

Family Engagement: A Guide to Tools, Strategies and Resources

STRATEGIES TO BOOST FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Schools and community partners know the importance of engaging families in children’s academic, social and emotional development at school. But meaningfully linking families to school life is complex and difficult to achieve effectively. In ExpandedED Schools, parents join with teachers, principals and community-partner leaders to add time to the school day to improve student outcomes, meet students’ needs and preferences, and incorporate parents’ visions into the school. But involving parents in planning is only one facet of family engagement, and additional strategies are required for higher levels of student success.

TASC created this toolkit to help school planning teams refine their family engagement strategies and clarify what they are trying to do, why, and how. We include a definition of “family engagement,” specific strategies and tactics that are rooted in the research on what works, and a curated collection of resources. We have also created a review of research literature as a companion resource.

The strategies listed below can help ensure that all members of the school and community partner staff honor and recognize families’ knowledge. These approaches help ensure that families are able to support their children’s education, encourage growth, advocate for change, and collaborate with schools. As a result, schools, community organizations and families together can boost student achievement, build a positive school culture, and provide young people with a stronger sense of community—in and out of school.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE HOME/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Effective family engagement:

- Is grounded in partnership and shared responsibility among families, community organizations and schools
- Continues from birth through adolescence
- Occurs across multiple settings and contexts in which children can learn

Schools and their community partners need to implement strategies that are systematic, integrated, sustained and meaningful. Activities to engage parents and families should be linked to learning, and be collaborative and interactive. The approaches detailed below are rooted in research on what works.

Enhance Parental Self-Efficacy

- **Establish opportunities for parents to build their own skills and deepen knowledge.**

Provide trainings and workshops that model for parents and guardians how to support reading and math skills for younger children and educate families on the middle school and high school selection process. For older students, provide workshops on the college application and financial aid processes.

- **Provide multiple opportunities for families to be involved through a variety of activities at school and at home, and communicate with them regarding the various factors that promote students' academic success.**

Organize visitation opportunities so families can observe and participate in extended day activities and field trips to promote a culture of high expectations.

Use a monthly newsletter that informs parents about current curricular activities and book club reading material, and that showcases best work.

- **Communicate with families regarding the factors that promote students' academic success.**

Help families access data, electronically and through other formats, about their child's attendance and performance. Also include guidelines for encouraging character skills, instilling parental expectations, and supporting student learning and growth regardless of the parent's skill level and educational background.

- **Create opportunities for parents to connect and build networks.**

Some parents may feel more comfortable engaging with other families rather than school. Provide opportunities for parents to build relationships with each other to facilitate peer learning and information sharing via parent meetings or program events and workshops.

Ensure Parents Know that Schools Want Their Involvement

- **Create a welcoming school environment that respects and celebrates language and cultural diversity.**

Display student work throughout the building and ensure families receive written communication in the home languages they speak, or provide translation services.

- **Actively encourage and facilitate family participation in school events.**

Publicize events early and often using multiple methods including on the school website or social media, via fliers or phone calls, and in newsletters. Make an effort to accommodate parents' work schedules.

- **Facilitate relationship building and information sharing between families and school staff.**

Ensure that parent-teacher conferences are productive and include goal sharing, and maintain regular communication of student progress between formal meetings. Student-led conferences can be a powerful tool for increasing student accountability. Teacher home visits, if possible, can also be an effective tool for establishing and maintaining relationships with families that promote school engagement.

- **Provide opportunities for family contributions and leadership.**

Regularly solicit parent feedback and input on school activities and events. Encourage parents with leadership capacity to be parent representatives on school leadership teams.

Build High Parental Aspirations

- **Develop a culture of high expectations.**

Provide parents with information on academically enriching summer programs, offer information on local colleges and universities and encourage parents to attend campus visits.

- **Provide workshops on financing college and applying for financial aid.**

Help ensure that parents don't make the assumption that finances will prevent their child from pursuing higher education.

Celebrate Success

- **Exhibit work.**

Display student work throughout the hallways, designate a "Student of the Month," and hold quarterly assemblies to celebrate student achievement.

- **Celebrate students.**

Build a strong school culture through quarterly celebrations, student-led performance assemblies, and parent nights showcasing student work.

- **Share stories.**

Share stories that exemplify optimism and perseverance. Conversations should be focused on how to support all students with high levels of achievement.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Now with strategies in mind, we offer a review of resources—including briefs, research papers and tip sheets—to further inform implementation of strong family engagement tactics.

