

Strategies for Strong Parent and Family Engagement

Part III – Connecting with Parents, Dismantling Perceptions

“Parents, especially parents of students in low-performing schools, know their involvement is important. Eighty percent of all parents, and 85% of parents of students in low-performing schools, say parents should be involved as advocates for their children when it comes to picking courses and teachers.”⁷⁰

Perceptions

Challenging Educational Experiences:

Parents who have had few or no successful education experiences are often intimidated by the school system and might believe they have little or nothing to contribute to their child’s education.

Strategy: Parent Empowerment

Action Step: Provide parents with a sense of empowerment and encourage them to view the school and the U.S. education system in a positive light. It is important to actively listen to parents’ questions and concerns and to invite their suggestions on important school decisions. Furthermore, involving parents in planning school social events can help ensure these activities accurately reflect the many cultures of the community.⁷¹

Parental Education Level:

The education system often uses specific terminology, concepts, and techniques with which parents may be unfamiliar. This inhibits their ability to understand and engage in their child’s education.

Strategy: Understandable Procedures and Communication

Action Step:

1. Avoid using technical terminology, including acronyms when communicating with parents.
2. Help parents understand the terms that cannot be avoided, like those related to education policy, assessments, and specific procedures. While acronyms such as ESEA, MEAP, and IEP are easily understood by school staff, many parents are unfamiliar with these terms. When working with families, be sure to always define full terms as well as their significance.

Strategy: Parent Education Programs

Action Steps:

1. Survey parents about their interest in learning more about your school, education policy, child development, parenting, etc. Develop parent education programs based on their requests to help families fully engage in their child's education.
2. Concentrate on both academic topics (understanding report cards and assessment tools, attending parent teacher conferences, helping with homework, etc.) and family-related topics (child development and discipline, family services available in the community, etc.)⁷²

Strategy: Parent Education Center

Action Step: Develop a parent information center at the school with resources on academic and school-related topics as well as parenting and family issues.

Parent & Teacher Roles:

In many countries and cultures, it is accepted that the teacher's responsibility is to educate a student while he or she is at school; the parent is then responsible for education at home. Therefore, it is common for immigrants to show their respect for schools and educators by keeping their distance. Unfortunately, this is often interpreted as a lack of interest or willingness to engage in their child's educational experience.⁷³

Strategy: Meaningful Participation

Action Step: Educators and school staff should continually reiterate the importance of having "parents as partners" in the education process of youth. Parent engagement programs that emphasize the development of and trusting relationships between school staff and families will be most effective in creating and sustaining family connections with the school. Schools can best engage families by "working actively to invite and welcome parent involvement, and by developing programs that support and enhance parents' efficacy for involvement in children's schooling."⁷⁴

Strategy: Parent Volunteer Programs

Action Step:

1. Provide parents with opportunities to help in the classroom. They can help children with academic tasks, including reading; for ELL parents, this will help improve their own

English skills. Additionally, time spent in the school and classroom can help parents gain a better understanding of the American education system.

2. Having parents in the classroom will reinforce the concept of respect for adults in the students. The parents will also be able to gain a better understanding of the teacher's role as well as learn about the U.S. educational system.⁷⁵

Traditional Parent Involvement Policies:

Schools serving diverse or low-income populations have been criticized for having a deficit view of parents and communities. Critics suggest that this perspective leads educators to view diverse students and families as problematic and lacking resources to provide home educational experiences. School personnel with this belief often assume that lack of parental participation is due to lack of parental interest. Schools are also criticized for focusing only on what parents can do to support the school or to support quantifiable academic achievement.⁷⁶

Strategy: Non-Traditional Parent Involvement

Action Step: Modify school policies and practices in order to effectively engage diverse parents and recognize cultural and linguistic differences.⁷⁷

Purpose of Education:

All parents value academic growth, especially in literacy. However, less-educated parents may not provide home experiences that promote text-based literacy. While they may read to their children, they may not ask response questions like more individualistic parents do.⁷⁸

Strategy: Collaborative Teaching

Action Step: Teachers and parents work together to set academic goals for the child. Strategies to achieve these goals include both school curriculum and home reading activities. The teacher may offer the parent a range of ways to participate in these educational goals.⁷⁹

Lack of Cultural Awareness in School:

In several studies, parents reported feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in their child's school due to a lack of cultural awareness and diversity.⁸⁰

Strategy: Create a Welcoming Environment

- Action Steps:**
1. Ensure that the school is welcoming and family-friendly as well as clearly navigable with signs in multiple languages.
 2. Decorate hallways with works of art, posters of national and international leaders and heroes, and flags of countries represented in the community.
 3. Train all school staff to welcome and converse with family visitors.⁸¹

Strategy: Promote Cultural Understanding

- Action Steps:**
1. Provide staff with professional development workshops to learn about the cultural richness in the school community.
 2. Attend cultural events in the community. Parents enjoy seeing their children's teachers and administrators outside of the school setting.
 3. Invite parents to lead in focus groups about cultural issues in the community and school.
 4. Ask families to visit classrooms to share their culture and traditions and give children an opportunity to share their home language and culture with other students.⁸²

Additional Information & Resources

1. "Partnering with Parents and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School." <http://www.rwjf.org/>
2. "Latino Parents' Motivations for Involvement in Their Children's Schooling: An Exploratory Study" <http://www.jstor.org/>
3. "Promoting ELL Parent Involvement: Challenges in Contested Times." <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506652.pdf>