

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT LEARNING SERIES

NEWSLETTER *for Teachers*

Founder's Focus: *Engaging Families on the Importance of Early Literacy Development*

In this month's Learning Series, we'll be sharing information on early literacy development and how families can help build these critical foundational skills. It's a timely subject! The ongoing debate regarding how children acquire literacy skills seems to have reached a new plateau, prompted in part by last fall's [NAEP](#) scores showing declines in reading achievement for students in most of the country. The widely used Balanced Literacy approach and accompanying *Units of Study* curriculum developed by Columbia professor Lucy Calkins has been highlighted as a possible culprit.



While *Units of Study* is celebrated by teachers for its ease of use in the classroom and focus on instilling a love of reading, it has received sharp criticism for not emphasizing foundational literacy skills. In response, state and local education systems have begun to shift focus toward developing skills, like phonemic awareness, while building students' content knowledge.

When I look at the literacy debate I wonder, "What does it mean for parents?"

The debate means that parents will need help grappling with conflicting information. Parents are still guided to use tools like the "[five finger rule](#)" when picking books for their children, even when such tools directly contradict new learning standards that require students to interpret complex texts. As a result, schools, community partners, out-of-school service providers, and learning apps may all be sending mixed messages about how parents can and should support their child's reading.

Schools making the shift to emphasizing foundational literacy skills and content knowledge should also consider how families and community partners are supporting efforts to help more children learn to read, and soon, read to learn. While planning these shifts, take a moment to evaluate whether your partners are supporting (or contradicting) your new approach. If you find there are no strategies in place to inform families as you implement a new curriculum, then consider adopting tools like [FASTalk](#) to share tips and learning activities aligned to your curriculum.

I'm curious to hear from you. How are you approaching literacy instruction? How are you partnering with families and community organizations to help more kids read? Join the conversation on Twitter at [@FamilyELab](#) or Facebook at [@ilovefastalk](#).

Sincerely,

Vidya Sundaram
Co-Founder, [Family Engagement Lab](#)

Educator Highlight: Sarah Vidmar, Encompass Academy, Oakland Unified School District



"I love connecting with my second grade families! I wish that I could communicate more often to the parents about what their child is learning in English Language Arts. However, as a teacher, that often doesn't even make it on my to-do list."

With FASTalk, text messages are automatically sent to families in their home language. It is already aligned with our curriculum, Expeditionary Learning, to not only give them a slice of what is taught, but also ways to interact with their child to further their education. For example, we are learning about plants and compound words, so one of the questions sent home asks, "A *compound word* is made up of two words like *sunflower*. Try to think of compound words together."

"Anything that strengthens the school-home connection is valuable, and this is so easy to use!"

Family Talk: What are parents saying about FASTalk? [Join the conversation](#) and [share their thoughts](#) with us.

I like how I get information about my son's school work and what's going on in school/class. I work a lot trying to provide a better future for my son, and FASTalk keeps me in loop with everything.

-Parent of a first-grade student
Oakland Unified, California



FASTalk's after school activities are great for parents to stay engaged in their kid's learning process.

-Parent of a third grade student
St Charles Parish, Louisiana

How can we improve your FASTalk experience? [Let us know.](#)

Family Engagement Resources

- Share these [early literacy resources](#) with parents to help them build early literacy skills for their children right from the start.
- [When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap](#) (Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics)
- [Building a Partnership with Your Child's Teacher](#) assists parents with creating and maintaining a relationship with their child's teacher.

FASTalk Tip of the Month : Staying Up-to-Date with FASTalk Messages



FASTalk messages are developed to reinforce your classroom instruction by providing families with simple ways they can support their child's learning at home. To view any upcoming pre-scheduled FASTalk messages for the week, log in to fastalk.org using your email and password. Scroll down to the bottom of the main dashboard where it says "UPCOMING MESSAGES." If you want to sign up for the text messages to arrive on your personal cell phone, please contact support@fastalk.org and share your cell phone number with us. Ask your principal or literacy coach if they want to sign up for the messages as well! It's a great way for school administrators and staff to stay up-to-date with the text messages your students' families are receiving. Email us at support@fastalk.org to request a PDF of the full calendar of scheduled messages to keep for your reference and/or if any pacing adjustments need to be made.

Share the Good News

As teachers, you can encourage parents to become more involved in their child's learning by providing them with quick tips on how to support learning at home. Here are a few social media posts to use this month to help build family engagement in your classroom or school.



Parents, use these [early literacy resources](#) at home to make everyday moments opportunities to nurture growing readers and writers.
#familyengagement #FASTalkFamilies



@FamilyELab's #FASTalk tool helps teachers and families work together to improve student outcomes. [Learn more here.](#)
#familyengagement #teamwork
#FASTalkFamilies

Contact Us

Have questions? Email us at felcommunications@fastalk.org.

Don't forget to **follow us on social media** for the latest tools and resources to support family engagement.

