
Core Function: Family Engagement in a School Community

**Effective Practice****Explain and communicate the purpose and practices of the school community**

Overview: Schools can improve student learning by engaging with families around their purposes and practices by viewing parents as partners in their children’s education, nurturing parents to provide leadership in school decision-making, and providing clear, consistent, and frequent communication. The school’s key documents such as a parent involvement policy and/or school-family compact specify school and parent expectations and highlight ways that the school can partner with parents to promote student learning. Schools should also communicate with parents by establishing well-defined homework and class visitation policies, garnering parent input where appropriate. Teachers and school staff may need professional development centered on effective communication with families and ways to cultivate school-family partnerships.

Evaluate Your Practice: How can schools foster communication by involving families in decision-making around the purposes and practices of the school? What are other effective ways the school can communicate the purposes and practices of the school to parents and families?

Introduction

A substantial amount of research has documented the influential role of the family in student learning and educational attainment (e.g., De Fraja, Oliveira, & Zanchi, 2010; Dufur & Troutman, 2013); family involvement in school may benefit low income and minority students the most (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research has also demonstrated that schools can improve their students’ learning by engaging parents in ways that directly relate to their children’s academic progress, maintaining a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Redding, 2000; Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the schooling years (Swap, 1993). This is vital for all students at all grade levels, in all settings (urban to rural), and even more so for those with disabilities and English language learners (CII, 2011).

Communication with families is a key component of effective family engagement, and schools must explain the purposes and practices of the school, while also engaging families to seek their input and build trust and a sense of common purpose. Effective research-based practices in these areas are described below.

How can schools foster communication by involving families in decision-making around the purposes and practices of the school?

Schools must see families as partners who have a voice in school affairs, including decisions about budgets, school programs and personnel, changes in curriculum and instruction, and student behavior (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Seeking parent input within a School Leadership or School Improvement Team by including parents can serve to increase and enhance the quality of communication and influence both individual families and the school’s operation itself. According to Redding and colleagues, “the cumulative effects of more frequent and higher quality interactions among teachers and parents are a greater reservoir of trust and respect, increased social capital for children, and a school community more supportive of each child’s school success” (Redding et al., 2004, p. 6). Representation on a School Leadership Team may be individual parents/family members of currently enrolled students or may be representatives from a School Community Council or similar school-based team with a majority

of members being parents, along with teachers, administrators, and community representatives. For example, a School Community Council can look at the connections between the school and the families it serves and make recommendations for strengthening the School Improvement Plan's emphasis on family-school connections (ADI, 2011).

Research has shown that shared leadership with parents can boost school improvement efforts (Redding & Sheley, 2005). Henderson and Redding (2011) suggest that parents or other family members can be nurtured as leaders to allow them to contribute in the areas of school decision-making (e.g., curricular and co-curricular programming), organization (e.g., planning school events and organizing a broad parent organization), engagement (e.g., convening groups of parents in homes to meet with teachers), educating (e.g., planning/providing volunteer training), and advocating/connecting (e.g., advocating for the school with community and political leaders). Parents and families engaged in these leadership roles acquire skills, confidence, and increased self-efficacy; higher levels of parents' self-efficacy is linked to children's higher school achievement (Shumow & Lomax, 2001, as cited in Henderson & Redding, 2011).

What are other effective ways the school can communicate the purposes and practices of the school community to parents and families?

A school's key documents must be developed and shared regularly with parents and families in order to ensure effective home-school communication around the purposes and practices of the school community. An ongoing conversation between parents and teachers around key documents and events connecting the home and school builds reciprocal trust and a sense of common purpose. Parents should receive "practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors" (CII, 2011, p. 185). The school should also provide culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet one another and share norms, standards and parenting concerns and successes. Teachers and staff should receive professional development to build their capacity to work with all families; this professional development should promote a strengths-based (rather than deficit-based) view of families (CII, 2011).

Key school documents that provide communication and promote family engagement may include a parent involvement policy and a school-family compact. Parent involvement policies should be written with the assistance of parents and should establish expectations for parental involvement, coordinate with early childhood program's parent involvement strategies, and identify and attempt to eliminate barriers to greater participation and more effective involvement. An effective parent involvement policy must focus on improving student achievement and should include a vision statement developed with and for families, highlighting the importance of the family-school partnerships (Henderson et al., 2007; Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009). Moles and Fage (2011) suggest "parents should organize around a shared vision such as increasing the number of children ready for college or providing a quality education for all children, rather than around interests that often compete and divide parents" (p. 9). In addition, family engagement should be interwoven through a school's instructional program, planning/management, and other aspects of schooling so that the school serves as a place of connection for students and their families (Moles & Fage, 2011).

