Families: Essential for Excellence

Family engagement is an essential ingredient for student achievement and for school turnarounds. For students and school improvements to be successful, schools must treat family and community engagement as an integral, rather than just an “add-on,” activity.

How well does your school nurture these key family relationships? Consider using the National PTA’s Standards for Family-School Partnerships to conduct a family engagement check-in. These research-based standards are a framework for thinking about, structuring, and assessing family engagement. Consider whether you and your staff are accomplishing these tasks; if not, take the following action steps to bolster your school-family partnerships.

Do you welcome all families into your school community? Families should be active participants in the life of the school and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

To accomplish this standard, start by working with your school council to develop “customer service” guidelines to be used by school staff. You can also set up a parent help desk or visitor welcome center outside the school office; conduct meet-and-greet walks in the neighborhoods where students live; or use a professional development day to address assumptions about race, class, and culture.

Are you communicating effectively with families? Families and school staff should engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning. To accomplish this standard:

1. Map your school’s parent-teacher contacts. How often do teachers communicate with families? What are the main topics? When do they have face-to-face contact?

2. Work with your PTA/parent group to establish guidelines for regular communication between home and school—for monthly calls from teachers to parents, home visits, and weekly newsletters.

3. Engage school staff, community members, and parents in developing a parent handbook.

4. Establish a method for parents to review their children’s work on a regular basis.

5. Publicize the hours when administrators and teachers are available for parent visits.

Do your family partnerships support student success? Families and school staff should continuously collaborate to support students’ learning and healthy development both at home and at school. Both groups should have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively. Accomplish this standard by asking parents to take an active role in reviewing student portfolios; instituting student-led parent-teacher conferences; and setting the expectation that teachers send home interactive materials at least once a month for families to work on with their children.

Do your families speak up for every child? Families should feel empowered to be advocates for their own and other children. This ensures that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success. Consider implementing these strategies:

1. Develop a Parent Bill of Rights.

2. Frequently share your school’s policy and procedures for resolving parent concerns. Cover how to define the problem, whom to approach first, and how to develop solutions.

3. Publicize any successful changes in the school that resulted from parent initiation and involvement.

Do families share power? Families and school staff should be equal partners in decisions that affect children and families. Here are some action steps to accomplish this goal:

1. Conduct an annual survey or hold focus groups to get parents’ input on current and potential school programs and policies.

2. Sponsor a school accountability meeting at which school officials describe school programs, services, and performance data.

3. Make sure the parents on the school improvement team represent the diverse population of the school.

4. Invite parents to share concerns and ideas by having a suggestion box in the front office, and be personally accessible to all parents.

Do families and staff collaborate with your community? Families and school staff should collaborate with community members to expand learning opportunities, and connect students and families to community services and civic participation. To accomplish this goal, consider hosting a community breakfast at the school for local businesses and civic leaders. Or, sponsor an annual Give Back Day on which students go into the community to perform needed work or services.

In the 2013-2014 school year, more than 300 school principals nationwide are collaborating with PTAs to put the Family-School Partnership Standards into action through the National PTA School of Excellence program. Learn how your school can take part at PTA.org/excellence.

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