

ARTICLE

Research Insights: A New Framework for Parent Engagement in Independent Schools

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For decades, educational research has consistently affirmed the critical role of parent involvement in fostering student success—from stronger academic outcomes to social-emotional development and a sense of belonging. In response, public school systems have invested heavily in family engagement efforts, often guided by well-developed, evidence-based frameworks. The most widely adopted is Joyce Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement, frequently considered the gold standard for organizing engagement into actionable categories.

Yet independent school leaders are often navigating parent dynamics using

frameworks built for systems with fundamentally different structures. Applying a public school model without adaptation is not just ineffective; it can be strategically risky. It may blur governance boundaries, heighten customer service expectations, or alienate families whose involvement does not match traditional definitions of engagement. Most important, it can distract school leaders from the goal that matters most: building relationships that support student growth while preserving institutional clarity and mission.

As part of my dissertation research, I conducted a qualitative research study, using the in vivo coding approach (using participants' exact words for more authentic interpretation), to reexamine Epstein's Parent Involvement framework through the distinct realities of tuition-based independent schools. Using semi-structured interviews with three independent school principals, I explored whether a research-based theoretical framework for parent engagement could be applicable at a tuition-based independent school.

Fundamental Differences

Strategic parent-school partnerships are not built through one-off events or isolated

initiatives. They are built through coherent systems that clarify expectations, improve communication, and align community life with a school's mission. Epstein's framework gained widespread adoption because it offers a structure to organize engagement efforts with consistent language and measurable goals.

Epstein's model includes six overlapping categories: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision-Making, and Collaborating With the Community. In public school settings, these categories function as a comprehensive approach to building equity-focused engagement that supports achievement, behavior, and social development. The model broadens the definition of engagement beyond attendance at events, emphasizing communication, learning support, leadership roles, and community connections as equally meaningful pathways for family partnership.

Adapting Epstein's framework for independent schools requires an understanding of how tuition-based models differ structurally from public systems.

Financial context. How independent schools operate—funded by tuition, philanthropy, and fundraising rather than government allocations—fundamentally shapes parent engagement. Parents often expect responsiveness, personalization, and transparency, while also being asked to contribute to the school's sustainability through giving and community involvement. The result is a layered parent-school relationship—one in which families are partners in the student experience, contributors to the culture, and often critical supporters of long-term financial health.

Learning model. Independent schools also hold greater flexibility in curriculum design and instructional approach. Rather than a single statewide model, they craft learning experiences shaped by specific missions and philosophies. Families choose independent schools precisely because of those differences, making mission alignment more than a marketing statement. It becomes a prerequisite for engagement and a measure of whether the partnership thrives.

Community makeup. Independent school communities are self-selecting by design. Enrollment reflects family choice, expectations, and aspirations, a dynamic that can foster deep loyalty and investment. At the same time, it heightens advocacy, scrutiny, and sensitivity to decision-making—especially at the high school level, where students are preparing for college, career, and adult independence.

Governance structure. Healthy independent schools maintain clear boundaries between parental involvement

and formal governance systems. Boards exist to protect mission, stability, and long-term strategy. Without clearly defined engagement structures, schools risk sliding from partnership into pressure, allowing immediate parental demands to shape decisions meant to serve long-term priorities.

A Modified Framework

The independent school leaders I interviewed as part of my research consistently affirmed that Epstein's framework remains a helpful lens. Still, they also described how engagement in their schools has different forms, different expectations, and distinct boundaries. The findings point to a simple truth: Independent schools need an engagement framework grounded in their own context. The model that emerged from my research can be summarized through six engagement commitments that are consistent with Epstein's intent but named differently and structured for tuition-based independent schools.

From Parenting to Support

Epstein's original framework includes parenting support as a school responsibility, often framed as helping families develop stronger home conditions for learning. Independent school leaders described a more relational, collaborative approach. Rather than prescribing parenting practices, independent schools position themselves as trusted developmental resources. They support families when invited into the conversation and offer expertise when parents seek guidance, but they avoid the posture of correcting or directing family dynamics.

