

Making Family and School Connections: A Look at Best Practices

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Introduction

A successful partnership between families and schools is essential to developing positive educational experiences for students. It is an important topic for practitioners and policy makers alike. Our nation's largest education policy document, No Child Left Behind, has specific mandates for family engagement initiatives; Title 1 funding has specific family engagement mandates; winners of the competitive Race to the Top funding had strong family engagement provisions in their applications. While family engagement has been increasing over the years, levels still could be improved. But why is it so important? What can family engagement do for our students as well as for our schools? The following brief discusses the benefits of family engagement, the barriers that schools and parents face in achieving successful engagement, and promising practices from the field that promote engagement.

Defining “family engagement”

Recent research has documented a shift in definition from the phrase “parent involvement” to “parent engagement.” While prior efforts to “involve” parents in school activities focused on passive parent support, recent efforts to “engage” parents push for more active, democratic forms of parent participation. Key to this new idea of parent engagement is the concept that it must be systemic, or purposely designed as a core component of whole school improvement, not just add on activities for parents to attend. New definitions incorporate the ideas that engagement happens in many different contexts (i.e., school, home, community), changes with child age (i.e., engaging middle school parents requires different strategies than elementary school parents), and is a shared responsibility between *both* families and schools (i.e., a two-way collaborative interaction).

This new definition broadens participation beyond parents to other caregivers in a child's life, acknowledging that students can receive support from a variety of adults. Family engagement strategies move beyond the well-known outreach efforts (i.e., bake sales, fundraisers, parent-teacher conferences) to full partnerships and shared responsibility with school staff, families, and community members with the ultimate goal of improving schools. There must be collaborative interaction among all three groups for family engagement to be successful and ultimately improve outcomes for students, schools, and communities.

Why is it important to engage families?

Benefits for students

There is a wealth of research that discusses the benefits of family engagement for children's behavior, learning, and achievement. To optimally benefit their children, parents should be engaged with the happenings of the classroom, not just when their children are struggling, but on a regular basis.

- Strong family-school partnerships contribute to students' academic and social success (i.e., higher graduation rates, improved grades, positive attitudes toward school, better behavior in school).
- Challenging school transitions are made more successfully when families stay involved through middle school and high school years—maintaining connections with teachers, working with schools to help students plan for the future.
- Children from diverse cultural backgrounds do better in school when there are clear efforts to bridge the gaps between the worlds of families and schools.

Benefits for schools

However, there are benefits to schools as well.

- When families are engaged, efforts to reform school systems are more effective.
- Successful family-school-community partnerships can help build and sustain public support for the schools.

- Strong relationships between families and schools promotes a positive school climate where school staff and family members develop a sense of collective responsibility for a child's success in school. Teachers and administrators do not feel the intense pressure to do it all.

What are the barriers for families and schools?

While we may typically confound low levels of family engagement with “hard-to-reach” families, family engagement is a two-way process that requires both schools and families to adapt. What are some of the barriers that cause *both* schools and families to be “hard to reach”?

- Parents may not have the requisite linguistic or cultural knowledge of schools to participate fully. Schools may lack the staff support or resources that allow them to communicate with families fully.
- Schools may plan events and activities during times that are inaccessible to families. This may lead schools to view parents' work schedules as inflexible or restrictive.
- Parents may have difficulty supporting their child's learning at home, especially if parents have limited formal education themselves. Schools may have difficulty encouraging parent support of children at home when there is little knowledge about their skills and educational experiences.
- Schools may have low expectations of parents' abilities to support their children and offer expertise to schools. Parents may distrust school staff due to prior negative experiences with schools.

What are the promising practices to increase engagement? What can schools do?

Schools should encourage families to be engaged in the happenings of the classroom, not just when their children are struggling, but at all times. But how can schools (both the administration and teachers) accomplish this? Recent research has indicated some promising practices to this end.

- **Welcome and encourage every family to become active participants in the classroom and school community.** Schools should strive to create a welcoming environment that transcends context, culture, and language. This factor has been shown to be the most influential factor in promoting engagement among families. Providing outreach, direct invitations to families, and involving the entire community are effective ways to garner engagement.
- **Continuously collaborate with families to create and implement strategies for supporting student learning and development both at home and at school.** By sharing families' views on education and engagement with teachers schools can build trust among families and dispel misconceptions any and all players have about what family engagement means. Research shows that when approaches are aligned with families' views of engagement and education and families strengths they are most effective. For example, schools should be linguistically sensitive and not only speak to families in their own language but show them that reading to their children in their native language is just as beneficial as reading in English (which might not be possible for some families).
- **Engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication with families about student learning and performance.** Parents and teachers should be equal partners – each has valuable information to bring to the table about the student. Schools should strive to understand what engagement looks like in different types of families and tailor their efforts to families' strengths. Conduct surveys with families to see what their current practices and expectations look like. Invite families to be part of conversations with school staff and leaders to share their experiences openly.
- **Collaborate with community members and organizations to connect students and families to expanded learning opportunities, community services and civic participation.** Students are members of families, neighborhoods and cultural communities that are significant to their lives. Schools are part of larger communities that have rich histories, as well as resources that can expand opportunities for students and families. These resources can often help school staff learn more about the communities they serve, making them more effective teachers and leaders.

For many school communities where family engagement has not been a focus or priority, an examination and

change in beliefs will often be necessary. Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies present four core beliefs that should shape every aspect of the family-school partnership:

- All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- Parents and school staff should be equal partners.
- The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

What can my school do?

When educators reshape their beliefs about families and parent participation in schools, they are charting a path for changing the very nature of family engagement. Here are four ways schools can determine whether they are moving towards an *ecological* model of family engagement—one that acknowledges that students and their families are embedded within a rich set of influential spheres of interaction.

- Are we centering our family engagement practices on the experiences of parents instead of the conveniences of the school?
- Are we promoting family-school experiences that foster engagement, community dialogue, and relationship building instead of one-time events and activities?
- Are we developing strategies that build on the assets and knowledge-base of families instead of their perceived limitations or deficiencies?
- Are we creating family engagement strategies that broaden participation and invite newcomers instead of creating requirements or limits that stand in the way?
- Are we developing family engagement strategies that transform families and schools rather than alter parenting practices?

As you and your team brainstorm the ways you might improve your school's family engagement practices and move towards an ecological model for family engagement, consider the following three core processes involved:

- **Building mutually engaging family engagement strategies:** Working with families to design programs and activities that present mutual benefits. Can we develop initiatives that parents want but that are also helpful and desirable to school staff?
- **Building authentic relationships:** Promoting activities that bring school staff and families into conversation with one another, allowing them to get to know each other as individuals and build trust.
- **Sharing leadership and power:** Developing parent leadership skills and including parents in school decision-making and school improvement efforts. Are you working with community partners that can help you foster these skills if you need support?

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