



Introduction to Building School-Family Partnerships: A Guide for School Leaders

“Family engagement refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, learning, and wellness, including in the planning, development, and evaluation of such activities, programs, and systems.”¹

Partnerships of families and school staff provide children with the adult supports they need to grow and face the challenges of learning and life.

Why are school-family partnerships important for student success?

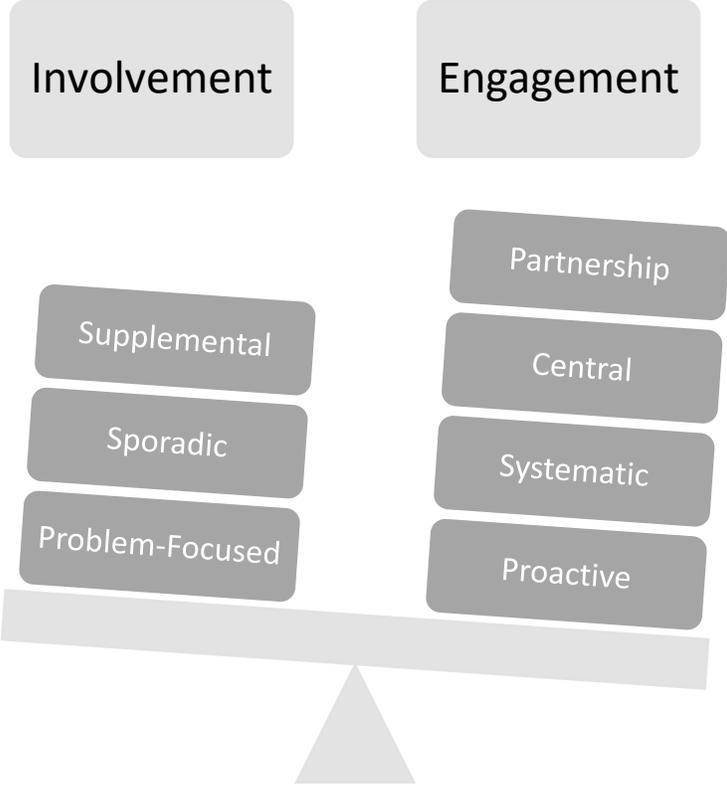
The **goals of family-school partnerships** have shifted over time, moving away from a focus on families supplementing school supports, compliance with federal or state requirements, and infrequent events, meetings and communication. Family-school partnerships are now recognized as critical to student achievement and well-being, contributing to educator work satisfaction and school climate (Gorski, 2013).

Not all efforts to partner with families are equally impactful and lead to these positive results. Traditional parent involvement activities such as fundraisers and family nights are often ineffective strategies for increasing student achievement or positive behavior. (Mapp, Henderson, & Hill, 2014).

¹ Source: [Health and Human Services and Education Policy Statement on Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#)

What does effective family engagement that leads to positive outcomes for children and teens look like?

We have learned from several decades of research that systematic collaboration with families based on strong personal relationships are the most impactful. By systematic, we mean intentional strategies that are sustained over time and are aligned with the learning and developmental needs of children. When professionals take partnerships with families seriously, they plan together with families, listen to families and partner with families in respectful and cultural-honoring ways. Partnerships provide children with the adult supports they need to grow and face the challenges of learning and life. These relationships are not seen as supplemental, but are critical to a child's learning and healthy development.



Building Partnerships with Families

Research supported practices for professionals

P-12



Start Early

Galindo and Sheldon, 2011



Relationships Matter

Bryk et al. 2010; Mapp 2014; Sheldon & Jung, 2015



Understand and Value Families

Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Sheldon & Jung, 2015;



Listen And Inform

Epstein 2009; Kraft & Rogers, 20150; Jaynes, 2012



Share progress

Sheldon & Jung, 2015



Link to Learning

Henderson & Mapp 2002



Multiple Opportunities

Mapp, 2014



Expectations

Hill & Tyson, 2009;



Marathon - Not Sprint

Voorhis, et al, 2013



Research Supported Practices and What Professionals Can Do

What is the difference between a meeting with parents/caregivers that builds a partnership and one that does not? Why are some teachers and practitioners able to reach ALL families while others struggle? The following nine principles offer points of reflection for improving your approach to partnering with families.

1. Start Early. Effective strategies for partnering with families are positive and proactive, rather than reactive or problem-focused. Beginning in the early years of a child's life, early in the school year or early in the relationship of the parent/caregiver and professional will set the stage for future interactions. Professionals should initiate communicating and listening before there are issues they need to discuss. They should get to know families so that they understand family culture, values and relationships (Galindo & Sheldon, 2011).

Examine your school or organization's strategies for engaging families and look for opportunities to shift to be more proactive and positive in your early interactions with families.

