

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 is not just a flyer, a pizza night, or a checkbox—it's a trust-based relationship where families see themselves as partners in their child's mental health and academic journey. When we move from expecting parent compliance to genuinely offering family support, we can create the conditions for students to access care earlier and more consistently.

Counselors and social workers are uniquely positioned to model this shift through everyday interactions, impactful referrals, and data-informed practice.

A Shift in Thinking About Family Engagement

- View families as **partners in the work**, not as problems to solve or passive recipients of services.
- Prioritize **relationship over event**: the true metric is whether a caregiver feels safe and supported when they call you for their struggling child.
- Approach families like **anthropologists**: with curiosity, not judgment. "Help me understand what this looks like at home."
- Recognize that **cultural experiences and past system harms** shape how families show up, ask for help, or avoid services.



We often refer the child to therapy and ignore the mental health needs we see in the adults sitting right in front of us.

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

Reduce Stigma & Build Trust with Families

- **Normalize help-seeking:** explicitly say, “It’s okay to have hard things going on and it’s okay to get support.”
- Use **community-friendly language**, not clinical jargon, when explaining services and supports.
- **Create low-barrier, relationship-building spaces** (e.g., open gyms, family drop-in events) where the primary goal is connection, not compliance.
- When possible, **offer supports that fit family routines** (evenings, weekends, virtual options, multi-language services).

The schools that are moving their accountability scores are the schools that are meeting with families. The schools that are stuck are often the ones struggling to engage them.

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



Use Data To Tell the Story

- Track **meaningful contacts** with families (conferences, circles, home visits), not just automated calls or letters.
- Pair quantitative data (attendance, access rates, satisfaction) with **student and family stories** to guide decisions.
- **Notice which students and families are missing** from events and services, and use that as a signal to adjust outreach.
- **Use program outcome data** (e.g., reduced suspensions after college exposure trips, decreased chronic absenteeism after family meetings) to advocate for sustained support.



Data defeats delusion — but we have to let anecdotal feedback and lived experience talk with the data, not against it.

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

Leverage these Actionable Strategies

- In your first week back, **identify one student and one family** who feel “on the fringe” and take a concrete step to rebuild trust (a phone conversation, home visit, or circle invite).
- When making a referral for a student, **scan the room for adult needs** too and, where appropriate, connect caregivers to support—not just the child.

Leverage these Actionable Strategies

- Start a simple log of **meaningful family contacts** so you can show how your relational work is impacting students and attendance.
- Collaborate with your district team to **map barriers** (transportation, timing, language, stigma) and brainstorm one small, specific way to reduce each.
- **Explore partnership opportunities with Cartwheel** to expand access to evidence-based telehealth therapy, parent guidance, and psychiatric support with rapid access and no waitlists for your students and families.

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 request Cartwheel for your school district, visit cartwheel.org/for-schools.