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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **FASTalk increases engagement between teachers, schools and underserved families during COVID-19**

### **Innovative service bridging language gap with teachers, parents sees sharp increase in use during pandemic**

**Oakland, CA; For Immediate Release** - Messages sent to and from Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) parents and teachers through Family Engagement Lab's FASTalk more than doubled in the week after schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

FASTalk (Families and Schools Talk) is a tool designed by Family Engagement Lab that bridges language and communications gaps that exist between teachers and underserved families with students in preschool through fifth grade. To support learning at home, families receive activities weekly that are aligned to the curriculum their child is learning in school, and teachers and parents can communicate via text message.

FASTalk is proven to accelerate months of academic performance gains for students whose home language differs from English. In a recent study, FASTalk students who recognized less than 25 percent of letter names during the Fall semester were four times more likely to meet OUSD's midyear literacy benchmark than non-FASTalk students.

In March 2020, FASTalk was quickly adapted and expanded to reach more families during the pandemic with a specialized service called FASTalk Direct. More than 18,000 Oakland public school families sent and received messages relating to their child's education, and ways they could support learning from home, during the distance learning portion of the 2020 school year. Families received messages in English, Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, Pashto, Amharic, and Tagalog.

Parents sent 695 messages to teachers during the first week after schools closed due to the pandemic, more than double the average number of messages sent (330) in 2020 before that.

"FASTalk was a natural solution to helping Oakland public school families support their child's education during distance learning," said Vidya Sundaram, the co-founder and CEO of Family Engagement Lab. "Our expertise is in bringing learning information to parents in a way that is practical and in their home language. Because FASTalk is a digital messaging service, families don't need a computer or WiFi at home to communicate with their child's teacher."

"It is rare for a program to have a direct and measurable impact on student achievement," said Wesley Jacques, OUSD's Executive Director of Academics. "With the great success of FASTalk, we expanded the service from an initial eight schools to nearly every OUSD elementary school. This partnership was key in ensuring we reached families and were able to communicate with them in their own language during the distance learning portion of the school year. We are excited to be able to continue to partner with Family Engagement Lab during the 2020-21 school year to reach even more families."

## **About Family Engagement Lab**

Family Engagement Lab's vision is for every student to have access to meaningful at-home learning opportunities that promote their social, emotional, and academic skill development.

At-home learning supported by families is critical to student success. Parent involvement at home has more than twice the effect on student test scores than parents' education level or socio-economic status (Melhuish, et al., 2008).

Family Engagement Lab is committed to supporting high-need families and communities. 82% of students served qualify for free or reduced-price lunch compared to 51.3% national average. FASTalk helps families learn strategies to support learning, including: Building critical academic skills, cultivating learning mindsets and habits, and practicing social and emotional skills.

To learn more about Family Engagement Lab and FASTalk, visit <http://www.familyengagementlab.org>.

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