, as well as numerous responsibilities.



“I try not to do that [contact parents] often, because that’s an extra thing I have to do, to be honest... I’m trying to... manage my classroom, and I can’t be sitting down, like, answering emails all day... So if it’s really necessary for me to communicate with a parent, then I just might do a phone call, but I’m not doing it every day because, like, that’s just another... thing I have to do on top of everything else” -Interview with MHS teacher, 10.25.24



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- Language poses another structural barrier, one that is felt by both families and teachers. Families whose home language is not English can struggle to access information (such as event details or updates) and participate fully in school activities. Teachers' fluency and comfort communicating with families in students' home languages also shape how they initiate and maintain communication with families. Students often step in to support families as "language brokers" (Orellana, 2009), though with varying degrees of comfort. Importantly, language appears as both a structural barrier and can also manifest as a relational barrier.

Relational barriers

- **Parents can feel unwelcome or fear judgment due to unfamiliarity with school norms and language anxiety.** Several students and one of the parents we spoke to substantiated how this fear can result in feelings of intimidation that prevent them from engaging in the way they would like to. A 12th grade student explained what happened when she invited her mother to a school event, noting,

“she didn't know English, and I told her, 'Mom, would you like to go with me?' and she said, 'No' ... she don't want to get embarrassed” –Student, 10.28.24

One Latine parent walked us through her thoughts when she walks into the school to interact with staff, worrying,

“when they hear me speak English, they know that I don't speak English, I don't have the accent to speak it. When I get going, I start to try, I practice a little, but at first, well, I'm nervous” -Parent, 11.15.24

- We noticed a **pattern of negative communication from the school to families**, primarily around academics, behavior, or attendance. These were the most common reasons for staff to contact parents, and students shared this understanding that communication from the school signaled something problematic that needed to be addressed. As one teacher noted, “most of the time if I am communicating with parents, if I'm honest, it's because... [there is] a behavioral issue” (Interview, 10.25.24). Students internalized these patterns so much that one 12th grade student reasoned that they would not get a call home because “I'm not that kind of kid that would like... make trouble” (Interview, 10.28.24). It is possible that some families avoid academic-themed events like parent-teacher conferences, assuming they will follow the same negative communication pattern. In contrast, many students and families we spoke with who attended parent-teacher conferences emphasized their pride in hearing about their child's academic success. This points to a potential misalignment in the ways that teachers expect parents of struggling students to be responsive to school communication, whereas parents of high-performing students may be more likely to attend these events. Echoing family desires for more community-building spaces, one teacher believed that families may be more likely to engage in extracurricular activities like Culture Day because, “It doesn't have to do anything with, like talking about academics or behavior” (Interview, 10.25.24).
- An additional barrier we noted was **uneven cultural competence**. Staff vary in their ability to connect with families from diverse backgrounds. Some of the staff members we spoke to who share cultural identities with families reported fewer challenges, noting their cultural affinity and shared language. Some staff indicated that, at times, they hesitated to reach out to families because they assumed what would and would not be effective, worrying that the effort might be a “waste of time” (10.25.24). However, hesitation could also be related to training and experience with communication tools or time and capacity within a school day.”

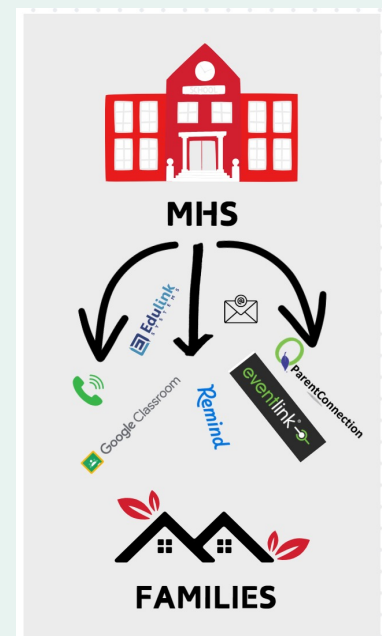
The challenges faced by MHS in fostering school-family engagement are multifaceted, spanning structural and relational domains. While students play a crucial role in bridging these gaps by acting as translators and intermediaries, this can place an undue burden on them. Sustainable solutions must focus on reducing systemic barriers, fostering cultural understanding, and creating an inclusive environment that empowers families to engage confidently and meaningfully. Kibler et al., 2017).

