

# using lived experience to identify systems-level metrics

STORIES FROM THE NETWORK

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Boston Opportunity Agenda | Boston, Mass.

*from  
A guide to racial and ethnic  
equity systems indicators*

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# using lived experience to identify systems-level metrics

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Boston Opportunity Agenda (Boston, Mass.) recognized the importance of family and community engagement in identifying systems-level metrics that indicate successes in early childhood outcomes.

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These indicators are featured or discussed in this story:

- Accessible and equitable parental and community governance
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## forming a family engagement committee

- ▶ Family engagement work wasn't always as innovative as it is now for the Boston Opportunity Agenda, who, since the inception of its Birth to Eight Family Engagement Committee in late 2015, has developed four principles to assess family engagement. These principles, along with a newly co-created definition of family engagement, are part of an ongoing pilot project to center families' voices and gather initial project data in Boston.

The nature of nonprofit work in Boston, which Boston Opportunity Agenda parent Danubia Camargos Silva describes as “the nonprofit mecca,” didn't make this work easy. “There's a nonprofit for everything and in every corner of the city, but we were all very siloed,” she said, referring to the often disconnected work being done in Boston. She explained that organizations wanted to do different things, and it was unclear what they were all trying to accomplish.

During the initial formation of the Birth to Eight network, the local community of nonprofits, policymakers, researchers and caregivers engaged in early childhood work gathered to develop a shared vision and set of metrics to measure the impact of the collective's work. All involved highlighted the importance of engaging families in deep and meaningful ways. Out of this conversation, the Family Engagement Committee was formed.

In early meetings, Boston Opportunity Agenda Executive Director Kristin McSwain posed questions that helped evolve their work in family engagement: How do we know we're successful in early childhood? What is the impact of quality family engagement practices? What does research tell us about outcomes for kids where families are deeply engaged? This discussion led to deeper questions, such as: Are these the right metrics? Is this how we measure success — that we'll know children are meeting early childhood outcomes?

Camargos Silva's own entry into family engagement work sheds light on some of its issues. “When I came into this work, I was just so angry,” she said. It was common sense to her — but not to nonprofit leaders — that “if people don't have food, they won't read a book.”

Camargos Silva described the norms of family engagement work that, for example, only measured the number of engaged families or children, which she called “the old data we can get anywhere.” More often than not, these norms failed to consider families' lived experiences and disbelieved parents and guardians as the experts of their children.

“It looks good over here,” she said about a status quo rooted in expertise in the field but lacking in authentic community voices. “But it doesn't feel good down here.”



## the strategies

- ▶ With the goal of developing better metrics, the Family Engagement Committee identified four principles of family engagement: relationship quality between families and service providers, empowering families, parenting efficacy and family in decision-making roles. Then, in the summer of 2018, the committee surveyed organizations about their family engagement practices, how they defined family engagement itself and to vet the four principles.

Twenty organizations responded, building consensus around the four principles. After receiving this feedback, Boston Opportunity Agenda felt less tied to the idea of metrics and shifted focus to the principles instead — the pillars the organization believed essential to equitable and inclusive family engagement practices. They also decided to create a family engagement “toolkit.” A work in progress, the goal is to be able to share the toolkit with other organizations to help them evaluate and improve their family engagement practices, informed by data and feedback from the families they work with.

The tenor of Family Engagement Committee meetings is necessarily collaborative. This was especially true when the committee decided to create a definition of family engagement after learning that most organizations don't have one of their own.

“The interesting dynamic is that Kristin just trusts the people doing the work, that they'll move the work forward,” said Boston Opportunity Agenda Senior Manager of Research Fernanda Campbell, who's also part of the Family Engagement Committee. “So when I came with my data mindset and said, ‘Well, why don't we just research, see what definitions are there and find one,’ Danubia and [other caregivers] pushed back: ‘It needs to be co-created. It needs to be all of us in the room.’”

This community-centered dynamic is present in the committee in other ways: members prioritize listening, including language that resonates with others and incorporating feedback. They also seek to get new people involved over time.

## collaboration

- ▶ The structure of Boston Opportunity Agenda and the way it operates are themselves effective strategies for improving family engagement. Campbell described how the five committees, including the Family Engagement committee, work as smaller groups — sometimes in subcommittees — and come together every three or four months to share updates and discuss how their work “fits into the broader conversation.”

At these larger meetings, called Birth to Eight Convenings, Boston Opportunity Agenda brings in outside research to contextualize the way meeting attendees engage with families. A standout example for Camargos Silva was research from Tufts University on the damages of deficit thinking, which sees the worst in others and makes assumptions with limited understanding. In deficit thinking, a mother pictured “in a cluttered household, with pizza everywhere, dirty, chemicals, the child in the crib” is assumed to be unfit, Camargos Silva

described, while an asset mindset acknowledges the textbooks signaling that the mother is probably a student, as well as the food on the table and the safe and happy child.

While convening attendees are predominantly staff from Boston Opportunity Agenda partners, families and parent/guardian leaders are also invited. It’s a “warm atmosphere,” said Campbell, where all are encouraged to ask questions. An icebreaker begins every convening, and before the COVID-19 pandemic, attendees connected over breakfast.

Similarly, the Family Engagement Committee members are from different paths, backgrounds and organizations. Campbell started as a data fellow and transitioned to working in family engagement; in her own words, she’s there “to keep things connecting to data.” Many of the members are volunteers, including caregivers and those who work full time at other organizations. Caregivers like Camargos Silva have the space to lead the work as experts.