The school-family compact serves as a clear written agreement between parents and teachers about how they should work together and is required for Title I schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESAA). Best practices indicate that a compact should focus on learning, including ways that parents can support their child's learning at home and opportunities for parents to communicate with the school to increase these supports (ADI, 2011; Henderson, Carson, Avallone, & Whipple, 2011; Henderson, et al., 2007). It is also essential that the compact explicitly outline the means by which parents, school staff, and students will share responsibility for improving student achievement, how the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help achieve state standards, and a description of parent-teacher communications (Henderson, 2015).

Schools can also communicate the purposes and practices of the school through homework and classroom visit policies. Homework is a primary point of interface between the school and the home, and parents are best able to support the school's purposes for homework when they understand what is expected of students and their role in monitoring their children's homework. Con-

sistency from teacher to teacher and across grade levels and subjects, established by a homework policy, contributes to teachers,' parents,' and students' understanding of the school's purposes for homework and also reinforces students' formation of independent study habits (Redding, 2006). Studies on homework that included an interactive element requiring children to talk with someone at home about the assignment have shown a variety of significant, positive outcomes, including improved study skills, increased parent involvement, and better teacher attitudes (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Van Voorhis, 2003). Classroom visit plans should balance the need to minimize disruptions or interference with student learning, maximize safety, and create a welcoming and transparent environment for families; parents should be involved in creating these policies and plans (ADI, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007). These policies should specify whether advance notice is required and how parents should arrange the visit, and the role of the parent/teacher during the visit. Clear and frequent communication and consistent implementation of these policies are necessary and help establish a welcoming environment for families and encourage true partnerships focused on student learning (Henderson et al., 2007; Redding, 2006; Redding et al., 2011).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
Parent representatives advise the School Leadership Team on matters related to family-school relations.
The school has a written statement of purpose for its Parent-Teacher Organization.
A School Community Council (SCC) consisting of the principal, parent facilitator, social worker or counselor, teachers, and parents oversees family-school relationships and helps parents to be better equipped to support their student's learning at home.
A majority of the members of the School Community Council (SCC) are parents of currently enrolled students and are not also employees of the school.
The School Community Council (SCC) meets twice a month and keeps an agenda and minutes of the meetings.
The school's Compact outlines the responsibilities (expectations) of teachers, parents, and students.

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The school's Compact includes responsibilities (expectations) that communicate what parents can do to support their students' learning at home (curriculum of the home).
The school's Parent Involvement Policy includes a vision statement about the importance of family-school partnership in a school community.
The school's Mission Statement is distinct, clear, focused on student learning, and includes the important role of the family.
The school's Homework Guidelines require homework at all grade levels.
The school's Homework Guidelines show the minimum amount of daily study time by grade level.
The school's Homework Guidelines stress the importance of checking, marking, and promptly returning homework.
The school's Homework Guidelines make homework a part of the student's report card grade.
The Student Report Card provides parents an opportunity to report on the student's home-based studying and reading habits.
The Student Report Card includes the student's progress toward learning standards.
Classroom Visit Procedures are clear, constructive, welcoming, and available for visitors in the office.
The school's Parent Involvement Policy, Compact, and Classroom Visit Procedures encourage parents to visit classrooms.
The school celebrates its accomplishments.
The school recognizes the individual accomplishments of teachers.
The school recognizes the accomplishments of teams (e.g., teacher teams, School Community Council (SCC), and parent-teacher organization).
The school's key documents (Parent Involvement Policy, Mission Statement, Compact, Homework Guidelines, and Classroom Visit Procedures) are included in the school improvement plan and other official documents.
Teachers are familiar with the curriculum of the home (what parents can do at home to support their children's learning) and discuss it with them.

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The school uses Open House as an opportunity to convey to parents that what goes on at home impacts student's academic performance.
The "ongoing conversation" between teachers and parents is candid, supportive, and flows in both directions.
Teachers use emails to provide parents with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interactions with their children.
Teachers use email to communicate with parents about student progress.
Teachers use phone calls to provide parents with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interactions with their children.
Teachers use telephone calls to communicate with parents about student progress.
Teachers use postcards and notes to parent to share student accomplishments.
The school has a web-based student information system to inform parents of student progress and updates information weekly.
The school regularly communicates with parents about its expectations of them and the importance of the curriculum of the home (what parents can do at home to support their children's learning).
The school provides parents and other visitors a friendly document that outlines the ground rules for visits to the school and classrooms.
The school's website has a parent section that includes information on how parents may post items.
The school's newsletter includes articles by parents, information on home support of learning, announcements of parent activities, and provides procedures on how parents may submit items.
The school has a bulletin board near the front entrance that includes information on home support for learning, announcements, parent activities, and provides procedures on how parents may post information.

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