MANY TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION, NOT A LOT OF CONNECTION

MHS engages several modalities for communication with families, such as email and phone calls, as well as apps like InTouch, Parent Connect, Remind, Eventlink, and Google Classroom. It is common for parents to receive phone calls from the school if an MHS student needs to be picked up early or if there's an attendance issue that needs to be resolved (fieldnotes, 10.31.24). Robocalls are also used to immediately notify parents of unexcused absences. Mornings and lunchtime are the busiest times in the central office, as many parents give verbal permission over the phone for students' absence or early dismissal. Meanwhile, InTouch is an automated messaging system for teachers to communicate quickly with parents. These messages are pre-written but personalized and automatically translated into home languages for parents. Parent Connect is a district-wide app beginning in middle school where parents can view assignments and attendance updated by teachers. Remind sends "two parallel messages" (fieldnotes 10.28.24), one to parents and one to students, in a group message format. Eventlink is a platform that provides information about extracurriculars like athletic events. Google Classroom is also accessible to students and families to track students' attendance, assignments, and performance. Additionally, teachers reported using MI-Star, provided by the Michigan Department of Education, to document all communication with parents to clarify misunderstandings or provide further evidence in the event of serious miscommunications (fieldnotes 10.28.24).

MHS primarily utilizes **unidirectional communication** to inform families about school events, student academics, attendance, and behavior. Unidirectional communication refers to practices where information primarily flows from the school to the parents, with the latter not generally expected to respond. **This top-down approach not only results in limited parent engagement but can lead to a sense of disconnect between the school and families.** Though some of the tools listed above have capabilities for two-way communication, they are not often used that way by families, according to teachers and parents we interacted with. In some cases, teachers expressed uncertainty about whether parents were consulting the tools available to them. Though teachers placed value on building deeper connections with families, they did not necessarily want more two-way communication through these tools. Meanwhile, parents may hesitate to engage in multidirectional communication because they often lack a full understanding of the tools' functionalities, how to use them effectively, or expectations for when they should be responding or initiating contact. One parent saw MHS's increased communication as a step in the right direction, though they worried that, "a lot of parents do miss it [Parent Connect] and maybe don't realize that it's there. So I, you know, I utilize those things, I don't know how many people are."

Communication is often unidirectional, top down, and occurs through many channels.



Adding to the complexity of the issue, teachers vary in their use of communication tools, with some favoring certain ones over others. For example, Ms. Emma Cruga, an MTSS specialist, prefers to use InTouch or phone calls to reach parents. However, another teacher we interviewed prefers to use the Remind application (interview with faculty 10.28.2024). Another teacher pointed to the accessibility of Google Classroom, emphasizing, "any time of day, they can log into [Google classroom]... Their grades are right there at any time, behavior, any comments. So, I think parents, you know, if they're taking advantage of this, they're using Google Classroom" (Interview, 10.28.24). This inconsistency can create confusion for parents who may receive information through different channels depending on the teacher.





Language barriers further compound the issue, as some tools do not offer home language translations. In general, multilingual parents we spoke with preferred tools that offered automatic translation or which reached them in multiple languages, such as weekly emails from the principal, which are translated in Arabic and Spanish. According to a MHS teacher, some parents are unaware that teachers have access to tools and technology that can translate messages, believing that they needed a translator to facilitate translation in real time (Interview, 11.1.24). One Spanish-speaking parent suggested that she did not feel sufficiently connected to the school to initiate a line of communication. *“I don’t have the connection to the school.”* (Interview, 11.15.24).

Overall, the current communication practices at MHS, while well-intentioned, are not fostering a strong enough sense of connection between the school and families. The abundance of unidirectional communication, in addition with inconsistencies in tool usage, language barriers, and a lack of clear protocols, may inadvertently discourage parents from actively or consistently engaging with the school.