## challenges

- ▶ What Campbell calls “the best way we’ve identified to bring people from different organizations together” — collective impact — is also a challenge. All committee members except for McSwain and Campbell are volunteers from other organizations.

“In collective impact, even though people are passionate, sometimes they can’t prioritize, so things move slowly,” Campbell said, mentioning monetary compensation as a related issue. Staff from participating organizations come to the table in their role as employees, and parent/guardian volunteers may or may not be compensated depending on their path to the work. Boston Opportunity Agenda is working to ensure all caregivers are compensated for their expertise and time, but it is an ongoing challenge. Right now, Campbell said about parent/guardian volunteers, “it’s really about their core beliefs in the work.”

Another area of growth is the challenge of mindsets. Camargos Silva questions the mindset that families experiencing poverty “need us.” She cites perspectives of those who are “wealthy, well-versed, who have degrees,” but who don’t see families’ assets

nor understand that families want skills and opportunities, not stuff.

She recalled once when she asked: “Could the reason we haven’t made a lot of progress be that we don’t want to work ourselves out — for example, provide the people with everything they need so then we no longer have jobs?”

“That was like a bomb,” said Camargos Silva, who professed that she usually drops bombs at meetings. She described bombs as “thought-provoking statements rooted in my lived experiences and from working directly with the communities.”

Camargos Silva is frustrated at the politics of working with partners — the feeling that you can’t challenge problematic or unhelpful mindsets and instead must respect partners’ work regardless of whether or not they’re actually helping families.

She said that’s why it’s important to get caregivers involved at the beginning of the process. “It’s a new muscle to exercise, but in the end the results are that much stronger,” she said, circling back to the importance of family engagement.

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## successes

- ▶ Besides families leading the work and those with positional power trusting and supporting family leadership, Boston Opportunity Agenda and the Family Engagement Committee have celebrated other successes, both internal and external.

An external success has been the strengthened ability of organizations across the city to collaborate with each other. Funders facilitate this work by launching collaboration-based grants, like in a recent example with a Children’s Hospital grant. Boston Opportunity Agenda itself received a grant from StriveTogether in early fall 2020, securing funding that would continue to support family engagement work specifically. “This wouldn’t have happened if the committee wasn’t active and engaged,” Campbell said.

Camargos Silva used the metaphor of clothing to describe collaboration:

*“You have a hat, I have a shirt, you have a pair of pants and you have a pair of shoes. If all of us come together, we can dress a whole child.”*

– Danubia Camargos Silva

A success that’s even closer to home is the creation of the Family Engagement Committee itself. As the citywide initiative Thrive in 5 came to close in late 2015/early 2016 — where Camargos Silva was also a parent/guardian partner — leaders in early childhood across Boston came together to reflect on “what we learned, what we want to do from now on, who should be at the table,” said Campbell. She noted how McSwain listened, rather than imposing immediate solutions. It was out of

this posture of deep listening and reflection that family engagement was identified as a need and the Family Engagement Committee was born.

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## building relationships

- ▶ Currently, 15 organizations are signed up to pilot measures developed by the Family Engagement Committee: North Shore Early Childhood Center, Families First, ABCD, Crispus Atticus, Inquilinos Boricua, South Boston Neighborhood House, Boston Chinatown, Families Assessment, Bolden Street, Family Aid Boston, Children Legal Aid, Family Nurturing Center, the Jeremiah Program, Dorchester Family Engagement Network and the Dorchester Boys and Girls Club. Fellows from Families First, in particular, are modeling how to implement surveys in a way that builds relationships and leaves families feeling trusted, rather than judged.

Besides a launch event in September 2020 that announced the pilot project, the committee is looking for ways to promote their work

to other organizations — a process that's become trickier during the pandemic. They hope to build their social media presence, maximize their website and otherwise build a sustainable communication plan.

The family engagement toolkit is part of their work but has only been discussed internally thus far. Before releasing the toolkit publicly, the committee has other priorities: piloting the measures and streamlining the use of a data collection platform. They want to make sure the why and how of the toolkit are strong first.

But it all comes back to building trust — with other organizations, and of course, with families. Camargos Silva described how the committee's approach communicates to families, "I've heard you, and what you're telling me is informing our next moves."

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## examples

- ▶ An example is a recent change on the project's timeline. After one-on-one interviews with several organizations in November, Camargos Silva identified the need to have the tools translated into seven languages. Partners were frustrated that non-English speaking families are usually left out of projects because materials are usually available in English, sometimes in Spanish.

"If we want to get things right, we need to change how things are done. Why wait to translate materials after piloting them in English? We are, again and again, not including

the voices of minorities," Camargos Silva said. The team immediately agreed to take yet another two steps back to get price estimates and a timeline for translation services. After reviewing the options, the team agreed it was the right thing to do, despite the delay in timeline.

## conclusion

- ▶ As they build relationships, the work continues. In May 2021, the committee will look at the data gathered and conduct a mid-year review of the pilot to assess and adopt any improvements. They've scheduled check-ins to reflect along the way on what the data tells them and how to better support families who are sharing feedback. They're working with United Way to enter screening data. Campbell is improving her data visualization skills.

"Before we weren't allowed to share our personal experiences; we were little robots working for an organization. I'm seeing more and more of people ... bringing that human nature back into the room," Camargos Silva said about the welcome change in decision-making spaces.

