

Six Steps to Partner With Diverse Families

Diverse student populations achieve at higher levels when families and teachers collaborate. However, an abundance of research spanning several decades reveals that many teachers feel unprepared to work effectively with families. In a recent study, kindergarten teachers told us that working with families becomes even more challenging as racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity in their classrooms increases. As our student population becomes increasingly diverse, educators must re-conceptualize how we connect with and engage families.

Family engagement—different from family involvement—is rooted in strong, reciprocal relationships in which teachers and parents both contribute on behalf of the child. This type of engagement includes:

1. Family participation in decision-making related to the child's education;
2. Consistent two-way communication;
3. Collaboration and exchange of knowledge;
4. Creating and sustaining learning activities at home; and
5. Home environments that value learning.

Collaborative engagement begins with strong relationships. The research in this area is clear: A key to working with the families of diverse learners is establishing a bond with each family. Principals can prepare their teachers for this important work by facilitating professional development on how to build culturally responsive relationships. Typically, many teachers use engagement strategies that tend to align with middle class, white assumptions and experiences. Instead, if teachers approach families with cultural responsiveness, they will select actions that value differences and support cross-cultural communication. Relationship-building can be taught. The following set of key concepts and strategies can guide principals as they equip teachers on behalf of student success.

Set the expectation for teacher leadership. Principals should express their expectation that teachers take the lead in building relationships with all families. A first step for teachers can be reaching out personally to families either by phone, email, or face-to-face contact. Making personal contact in culturally appropriate ways is key. Teachers should be aware of and use patterns of communication that are characteristic for each family, including consideration of work schedules. When families feel that they are welcome and that the teacher knows their child, they are more likely to reciprocate, work collaboratively, and share information about the learner.

Learn about the child, family, and community. To forge culturally responsive relationships, teachers should be authentically curious and learn about students' unique aspects and their families, while also becoming familiar with the community in which they live. Teachers can learn a lot about a community by riding a school bus route or taking a community walk. Both activities offer teachers the opportunity to see and learn about places that are part of students' lives. Home visits are another strategy that can provide teachers with this robust understanding. The knowledge teachers gain through these practices allow them to make authentic connections to families' contexts.

Acknowledge a shared commitment.

Two-way relationships are best built when both parties bring their expertise to it. These ties are strengthened as the parties discover and embrace their shared commitment. In the case of families and teachers, the child's well-being and academic success are the center of the shared commitment. Acknowledging this common ground strengthens the relationship and opens the door for collaboration. Principals can encourage teachers to verbalize their shared commitment with families as a step to build foundational relationships.

Embrace a strengths-based perspective. Every child comes from a family with unique life experiences and a set of strengths. These are, as Diana Hiatt-Michael writes in *Promising Practices for Teachers to Engage Families of English Language Learners*, “funds of knowledge” about each child. Teachers should routinely ask parents to share their observations about their child. This practice honors parents as a child's first and most significant teacher and gives teachers the opportunity to build on the strengths of the family.

Forge trust. Trust is the foundation of every relationship. As parents' trust in their child's teacher grows, their willingness to support and partner with the teacher increases. Teachers need to recognize that developing trusting relationships takes sustained effort over time. A helpful strategy is to develop a plan for a series of interactions with families. These interactions can include, but are not limited to, phone calls, emails, written notes, conferences, and sharing students' work. While these steps seem routine, it's the intentional recognition of the student as an individual that adds value to the interaction.

Encourage reciprocal communication. Communication is a key aspect of strong relationships. Regrettably, many teachers never receive training in the skill set that supports effective professional communication. In *Building Culturally Responsive Family-School*



Relationships, Teresa Leibforth and Mary Ann Clark write about building family-school relationships to maximize student learning. They define four critical communication skills that teachers should use when building ties with diverse families:


1. Listen attentively;
2. Summarize and/or paraphrase conversations;
3. Ask appropriate questions; and
4. Use constructive feedback.

Principals can provide professional development around these four key aspects of reciprocal communication.

With a strong relationship established, teachers can begin to facili-

tate true collaborative work. Principals should encourage teachers to begin by teaming up with families on non-problematic issues—for example, establishing a classroom homework routine that requires parental participation. Then, teachers can move the conversation into partnership around academic success, behavioral issues, and student well-being. These conversations should include both the teacher and parents, each bringing their expertise and unique knowledge of the child to the conversation. Co-decision-making results when both the teacher and the family take responsibility for action. It is this type of collaboration that makes a

difference in the academic achievement and well-being of the child.

Oregon’s former chief education officer, Nancy Golden, once wrote that “authentic partnerships with families represent some of the greatest sources of untapped capacity for delivering on the promise of opportunity for each of our students.” Teacher development in this critical area should be a priority for every school leader. 

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