Modified framework: Support replaces prescriptive parenting assistance. Independent schools strengthen engagement when they offer expertise, coaching, and developmental guidance in ways that respect family autonomy and position the school as a trusted resource rather than an authority over home life.

Communicating

Communication emerged as a shared priority but with a distinctly independent school character. It is often more personal, more direct, and less constrained by institutional bureaucracy, with parents and teachers in closer proximity and easier to contact. This accessibility can strengthen trust and accelerate problem-solving, but it also raises expectations for real-time responsiveness. In tuition-based environments,

communication is not simply a function of engagement; it becomes a measure of service, transparency, and care.

Modified framework: Communication remains the infrastructure of trust. It must be clear, transparent, and personal, but also structured enough to be sustainable for school leadership and faculty.

From *Volunteering* to *Giving*

School leaders recognized that engagement expands beyond time and physical presence to include talent and treasure. Independent school parents contribute through volunteering, professional expertise, advocacy, ambassador roles, and financial support through annual funds and campaigns. Giving reflects a philanthropic culture embedded in tuition-based sustainability. This does not mean that every family gives in the same way. It means that engagement is understood as investment—and investment looks different across a community.

Modified framework: Giving expands the definition of involvement. In independent schools, engagement includes time, talent, and treasure. A healthy culture of giving is not built by pressure. It is built by participation, shared ownership, and consistent messaging that families contribute in different ways.

From *Learning at Home* to *Partnership*

In many independent high schools, homework has become a significant stressor for families, and schools are increasingly mindful of the role home life should play in supporting adolescent learning. Rather than centering engagement around homework compliance, leaders described a broader partnership approach. Parents support the mission, reinforce expectations, and help students develop independence and self-advocacy. Engagement becomes less about managing nightly assignments and more about shaping the long-term conditions for growth.

Modified framework: Partnership becomes the foundation. Engagement begins with mission alignment and shared expectations, not with event attendance. Independent schools thrive when they design relationships rooted in trust, values, and clarity about what the school is—and what it is not.

Decision-Making

Decision-making proved the most significant point of tension with Epstein's original framework. While Epstein encourages active parent participation in school decision-

making through councils and leadership structure, independent school leaders were more cautious. They expressed a clear preference for separating current parent involvement from formal governance, with many schools intentionally limiting parent participation on boards to preserve strategic focus and protect long-term planning from short-term pressures. Leaders value parent voice but emphasized that governance cannot become a customer-service response mechanism. Engagement, they said, must invite perspective without ceding institutional direction.

Modified framework: Decision-making must be clarified and bounded. Parent voice matters, and schools benefit from feedback, advisory roles, and community dialogue. But governance must remain focused on institutional priorities rather than individual preferences. Leaders strengthen engagement when they clearly define where parent input is invited and where leadership is responsible for making decisions in service of the long-term mission.

From Collaborating With the Community to Inclusivity

While Epstein's framework emphasizes collaboration with the broader community, independent school leaders focused on inclusivity within the school community itself. Their focus was less on outside resources and more on ensuring that every family feels welcome and able to participate, regardless of schedule, family structure, or access. Leaders said engagement can easily become dominated by the most visible families, underscoring the need to widen pathways for involvement and to recognize the meaningful roles extended family members can play in the child's experience and the school's sense of belonging.

Modified framework: Inclusivity becomes a strategic priority. Engagement should not depend on availability, wealth, or physical proximity to campus. Schools need multiple pathways for families to participate meaningfully, ensuring that engagement opportunities reflect the full diversity of family circumstances.

A More Authentic Path Forward

The adaptations identified in this research are not cosmetic. They are structural. Independent schools do not need louder parent engagement. They need healthier engagement, built on shared mission, strong relationships, inclusive access, clear boundaries, and a culture of investment. When schools move beyond transactional involvement and toward a transformational partnership, they strengthen not only

parent relationships but also the student experience and the long-term vitality of the institution itself.

Go Deeper

Parents today bring both deep investment and deep anxiety to the school relationship. Better understand what's driving parent behavior, and respond with clarity rather than reactivity. Read [***Hopes and Fears: Working With Today's Independent School Parents***](#), a practical and research-informed framework that unpacks what parents want—and worry about—most.

About the Author

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