2. Relationships Matter. The relationship professionals have with families is an important factor in achieving both behavioral and academic outcomes for students. Relationships are built on a strong foundation of communication and respect. The goal of these relationships is trust, but it cannot be accomplished overnight. Professionals must first demonstrate care for a child, respect for a family, professionalism, and responsiveness to family concerns. For families who have had negative experiences with educators or other professionals, building positive, trusting relationships is more necessary and requires persistence. Families need to experience teachers and professionals who refrain from blame and demonstrate that they will not give up on the child or family (Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Gorski, 2013; Turnbull, Rutherford, Turnbull, & Kyzar, 2009).

Think of a family for whom it is going to take persistence on your part to build the trust needed to work together for supporting their child. Think of ways you can demonstrate respect, communicate frequently and listen intentionally to the family.

3. **Understand and Value Families.**

Communication between professionals and families is more positive and effective when the professional believes that a family's cultural practices and beliefs are important, the family has strengths, they care for their child and they have expert knowledge about their child. These core beliefs affect what professionals see, hear and expect when working with families. (Johns Hopkins University School of Education, 2015; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

What perceptions and beliefs do you have that are keeping you from valuing and respecting some families? How well do you know the families of the children in your classroom, community or school? What can you do to build your understanding of families' cultures, values, skills and knowledge that will equip you to be more effective in your work?

4. **Link to Learning.** It can be frustrating to spend time and resources to implement a meeting, resource, or activity for families if families do not respond. Furthermore, many of the traditional activities for "parent involvement" do not impact student achievement or behavior. Our response to both of these dilemmas is to guide professionals in planning family engagement activities that are clearly and intentionally linked to supporting outcomes for children. Each communication and event should provide families with a better understanding of how they can support their child's positive behavior and learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kraft & Roger, 2015).

List all of the current activities your school organization does to engage families. Reflect on each activity and determine if it is clearly building families' knowledge or skills for understanding and supporting their child's behavior or learning. Think about how you know if the strategy is successful.

5. **Share Progress.** Studies show that families want information about their child's progress in school and about how they can support their child's learning and positive behavior at home. When parents understand what their child needs and how to help, they take action. Even brief phone messages or texts to families about a child's progress can give parents the information they need to help their child improve (Johns Hopkins University School of Education, 2015; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Kraft & Rogers, 2015).

When communicating with families about their child's progress, consider how you can be understandable and non-threatening. Provide information in a regular pattern, in an easily accessible format, and in families' home language.

6. Listen and Inform. Many professionals could generate a long list of ways they send information to families. However, those same professionals would have a difficult time coming up with a list of when and how they listen to families share their ideas, expectations or feedback. Ongoing two-way communication between professionals and families, in which professionals both give information and take in information, has positive effects for children. Families know they have been heard when they see their ideas included in plans, acted on by administrators or implemented by teachers (Epstein et al., 2009; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Jeynes, 2012).

Create a list of how you communicate with families. Consider how you can create a culture of listening in your school or agency. When you receive input from families, how do you show families their ideas are included and lead to positive change?

7. Multiple Opportunities. Family members who engage with schools to support children and teens bring an unlimited wealth of interests, knowledge, and experience. At the same time, families bring challenges, including limited time, differing roles and expectations, and various levels of confidence and desire to interact with professionals. Not all family engagement opportunities are a good fit for every family. Professionals should provide families with multiple ways of communicating, interacting with the school and supporting their child at home (Mapp, Henderson, & Hill, 2014).

Consider the opportunities for families to partner with your school or organization. Which families are not given access? Are there families for whom communication is not understandable? Are there grandparents, fathers or others who are not welcomed? Are connections with families made outside of the school day and the school building?

8. Expectations. When families and professionals communicate high, positive expectations to children and teens, they motivate them to hold high expectations for themselves. These high expectations lead to improved behavior and greater effort in school. Professionals should listen to families' expectations for their children and communicate to parents the promise they see in the child (Gorski, 2013; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

Look for opportunities in communication with families to discuss expectations for learning and behavior for children and teens. Develop a list of shared expectations that both family members and professionals can talk about with children.

9. Persist – it is a Marathon, not a Sprint. Sustained focus and effort over time by organizations and schools results in more family engagement. High-performing schools cite family engagement as a consistent practice that contributes to their ability to support positive behavior and high achievement for all students. Persistence at the personal level is important too. When professionals continue to communicate and value families, they are able to reach families who have had negative experiences in the past. Relationships, trust and two-way communication take time to cultivate (Gorski, 2013; MDRC, 2013; SEDL, 2013).

Does your school or organization have an annual plan of strategies linked to student behavior or learning? What strategies do you use to communicate and develop relationships with families who have had negative experiences or who face barriers to being strong advocates for their children?