MISALIGNMENTS

MHS staff, parents, and students feel most aligned when parents and teachers are connected and working as one team to facilitate the academic and social development of the students. When stakeholders are acting as one team, it creates a sense of understanding, comradery, and mutual support. One parent reflected how the ability to reach out to her child’s teacher left them feeling, *“heard by her”* (Interview, 11.8.24). In the same vein, a teacher reflected on meeting a student’s parent and having the parent show interest in the class their child was taking, and how *“it made me feel connected to the parent of this student.”* (Interview, 10.25.24). Students also recognized the importance of school-family connections, though they envisioned various degrees of engagement across these domains of their life. For example, one student recounted how the school and her family worked together when she was struggling in a class, to facilitate the goal of academic achievement with care.

“I think there’s a lot of things... in a child’s development that a school can’t just do. There needs to be support on both ends. So I think having a parent know what’s going on at school, so they can help at home, like, really helps it, you know, even it out” (Interview, 10.31.24).

However, we also found misalignments in the vision and expectations for school-family engagement between MHS staff, parents, and students. These **misalignments may be due to a lack of a shared definition and expectations for school-family engagement across various actors.** As one teacher put it, *“expectations of... what a parent should be doing and the expectation of what a teacher should be doing aren’t aligned... [and this is how] rifts have happened”* (Interview, 10.25.24). MHS teachers and administrators tended to prioritize families showing up physically for school events, including academic events (e.g., parent teacher conferences), non-academic events (e.g., sporting programming, Homecoming), and informational events (e.g., events coordinated by the School Improvement Committee).

Based on the parents we spoke to, parental expectations of engagement were guided by trust and limited by time constraints. Throughout most of our conversations with MHS stakeholders, there was a thread of how parents and guardians seemed to trust the school to handle the education of their children. This overall sense of trust was confirmed in our conversations with parents, who expressed faith and trust in both their children and the school to do what was right. As elaborated earlier, in some cases parents desired deeper connections but felt unable to establish them. MHS students were the most likely to favor current practices. While showing an understanding of why improving school-family engagement might be necessary, some students felt adequate support from their families and often saw themselves as messengers or bridges between MHS and their families. Additionally, students valued their autonomy in the school space.

While there is misalignment happening across stakeholders, we urge MHS to begin with the shared vision of supporting students in their educational endeavors and self-development. **The next section focuses on recommendations for mending misalignments or creating opportunities for realignment.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The scope for this study has been guided by MHS leadership's goal to create a positive, welcoming culture of engagement and communication at MHS. Our recommendations are organized into three categories, aimed at mending misalignments or realigning school-family expectations to foster deeper connections and a sense of belonging: (1) address structural barriers, (2) strengthen two-way communication, and (3) develop new engagement patterns to foster community connection. These recommendations are not intended to be all encompassing, and we recognize that some of the recommendations are more actionable than others.

Address structural barriers

- Structural barriers relating to transportation, time constraints, and language can be addressed in various ways. We suggest MHS leans into more **flexible methods for event scheduling**. This includes offering events at different days, times, and locations throughout the school year, and regularly asking for parent input on what event schedules are working best for them, while also seeking teachers' input. Offering additional events in an online or hybrid format, or at locations outside of MHS, would allow parents to add flexibility into their own schedules, and might simultaneously protect teacher capacity.
- Organizing a **community carpool** may also address the structural barrier of transportation, while also building more opportunities for parent-parent interaction, fostering a greater sense of overall trust and belonging.
- It would be useful to offer **childcare or child-friendly spaces during school events**, especially those that happen outside of workday hours when parents are less likely to have coverage for their younger children. Childcare could be supervised by family or student volunteers. For example, MHS's Education students will soon be gaining primary school experience and could tap into these skills to organize child-oriented activities for the duration of a school event. Reducing these logistical barriers might increase parent attendance and participation in MHS events.
- Additionally, there are various logistical improvements that could be made around current communication practices. As previously mentioned, the number of communication apps and methods can be overwhelming to families, so we recommend removing some of the more redundant communication apps from MHS use. **Asking parents and teachers to vote on what they prefer for communication methods** could be helpful in narrowing down which communication systems could be eliminated.
- For the communication systems that are in place, **creating and publishing clear setup and use guides** for both parents and teachers would help reduce some of the feelings of overwhelm. These guides could include steps with visuals, links to video tutorials, and information on how frequently parents could expect to be using the app. Publishing these guides in multiple locations and in multiple languages would help increase access to the support families might need, which would also cut down on some of the extra work MHS currently does in offering tech support for families.
- We recommend that MHS **update its staff directory** on the website to include the most current contact information for staff members and with emails listed rather than embedded in the Mail app. This increase in access to staff can increase family comfort to contact the specific staff member they want to reach, rather than navigating through the main office. Meanwhile, MHS could work towards updating the contact information for MHS families in their records. Though phone numbers and email addresses for many MHS families are in flux, placing an emphasis on maintaining the most up-to-date information will help make communication with and among families easier moving forward.

