

Building Trust, Boosting Outcomes: Embedding Family Engagement in School Mental Health and Academic Strategies

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Key takeaways from Cartwheel's session featuring **Cory McCarthy**, Chief of Student Support, Boston Public Schools (MA), **Dr. Tia L. Pressey**, Former Executive Director of Engagement and Student Support, Hudson City Schools (NY), **Jose Escribano**, Assistant Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools (MA), and **Jillian Kelton**, M.Ed. Director of District Engagement, Cartwheel.

Family engagement must be a systems strategy. When families are treated as integral members of the educational system, districts see measurable improvements in access to mental health care, attendance, and academic outcomes. Shifting from compliance-driven events to relationship-driven partnerships requires rethinking policy, data, staffing, and community-facing communication. District and student support leaders play a critical role in removing barriers and aligning mental health, family engagement, and instructional priorities.

Start to embed family engagement into systems and strategy:

- Start recognizing families as **core members of the system** whose experiences shape school climate.
- Align vision, policies, and budgets so that **family engagement is embedded** in MTSS, mental health, and academic plans—not isolated as a separate initiative.
- Explicitly **define what “meaningful engagement” looks like** (e.g., co-created plans, regular two-way communication, participation in problem-solving teams).
- Ensure student service leaders, counselors and social workers have **time, tools, and expectations** to engage families proactively, not just in crisis.



***Relationship-based practice starts with radical presence —
making families feel like you work for them.***

Cory McCarthy, Chief of Student Support, Boston Public Schools (MA)

Create a shift in thinking about mental health:

- Promote a culture in which mental health is treated with the **same urgency and intentionality** as reading and mathematics.
- Center the message that **exposure and opportunity** to college visits, enrichment activities, structured after-school spaces are mental-health protective factors, especially for students historically underserved.
- Encourage staff to approach families as **partners and experts** on their children, particularly in communities with longstanding, warranted mistrust of institutions.
- Support training on **bias, curiosity-based questioning, and family systems concepts** so staff can better understand, feel more comfortable and de-escalate complex situations.

We tell staff to approach families like anthropologists: we're not here to judge or fix you, we're here to understand you.

Jose Escribano, Assistant Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools (MA)



Leverage data and outcomes to drive accountability:

- Move beyond punitive attendance and behavior systems to track **root causes and relational interventions** (e.g., family conferences, circles, follow-up contacts).
- Use dashboards to monitor **family meeting rates, access to mental health services, and satisfaction**, and connect these to chronic absenteeism and discipline trends.
- Highlight examples where strategic investments (e.g., college exposure trips, Sunday youth/family hubs, telehealth partnerships) led to **reductions in suspensions and chronic absenteeism** and improved graduation trajectories.
- Integrate mental health and family engagement metrics into **school improvement plans and leadership evaluations** to sustain focus.



We took 45 ninth-grade boys on an HBCU tour. Together, they'd had 33 suspensions before the trip. By graduation, those same boys had one suspension between them.

Cory McCarthy, Chief of Student Support, Boston Public Schools (MA)

Use these actionable strategies:

- Identify **one policy or process** (e.g., attendance, discipline, re-entry, referral) that treats families as outsiders and begin revising it to reflect families as system partners.

Use these actionable strategies:

- Ask each principal or student support lead to set a **specific, measurable goal** for meaningful family meetings tied to attendance or behavior for the coming term.
- Allocate or protect time and modest resources for **low-barrier family engagement spaces** (after-hours gym access, weekend programs, family-facing workshops).
- Make sure your teams can connect with **clinical partners who understand families' cultures and languages** and can provide care after school, on weekends, or through telehealth.
- **Explore partnership opportunities with Cartwheel** to deliver rapid-access, evidence-based virtual mental health services, parent guidance, family therapy, and psychiatric consultation at scale, while leveraging insurance to reduce district costs.

Telehealth made it possible for students to connect with certified therapists from home, after school and on weekends. It was accessible and it was convenient.

Dr. Tia L. Pressey, Former Executive Director of Engagement and Student Support, Hudson City Schools (NY)



About Cartwheel

Cartwheel is the leading provider of school-based mental health services and partners with 325+ districts nationwide to build sustainable mental health programs for students and families. With licensed clinicians, evidence-based interventions, multilingual services, and no waitlists, Cartwheel ensures that every child has immediate access to evidence based care. Cartwheel's comprehensive services include teletherapy, psychiatry, family therapy, parent guidance, staff support services, and specialized programs including school avoidance interventions.

To explore how Cartwheel can support your school district, visit cartwheel.org/for-schools.