

Five Ways to Boost Family Engagement

One of the greatest challenges in education today is actively engaging families in schools as partners in the educational process. This is an essential component for promoting schools of excellence with student success in mind. While there is no magic formula for engaging families in education, there are best practices and strategies for bridging home-school partnerships.

It is critical for school leaders to recognize that schools cannot operate in isolation of families, but instead must look at new ways to partner for the sake of children. As the new school year begins, principals have a great opportunity to welcome families to participate in meaningful partnerships.

Research studies have clearly shown that there are benefits for engaging families in schools—benefits for teachers, students, families, and the school community. As educational teams strategically plan to invest time in building parent partnerships, schools will discover a great return on their investment, including improved student performance, behaviors, attendance, test scores, and motivation to learn.

As principals begin to search pathways to student growth and success, it is important to begin the process by assessing the climate of the school and asking key questions to promote a family-friendly environment. Are all families:

- Treated fairly and equally as partners in learning?
- Respected regardless of their background?
- Included in shared decisions that impact the child's education?
- Greeted with courtesy and professionalism by the entire staff?

Administrators should initiate climate surveys to promote a positive learning environment that welcomes VIPs (very important parents) to actively participate in the education

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of students. By examining the results of climate surveys and family needs assessments two to three times per year, schools can then modify and adjust partnership opportunities as needed for families.

The next step is to examine and apply five keys to active family engagement that may be customized for parents with children in any grade level.

1. Communication

Open, two-way communication is one of the most important steps in building a successful partnership between home and school. This key opens the door to positive relationships and provides opportunities to build rapport with all families throughout the school year. To effectively build rapport with school partners, consider staying on the fol-

lowing communication track:

- Respect family values and strengths;
- Actively engage families as partners in student success;
- Promote a positive school climate;
- Position yourself to listen and learn from families;
- Open the door to two-way communication;
- Respond positively and professionally; and
- Take time to learn about families in the school.

2. Parenting

Many parents want to be actively engaged in their child's education but may not know how to become engaged as a partner in learning. It is important for schools to offer parenting tips and information through workshops, parent meetings, newsletters, and Web messages to remind parents of little things they can do to extend learning at home.

Other considerations for promoting parenting skills is to offer information in diverse languages as needed, consider different locations and times for family activities, and use differentiated strategies to address adult learners. When schools provide support, resources, and parent education to families, parents become empowered with knowledge and skills to help students thrive and grow in education.

3. Volunteering

As principals search for meaningful ways to engage families in schools, volunteer opportunities are usually found at the top of the list. The challenge for many schools is recruiting families as school volunteers. One way to market volunteer opportunities is through parent leaders who can serve as the volunteer recruiters for their child's school.

Invite parents to share their time, talent, and skills in the school by working with teachers and other staff to monitor, mentor, or serve as a role model for students. Finally, school leaders must focus on ways to pro-