Strengthen two-way communication

- MHS has many unidirectional methods of communicating with families. We encourage MHS to consider other ways of implementing two-way or bidirectional communication where families can provide insights and feedback more regularly. **Asking explicitly for feedback from parents when it is needed or desired is a good way to make parents feel like they are a valuable resource to MHS. Additionally, acting on the feedback that is received will make parents more likely to continue to provide feedback in the future.**
- Building different mechanisms of communication to ask for and receive feedback would help open up the opportunity for a wide range of families to participate, whether it be a **suggestion-box-style Google Form** that is checked regularly or setting up **coffee chats with MHS administrators**. We encourage MHS to create open lines of communication for conversation around the ways that MHS families hope to be involved in the MHS community rather than narrowing in on a single definition of family engagement.



- Students are working as translators of language, experience, and information for their families, and serve as a bridge between school and home. We encourage MHS to **continue to support students as bridges** by recognizing and compensating students who serve as translators in the classroom and beyond.
- To protect the capacity of students and faculty, hiring more bilingual staff, including a Spanish-speaking parent liaison, would support the connection between multilingual families and the school.
- **Utilizing translation-friendly communication tools and platforms with more consistency** would reduce some of the current communication barriers and encourage caregivers to respond, knowing their messages would be translated for faculty and staff.
- **Encouraging teachers and providing the time**, perhaps during professional development days, to make a phone call, send a message, or write a note home for students who have shown positive progress would establish a trend that communication from school is not always negative.
- Implementing **student-led conferences** instead of the traditional parent-teacher conferences not only involves students in communication between teachers and caregivers, but it also allows students to lead a discussion on their learning and growth at school, while practicing organizational and leadership skills.

Develop new engagement patterns to foster community connection

New ways of coming together as a community can create opportunities for understanding how families understand their needs, goals, and expectations, allowing the school to articulate a shared definition that draws on multiple voices and perspectives.

- Creating spaces for students to share their views and design initiatives involving their families is an additional way to recognize and draw on community resources to shape the school environment.
- Organizing community walks or home visits recognizes families and community members as knowledge holders. Interactions based in the community can offer important insights into students' home lives and community resources. They can also establish a sense of community trust so that relationships are in place when conflict or crisis occurs.
- Community and cultural gatherings allow families to interact with the school, share their heritage and knowledge, and connect with others in their home languages while strengthening connections between families, students, and staff. More culturally inclusive, non-academic events, like Culture Day, allow families to share and connect with the school community in positive ways, not only when there is a problem or concern. Opportunities for faculty to gather with families outside of parent-teacher conferences or academic-related concerns can provide casual, low-stakes opportunities for teachers to learn from families. We propose creating community spaces that celebrate cultural traditions and embrace the opportunity to create new ones specific to MHS.
- Offering funding to take language classes or plan events with parents would incentivize teachers to model the learning they want to see in their students.
- Developing a shared understanding that family engagement can look a number of different ways at MHS would encourage families to be involved members of the community in ways that appeal to them.

These are some of the ways we envision MHS building trusting connections between the home and school. We underscore the particular importance of school efforts to reach families during times of increased political polarization, immigration enforcement, and related stress that students, teachers, and community members may feel (Garibay, 2019/2020).



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