

Family Engagement Toolkit

An Overview

When we think about children and what's best for children, we often turn to counselors, doctors, and teachers to give us their suggestions. When we turn to professionals, we often overlook the experts who know their children best - families. Families are in the unique position to know their children during both their best and most challenging times. They know how to bring out a smile and how to encourage risks. Families can identify facial expressions and moods and uncover desires and talents. They hold the answers to many questions educators have about the children in their classrooms, their traditions and cultures, their learning styles, and the best ways to introduce new material.

We know families are their child's first teachers and as such they are valuable assets in the school setting. Creating strong family-school partnerships can only enhance what schools are able to provide for a child. Our hope is that this toolkit will provide the avenue to creating these authentic connections.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for the key stakeholders in a child's life. When all stakeholders are equally aware of the roles they play in the child's success, it creates opportunities for trust building, meaningful cultural brokering, and mutual accountability. For the purposes of this toolkit, the stakeholders are **families, teachers, principals, and district leaders**. And, while this toolkit was initially created to support family involvement in the formative assessment process, the resources included in the toolkit are primarily targeted towards family engagement and an authentic family-school partnership throughout the early elementary school years.

Family members:

Teachers and other school leaders need you! They need your deep knowledge of your child to help them make the most of the elementary school years.



Teachers, Principals and District Administrators:

This Family Engagement Toolkit strives to create a healthy foundation from which two-way communication, equity and access, shared decision-making and sustainability can grow between schools and families.

“When the adults around young people work together to support student learning, students earn higher grades, score higher on achievement tests, adapt better to school, attend more regularly, earn more credits, have better social skills, and are more likely to graduate and go on to higher education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).”

Toolkit Structure

Each of the four sections of the toolkit has resources which are targeted to families, teachers, principals, and district leaders. These four sections are:

Two-Way Communication: There are a wide variety of traditional communication strategies that exist for schools to connect with families including

phone calls, conferences, open houses, websites, newsletters, email, home visits, and social media. To be most effective, these strategies must be culturally responsive to the diverse language, needs, schedules and preferences of families. No single means of communication will meet the needs of all families; rather, multiple strategies should always be employed. Schools learn this best by engaging in open dialogue with families. This section of the toolkit includes resources to assist in implementing this approach.

Equity and Access: This section emphasizes intentional reflection on the current structures that are in place to ensure all families are effectively reached and supported by the school community. Every child and family should have the opportunities they need to be successful in the educational experience, which means different children and families receive different resources that meet those cultural, linguistic, and socio-economical needs. The school does take into account the historical context of where families may have strived or struggled, their current realities, and the desired future outcomes for their children. *(Dr. Ann Ishimaru, University of Washington)*

Shared Decision-Making: In this section, access resources that provide opportunities for families and educators to work together to set learning and development goals on behalf of the children. If this is authentic, then family input is available to improve the school experience and relationship building among staff and families; and the families are seen and treated as the experts of their children. At the same time, families recognize that teachers are experts on the academic content. We need both areas of expertise to ensure children are successful in school and life. Through this process, there is a balance of family and school power and family concern and goals that drive the decision-making process. *(Excerpted in part from The Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Research Project at the University of Washington 2015)*

Sustainability: These resources emphasize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create consistent and intentional impact on the school and family connections. Plans and structures exist for feedback and communication from school to family and from family to school. Ongoing community meetings, training in social media platforms, surveys, etc. are in place to guarantee that families are essential partners in the education of their children.



On the following pages, as families, teachers, principals and district leaders, consider the priorities for family engagement and the roles that you as important stakeholders play in a child's life during the elementary school years.

Families

WE ARE important figures in the lives of children such as: parents, grandparents, tribal elders, older siblings, court appointed guardians, foster parents. When our child is not at school, they spend the majority of their time with us.

Our Family Engagement Goal is to be an active part of our child's learning process with an opportunity for our voices and experiences to be included when considering culturally relevant instructional practices.

What We Can Offer the School on Behalf of Our Child:

- Share what we see our child do and what they work on outside of school.
- Communicate with teachers through school visits, parent-teacher meetings, phone calls, text messaging, and secure online platforms.
- Discuss with our child's teacher what we have learned and still need to learn about formative assessments.

What We Can Receive from the School:

- An understanding of the purpose of formative assessment and how it connects to my child's learning.
- Information on the stages of learning and how my child is progressing.
- Awareness of the hopes, concerns, and questions that surface about my child's learning experience.



Family involvement makes it possible to influence your (school) community more positively and influence children's lives by giving them more opportunities earlier. It takes more time but the payoff is student success.

—Ignacio Solis, Ernesto Serna School, El Paso, Texas

Teachers

WE ARE classroom leaders who engage students in strong learning experiences. Your child spends the most time with us at school.

Our Family Engagement Goal is to establish positive and balanced relationships with families that support students' learning.

What We Can Offer Your Family:

- Engagement in authentic communication about your child's learning experiences.
- Creation of a foundation of trust and respect.
- Reciprocal relationships regarding shared decision-making and learning strategies.
- Time to understand the needs of your family.
- Materials and presentations in an accessible language that meets the communication preferences of your family.

What We Can Receive from Your Family:

- Preferences for communication about your child's learning goals and progress.
- An understanding of your family's culture and opinions about your child's education, behavior, etc.
- Information that will help us work better with your child.



Principals

WE ARE school building leaders who provide supports and structures for teachers to create strong learning experiences for students. Although your child may see me often, I am not a regular part of his/her daily learning experience. My efforts will affect how your child experiences our school.

Our Family Engagement Goal is to establish open lines of communication, and develop a variety of ways for families to participate in their children's learning and in the life of the school. (*Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works 2006*).

What We Can Offer Your Family:

- Create opportunities for you to share your observations about how your child learns and your thoughts and insights about your child's behavior.
- Support teachers' efforts to use multiple approaches to reach your family, (i.e. family visits, parent-teacher meetings and other forms of communication, including phone calls, text messaging, and secure online platforms.)
- Create a school environment that promotes the chance to keep you informed by regularly sharing key findings from assessments and work samples that together form your child's portfolio.
- Provide data/information in a user-friendly format.

What We Can Receive from Your Family:

- Share what you see your child do and what they work on outside of school.
- Communicate with us through school visits, school meetings, phone calls, text messaging, and secure online platforms.



District Leaders

WE ARE school district leaders that provide supports and structures for principals to create strong teaching and learning environments for teachers and students. We are not a regular part of your child’s daily learning yet the efforts we make directly impact your experience as a family in our district.

Our Family Engagement Goal is to foster district-wide programs, policies, and support strategies to ensure appropriate structures are in place for all schools to consistently engage families as partners.

What We Can Offer Your Family:

- Support principals in building a culture that respects all families and understands their valuable contributions to the child, the school, and the community.
- Develop policies and strategies and resources that assure that school leaders are creating a welcoming environment that builds trust and is responsive to individual strengths and needs.
- Establish a clear priority for all school leaders that ensures that two-way communication between families and schools is linked to student achievement.
- Promote throughout the district an understanding of cultures and communicating in ways that are appropriate for each family.

What We Can Receive from Families:

- Inside perspective on each child’s strengths and needs.
- A basic understanding of each family’s culture, beliefs, and traditions; what kinds of behavior are valued and what is discouraged; and what each family expects from their child as a student.
- The expectation that families will ask questions and share thoughts about the assessment data gathered on their child.
- Contribution to setting learning goals and to engage in partnership opportunities.



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