

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family engagement, a fundamental element of school improvement efforts (Bryk, 2010), is a broad term which is often used to describe an array of behaviors and practices that can be supported in the school environment, such as parent/guardian-child and parent/guardian-teacher communication practices, parent/guardian roles and responsibilities in the home environment, and parent/guardian roles and responsibilities in the school environment (Sheldon, 2011).

There exist three categories, or levels of quality and focus when it comes to school-based family engagement efforts (Paredes, 2011): random, compliance-driven, and student-centered. *Random* efforts are offered in piecemeal, without a systematic, intentional goal or design. These efforts are typically organized around activities that attract parents to the campus. They offer families and other members of the school community an opportunity to socialize, meet the school staff, and they may include educational information that is broad in scope. Some examples of random family engagement efforts include: sporting events, open house, and freshman orientation. While these efforts provide important opportunities for families to grow familiar with the school, they are rarely implicated in improvement in student achievement over the long-term.

Like random efforts, *compliance-driven* activities are broad in scope and aim to attract families to the campus, but they also serve to meet the compliance demands and responsibilities required by funding sources and by state and local education agencies. Many parent involvement programs developed by schools and community organizations fall into this category, lacking systematic considerations in their design and implementation—weaknesses that, ultimately, make them ineffective for improving student outcomes (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002).

Student-Centered family engagement, the third and most effective category, is strategic, research-based, and data-driven, demonstrating a deep understanding of the community the school serves. Within this category, the school's efforts to engage families aim to focus on individual students' learning and performance needs. In high functioning schools, the relationship between family engagement and students' high school achievement and postsecondary attainment is fully recognized by teachers and school leaders. For example, Clinton, Hattie, & Dixon (2007) evaluated the use of a trained liaison to help parents navigate the school, including providing instruction on strategies for assisting their students with schoolwork at home, and providing them strategies for communi-

What Works Briefs summarize state-of-the-art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system-wide issues. All *What Works Briefs* are organized into three sections: Quick Wins: What Teachers & Adults Can Do Right Now; Universal Supports: School-wide Policies, Practices, & Programs; and, finally, Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for At-Risk Youth.

cating with teachers. The strategy was associated with improvements in students' academic engagement and reading achievement. Other innovative student-centered programs, such as the Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program at Arizona State University (<http://promise.asu.edu/hmdp>), aim to include family members in meaningful and systematic events and activities intended to connect them to valuable community resources and advance their children toward college readiness.

While the broad construct of family engagement has been found to have a moderate but meaningful effect on student academic achievement, some family engagement behaviors have stronger effects on academic achievement than others, with specific differences occurring across ethnic groups (Hong & Ho, 2005; Jeynes, 2007; Singh et al., 1995). For example, parents' high expectations for their students' academic performance is a stronger predictor of academic achievement, both in the short-term and over a five-year period, than are parents' supervision-related behaviors of their children at home (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hong & Ho, 2005). Second to high expectations messages' effect on student academic

achievement are family-participation-at-school behaviors, such as attending on-campus meetings and events and communicating consistently with important school personnel, such as teachers and counselors (Hong & Ho, 2005). Family engagement has also been linked to other important outcomes, such as school attendance (Sheldon, 2007) and school completion (for review, see Rumberger, 2011).

The evidence suggests that the predominant belief that adolescent students navigate home, school, and community environments as separate spheres of influence must shift to embrace a collaborative approach, wherein resources and high expectations for youth are shared across settings (Epstein, 2001). Toward this end, it is imperative that schools adopt a strong, reliable, and systematic means of communication and collaboration with families that make expectations clear and roles explicitly defined (Henderson, & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jeynes, 2010). Following are practical ideas for improving family engagement in high school settings.

QUICK WINS: WHAT TEACHERS & OTHER ADULTS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Quick Wins are strategies and activities that school adults can implement on their own, without coordinating across other individuals, school departments, or community agencies. Quick Wins are meant to provide school adults with inspiring ideas for immediate

action. Of course, in order to optimize their positive effects, student-centered family engagement efforts must be fully supported by the principal and implemented systematically across the school.

Plan thoughtfully

- » Help families and students coauthor yearly study plans.
- » Provide regular office hours so that families can have access to your support.
- » Be sensitive to the variability in parents' personal educational experiences.
- » Provide flexibility in days and times for class events and meetings in order to accommodate family members that work non-traditional shifts.
- » Provide flexible opportunities for family members to volunteer in the classroom.
- » If the family is non-English speaking, make advance plans to have a translator available at meetings and events.