Assumptions Underlying Healthy Family-School Partnerships



Our core beliefs about families affect how well we can form partnerships. Take some time to reflect on what you believe about the families of kids you work with. Which of these core beliefs do you share, and which are you working to develop?

- All families have strengths to build upon.
- The best environment for children to learn and grow is when schools and families are partners.
- It is the responsibility of educators to initiate and build family-school partnerships.
- School leaders must set the expectation for the school building.
- Systemic changes that build parent engagement over time yield the strongest results.
- Family partnerships benefit students, schools and families pre-K-16.
- Families want, and can learn, ways to help their children at all ages.

A Parent's Perspective

January 19, 2017

Dear educators,

This is what I wish you could know:

We, as parents, need you. We've all heard the expression "It takes a village to raise a child." We definitely cannot do the best for our children on our own. You see our children for as much of the day as we do, and sometimes even more. We count on you to be our eyes to see their actions, their strengths and their weaknesses, while they are in your care. You see them in different surroundings than we do. For example, in kids with anxiety, you see them out of their 'safe' zone at home.

Your experience is invaluable; you see hundreds of kids pass by. I believe you are able to pick out behaviors that are not acceptable or age appropriate, that we have just become used to. Conversely, you can comfort our over-concerned parent-hearts with, "They're doing okay. Most kids their age haven't gotten that figured out yet."

On the other hand, we really need you to work with us as a team. We are experts on our specific child. We have seen their varied reactions to many different types of situations, usually since the day they were born. We have a sense for those things that make them unique, and their vulnerabilities. We need you to listen to our concerns and ideas without an I-know-better attitude (even if perhaps you do). I'm sure you appreciate the same cooperation from us.

I know you have a crazy workload and huge hearts or you wouldn't be in this profession. Without increasing your burden, please know that we can't do without your input. I appreciate being able to communicate to you at the beginning of the year, "My child has some issues with this or that, could you let me know how they are handling school." I hope you don't mind if we check in once in a while and say, "How are they doing? Have you noticed any _____ recently?" We are glad when you touch base with us sometimes and say "I have noticed that your child has been _____ lately". We need (and want) to work together with you, and if you don't tell us, we may never know what is going on with our child in your world. Together we can figure out a better way to address any issues.

Sometimes we may not agree there is a problem, or what the root of it is. Sometimes we may not agree on the suggested solution. But with our combined expertise and care for the child, we will surely be able to work together for the child's best development.

Thanks for all you do for our children!

Becky

(Ohio Parent)

Professional Roles

Different professionals can take on different responsibilities for engaging families. Here are opportunities for you based on the role you play in your school or organization.

Principals and Organizational Leaders can:

- Make family partnerships a priority. Put family engagement at the top of meeting agendas.
- Establish expectations and processes for teachers and personnel to listen to families as well as informing families (e.g. conferences or IEP meetings that prioritize family input).
- Review current practices (e.g., Parent Teacher Organizations) and evaluate how related they are to school improvement goals. Find a way to link the work of your PTOs and other parent organizations with the learning and climate goals of the school.
- Coach staff in how to work with families one-on-one and model what it looks like to welcome and care about families.
- Create policies that encourage staff/teachers to work one-on-one with family members on a regular basis to build trusting, respectful relationships.
- Provide staff with time and a process to consider the strengths and concerns of each family, and encourage them to learn about the family's cultural background and their personal understanding of their child's experiences.
- Provide positive reinforcement to those who demonstrate caring and commitment to families.
- Provide an evaluation tool for family engagement work.
- Adapt the system to support families with multiple children or individuals with multiple diagnoses.
- Provide informational materials for families on their rights and resources for advocating for their child – especially as it pertains to the services provided at your organization.
- Utilize funding and resources for support networks for families.

Direct Service Providers/Teachers can:

- Listen. Ask family members what they think is best for their child and for feedback on the school or organizations that work with their child.
- Develop your own growth mindset about families and your ability to work with all families.
- Work to establish a trusting, respectful relationship and sustain it for the entire time a family has a child or multiple children in school or receiving services. It is better to take the time to do this up front; otherwise, your work may miss the opportunity to prevent issues.
- Shadow other professionals with experience working with populations with which you are less familiar.
- Normalize experiences families are having whenever possible, and stay positive
- Coordinate with other teachers or providers to reduce the burden on families with multiple children to drive to and from services/meetings.
- Acknowledge when things go wrong or not as expected and be transparent about plans to correct issues.
- Create opportunities for all family members - fathers, mothers, grandparents, older siblings, or others to engage and be meaningful partners in ensuring success for children.
- Empower family members to be advocates, and connect them with other families and support organizations in the community.
- Give families time to absorb and reflect on new information.
- Give families choices about how you communicate with them, and how they can be involved in supporting the school and their child's education. Studies have shown that regular, short updates about a child's progress (e.g., text messages, or paper notes) written in an encouraging way are motivators for families (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

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