

# Creative Approaches to Family Engagement

**Transformative Path Bridges Home and School**  
A Q&A with Jenna Monley, The School District of Philadelphia's FACE Deputy Chief

**A**s told to interviewer Dominique Young, Crayola professional development leader, this interview explores how The School District of Philadelphia designed a creative approach to family engagement and offers other educators recommendations for transforming their work with families.

## Describe your district profile and your family engagement office's mission.

**Monley:** The School District of Philadelphia includes 215 schools with 127,000 enrolled children who speak more than 100 languages, and 100 percent are economically disadvantaged. Our Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office has a deeply rooted commitment to engaging families through partnerships and building the capacity and capabilities of families to support the learning process.

## As you think about the work that is being done in the district, has this always been the approach? What was the spark behind this commitment?

**Monley:** 2016 was coined Year 0—Building from the Ground Up. Prior to 2016, most of our families felt disempowered and disenfranchised. With 200-plus schools, the district at that time had only seven family-focused personnel on staff and no clear vision or policies for family engagement.



## Please describe your journey in energizing the district's approach to engaging families and the community.

**Monley:** The district put in place seven key priorities that other districts can also adopt:

1. Develop districtwide policies that promote effective family-school community partnerships.
2. Agree upon a shared vision.
3. Hire a sufficient number of family engagement staff. (We brought onboard 30 individuals whose full focus is working with families.)
4. Create opportunities to engage families in a range of services.
5. Develop a series of professional development sessions to enhance

educators' knowledge of family collaborations.

6. Deliver recurring training sessions to boost the confidence of both staff and parents, build their leadership competencies, and support learning.
7. Provide regular communication with multiple methods for information-sharing.

## What is the frame that sets goals into action for your team?

**Monley:** Our FACE 3Es of Action are *Engage–Empower–Educate*. These align with the Crayola creatED 4Cs of Family Engagement covered in the courses our staff are enrolled in: *Champion, Conducive, Commitment, and Co-educate*. It is important

# ESSA/FACE ALIGNMENT



Create-to-Learn Family Project kits provide strong take-home activities that help parents and staff have important discussions about the concepts children learn in school and how to support that learning at home. It is important to provide content and materials that fully engage families in fun, interactive learning experiences.

that the staff receive training that reinforces the mindsets and actions we expect from them when they are working with families.

### How does the district leverage the power of partnerships?

**Monley:** In collaboration with other central office teams, the FACE office coordinates and integrates services and practices meaningful two-way communication. Externally, the FACE office seeks partnerships that bring innovation and creativity to our programming.

### What role did creativity and innovation play in your district’s family engagement transformation?

**Monley:** When thinking about best practices in adult learning, creative leadership is key. We knew that to build the capacity of our staff and families, it would require modeling and an immersive, hands-on approach that would build confidence and knowledge. By using creative outreach and events for families, the district has become more accessible to families. Our program with Crayola, in particular, was key in exciting families to participate. The

### How does your family engagement plan align with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

**Monley:** The district has adopted six powerful principles that fulfill the requirements of ESSA. We frame each pillar as “The Power of…” covering Partnerships, Strategy, Communication, Innovation, Capacity Building Support, and Data and Analytics. It is important to conduct outreach, build capacity, address barriers, develop evidence-based strategies, coordinate and integrate services, and practice meaningful involvement.

### What advice would you give other education thought leaders as they work to improve student outcomes in partnership with families?

**Monley:** Start with a clear, inclusive vision. Base your work on research. Communication and collaboration are key, both internally in the office and externally in the community. Have a holistic view and be creative in your approach. And remind your team that providing training and resources is non-negotiable. When staff and families are informed and inspired, their combined work results in outstanding outcomes.



*Jenna Monley is the family and community engagement deputy chief at The School District of Philadelphia. She was interviewed by Dominique Young, Crayola professional development leader.*