Be a mentor

- » Family-focused mentoring
 - Clearly explain to families the meaning of common school acronyms and jargon, such as Grade Point Average (GPA), Advanced Placement (AP), and SAT®.
 - Help break down for families what may be complex school credit requirements, graduation requirements, and assessments.
 - Ask family members about their aspirations for their students.
 - Give families ideas for out-of-school activities and resources.
- » Student-focused mentoring
 - Develop meaningful relationships with students (For more specific ideas, review *What Works Brief #1: Caring Relationships and High Expectations*).
 - Make time to ask about students' backgrounds and home life.
 - Visit students' homes.
 - Have lunch with students on a regular basis.
 - Mentor students with non-traditional home experiences, including homeless youth or youth living in foster homes.
 - Encourage students to participate in school teams and clubs.
 - Connect students to adult coaches and advisors for the activities that interest them.
 - Be an advisor to a student-led group.

Encourage open communication

- » Find routes of communication that work best for different families (e.g., in person, e-mail, or phone/text message).
- » Personally invite families to meet with you.
- » Provide families with your contact information, including email address, so they can ask questions.
- » Regularly welcome family members into the school and classrooms. Provide creative opportunities to talk with the principal (e.g., coffee with the principal) and teachers (e.g., monthly family visits).
- » Communicate with families about the special talents of their students.
- » Share good news about students promptly and through the family members' preferred method of communication.
- » Help families meet other families and create social networks.
- » Avoid correcting errors in family members written or spoken language.
- » When speaking with family members, use their words when reflecting back what you've heard them say.

Model high expectations and encourage self-determination and self-reflection

- » Ask families and students to visit local colleges and universities.
- » Set up tours and visits for families and students to local colleges and universities.
- » Give students opportunities to revise their assignments.
- » Give students opportunities to retake tests.
- » Talk with students and families about college readiness.
- » Share scholarship opportunities with students and families.
- » Find internship and volunteer opportunities for students who demonstrate readiness.
- » Invite a variety of professionals to speak to students and families about their fields of work.
- » Help students prepare to participate in Advanced Placement courses.
- » Reward students with encouraging statements and actions (e.g., special lunch time meetings or calls to parents) over external rewards (e.g., gift cards).

UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: SCHOOL-WIDE POLICIES, PRACTICES & PROGRAMS

Universal supports for student-centered family engagement target the whole student population, rather than any single at-risk group or individual. Because they generally require more planning across

people, programs, or communities, universal supports for family engagement may take longer to implement than Quick Wins.

Partner and communicate clearly

- » Provide teacher-led workshops for families, particularly those that aim to build parents' capacity and confidence to support learning at home.
- » Enlist parents to disseminate school-related information within their own communities.
- » Enlist school community members as home-school liaisons.
- » Enlist community partners to assist in reaching school improvement goals.
- » Partner with local community colleges and universities and work together to provide families with information, training, and resources.
- » Provide flexible and frequent opportunities for family members to volunteer at school.
- » Regularly communicate school news and parent participation opportunities through a variety of media, including newsletters, emails, and/or phone calls.

Use data

- » Collect, analyze, and disseminate feedback data from family members. Consider using the California School Parent Survey (CSPS; csps.wested.org) to engage family members in a meaningful conversation about the school's improvement efforts.
- » Compare parent data to data from other stakeholder groups (e.g., staff and students).
- » Disseminate school-wide and individual student performance data on a regular basis.
- » Provide forums for parents to ask questions or provide recommendations related to data (e.g., parent focus groups).
- » Have teachers and parents partner to develop learning goals for their students.

Reshape district policies to include and welcome families

- » Establish a district policy for family engagement that explicitly includes high schools.
- » Identify district personnel responsible for helping high schools build comprehensive family outreach programs.
- » Reconsider elements of the school environment that may discourage parent participation, such as locked gates.
- » Work with front office staff to encourage a welcoming approach to family members.
- » Provide professional development on the dimensions of family engagement, including workshops designed to address issues related to differences in culture, class, or language.
- » Include family engagement in high school principals' and teachers' performance evaluations.
- » Identify funds and resources needed to implement effective family engagement practices.