- **Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works (2006)**

www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CommunityAndFamilyEngagement.pdf

A publication of the National Association for Elementary School Principals, National Association for Secondary School Principals and the Coalition for Community Schools, this paper explores ways in which principals of community schools—and other principals who, though they may not yet identify their schools as community schools, are responding in a very similar manner—work successfully with community partners, families and other key stakeholders to improve student outcomes.

- **Family Involvement in Elementary School Education (2006)**

www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-elementary-school-children-s-education

This brief by the Harvard Family Research Project summarizes the evidence base that links family involvement during the elementary school years to outcomes and programs that have been evaluated to show what works.

- **Helping Families Pave the Path to College (2012)**

hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/helping-families-pave-the-path-to-college-supporting-the-developmental-processes-that-facilitate-college-readiness

Harvard Family Research Project outlines five strategies educators can use to help families pave the path to college by supporting developmental readiness, including open communication with families, college exploration activities like campus visits, peer networks, and student-led planning conferences.

- **Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education (2007)**

www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-middle-and-high-school-students-education

This brief by the Harvard Family Research Project summarizes evidence that examines effective involvement during the middle and high school years. Programs and initiatives should be mindful of approaching family involvement in multiple ways, facilitating parents' ability to monitor adolescents' growth and progress, supporting youth and parents in the college transition, developing a climate of high expectations and being sensitive to cultural values.

- **One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America’s High Schools (2008)**
<http://www.hartresearch.com/new/pdf/onedream.pdf>

This report by Civic Enterprises for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation discusses how regardless of income, education, and performance at the school, parents believe that their involvement is central to their child’s academic success. Researchers asked a nationally representative sample of high school students’ parents to offer their suggestions on how to better involve them in their teenagers’ education. Responses centered primarily on effective communication between parents and the school, with parents eager to have updates on their children’s progress, information on graduation and college admission requirements, and a faculty advisor available to monitor progress and maintain contact.

- **Engaging Families at the Secondary Level (2005)**
www.sedl.org/connections/resources/rb/rb3-Secondary.pdf

This strategy brief by the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools offers ideas for engaging families at the secondary level, with examples of specific strategies that counselors, teachers and parents can use to increase involvement.

- **Parent-Teacher Conference Tip Sheets for Principals, Teachers, and Parents (2010)**
www.hfrp.org/var/hfrp/storage/fckeditor/File/FI-ConferenceTipSheet-111810.pdf

This tip sheet will help principals, teachers, and parents ensure that parent-teacher conferences achieve their maximum potential and are used effectively to promote productive home-school communication. These three tip sheets—for principals, teachers, and parents—can help ensure that parent-teacher conferences achieve their maximum potential by providing guidance that reflects each person’s role and responsibility in promoting productive home-school communication. Designed to be used as a set, the tip sheets combine consistent information with targeted suggestions, so that parents and educators enter into conferences with shared expectations and an increased ability to work together to improve children's educational outcomes.

- **Student-Led Parent-Teacher Conferences**
www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/apr96/vol53/num07/When_Students_Lead_Parent-Teacher_Conferences.aspx

ASCD has pioneered a more student-centered model of conferencing with pre-conference, during, and post-conference resources.

- **The Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP)**
www.pthvp.org

Educators are finding home visits to be an increasingly powerful tool in establishing a positive relationship with students' families, particularly in low-income, urban districts where educators traditionally struggle to build parent involvement. The PTHVP is inexpensive and easily replicated model of family engagement that has been proven to end the cycle of blame between families and school staff by building trust and respect, instilling cultural competency and increasing personal and professional capacity for all involved.

- **Federal Student Aid Information**
studentaid.ed.gov

This government website is dedicated to explaining the different types of higher education financial aid, who is eligible for it, and what families need to do in order to get it.

- **ARIS Parent Link**
arisparentlink.org/parentlink

The New York City Department of Education's Achievement Reporting and Innovation System provides a single place where educators can go to find and study important information about a student. This link makes that same information available to parents.

- **Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Programs Toolkit**
www.bostnet.org/uploads/3/0/3/9/3039436/engagingfamielstoolkit.pdf

A publication of Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet) that builds off its Engaging Families Initiative, this toolkit can be used to build a family engagement strategy. The brief includes an Engagement Checklist, to assess current program practices; an Action Plan, to determine next steps; and a Communication Log, to track program outreach. The brief also offers strategies and tips for supporting family engagement.

ABOUT TASC

The mission of TASC is to expand the school day to give disadvantaged students more opportunities to discover and develop their talents; more support to overcome the challenges of poverty; and more time to achieve at the high levels essential for success in the global workplace. Since our founding in 1998 we have helped more than 621,000 kids, supported more than 564 public schools, partnered with more than 400 community and cultural organizations and colleges and trained 23,000 community members to work in schools.

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