Plan systematically

- » Hire or recruit a family liaison to help parents navigate the school environment.
- » Implement a Family Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) to oversee efforts, including writing and implementing action plans.
- » Align family engagement efforts to School Improvement Plan.
- » Systematically link home and school curricula.
- » Provide professional development for teachers and staff to effectively engage families.
- » Personally invite families to come to the school for regularly occurring planning and feedback opportunities.
- » Clearly define and demonstrate grade-level academic expectations.

TARGETED SUPPORTS: INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Targeted supports include those resources that are provided to meet the specific needs of high-risk students and their families. The foci of targeted supports for family engagement range from improving teacher-parent communication patterns in the school setting to improving parent-child interactions in the home setting. While the former programs are school-based, the latter programs may be offered by trained psychologists, counselors, or therapists in the school setting or in community agencies.

Following are samples of evidence-based programs and therapeutic practices aimed at improving the dimensions of family engagement:

ACADEMIC PARENT-TEACHER TEAMS (APTT) model is an intentional, systematic means of increasing student academic learning and performance by enhancing the quality and quantity of parent-teacher communication and interaction. APTT was designed using the lessons learned from both research and practice, and is intended to give purpose, structure, and direction to school leaders and teachers on how to engage families in student learning. By providing parent education and creating a two-way system of regular communication, teachers can ensure that parents understand their child's grade level learning goals, and that parents are engaged in helping their children meet or exceed appropriate standards.

Research confirms that when families have high expectations for scholastic attainment, students do better in school, attend school more regularly, and develop a healthy attitude toward learning and achieving. By introducing high school teachers and families to a more structured and rigorous system of information sharing,

based on student performance data, agreements around high-expectations get established. In turn, these reciprocal agreements reinforce support of student learning at home and focus available resources at school to meet the specific needs of each student. www.wested.org/cs/we/view/serv/161

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PROGRAM (SFP)  is a family skills training program designed to increase resilience and reduce risk factors for behavioral, emotional, academic, and social problems in young adolescent children and their parents/caregivers. The SFP comprises three life-skills courses delivered in seven weekly, 2-hour sessions. The Parenting Skills sessions are designed to help parents learn to increase desired behaviors in children by using attention and rewards, clear communication, effective discipline, substance use education, problem solving, and limit setting. The Children's Life Skills sessions are designed to help children learn effective communication, understand their feelings, improve social and problem-solving skills, resist peer pressure, understand the consequences of substance use, and comply with parental rules. In the Family Life Skills sessions, families engage in structured family activities, practice therapeutic child play, conduct family meetings, learn communication skills, practice effective discipline, reinforce positive behaviors in each other, and plan family activities together. Participation in ongoing family support groups and booster sessions is encouraged to increase generalization and the use of skills learned. Check it out from the California Healthy Kids Resource Center: Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14 (#1591) californiahealthykids.org/product/M1591 www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org



ADDITIONAL HIGH-QUALITY RESOURCES

www.californiahealthykids.org

The California Healthy Kids Center website (www.californiahealthykids.org) maintains a lending library with a number of high-quality parent engagement-related materials, including: *176 WAYS TO INVOLVE PARENTS: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES*.  This four-part book offers strategies to engage families and the community in partnering with their children's schools. This resource offers 176 ideas to increase and promote parental and family involvement and additional resources are offered through a list of website links. Strategies include volunteer recruitment and development, effective communication, developing community relationships, fundraising development, and capacity building. Check it out from the California Healthy Kids Resource Center: *176 Ways to Involve Parents: Practical Strategies for Partnering with Families* (#8477) californiahealthykids.org/product/8477

www.families-schools.org

The Families-Schools organization website (www.families-schools.org) provides a number of family engagement resources, including the recently published *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement*. The Handbook outlines the research support for a number of family engagement activities intended to support everything from homework completion to career readiness. The Handbook was produced by the Academic Development Institute and Center on Innovation and Improvement with funding and support from the Elementary and Secondary Education Office of the U. S. Department of Education (ED).

www.hfrp.org

The Harvard Family Research Project (www.hfrp.org) is replete with family engagement-related resources, including *The Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit: Planning and implementing an initiative to support the pathway to graduate for at-risk students*.

www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm

The Center for School, Family, and Community Partnerships, which is connected with the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, is also an excellent resource. Find it at www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm



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