

For Educators – Part 1: Building Effective Family-School Partnerships

Families and educators as partners

The education of children is a responsibility shared by families and educators. When you work with families as equal partners, students are more likely to succeed. Effective school-family partnerships are characterized by mutual respect, equality, and open, two-way communication. A critical role for teachers in this partnership is to initiate and maintain relationships with families.

Why is it important to develop and maintain partnerships with families?

Answer #1 - Families who feel valued and respected by educators are more likely to:

- Feel more confident in assisting and supporting classroom and at-home learning
- Encourage positive attitudes and behaviors in their students
- Help their students meet classroom expectations
- Turn to school staff as a resource for solving problems
- View educators in a positive light
- Develop positive attitudes about post-secondary education

Answer #2 - Educators who establish and maintain positive relationships with families are more likely to:

- Observe higher student achievement and improved classroom behavior
- Be viewed more positively by families
- Develop a positive presence and influence in the community
- Gain support or resources from families and their communities
- Experience higher morale

Family engagement and family-school partnerships will be different for each family. One single approach will not work for all families. The success of these partnerships often depends on the educator's ability to understand the social, cultural, and economic issues that affect each family's engagement. Educators can then use the best approaches with each family to build on what is already in place.

For Educators – Part 2: Building Effective Family-School Partnerships

Communication that builds partnerships

Make it clear, appropriate, and respectful

The foundation of successful family-school partnerships is clear, appropriate, and respectful communication. Use plain language and make requests easy to understand and fulfill. Appropriate messages focus on student growth in academics and social skills.

The tone of messages is just as important as the content. All communication should have a tone of mutual respect between the school and the family, shared responsibility for student success, and mutual goals for students. It is helpful to find out family preferences for communication and use strategies that develop trust and value family input.

- Encourage families to ask questions and let them know how and when they can best reach you.
- Ask families questions to clarify what they tell you.
- Be willing to discuss and understand different viewpoints and be open to compromise.
- Make follow-up phone calls when necessary to be sure that families receive information.

→ **Never assume**

Don't assume that families understand educational jargon. Summarize statements and wait for confirmation.

→ **Always remember**

Understanding information does not mean everyone agrees.

→ **Go easy on yourself**

Lack of reciprocation from a family does not mean that your efforts are unappreciated or not working.

Demonstrate authenticity and empathy

Families know when educators are sincere and have a genuine interest. Encourage conversations that allow them to share thoughts, information, and suggestions. Let families know that you are interested in their child's success. Communication should focus on strengths rather than problems or deficits. Some ways to do this include:

- Look for informal ways to communicate with families so they can become acquainted with you
- Provide positive phone calls, text messages, or written notes to families
- Respond promptly to communication from families
- Act on agreed plans/solutions in a timely manner; keep your commitments
- Send welcome letters to all new students

Welcome letters that build partnerships

Consider adding these items to your welcome letters.

- **A family questionnaire for them to return to you. Questions to include:**
 - When is the best time to connect with you?
 - Do you prefer email, written notes, text, phone calls, WhatsApp, or in-person meetings?
 - Do you have any accessibility needs?
 - What is important to know about your family?

- **A list of the school resources available for students and families such as:**
 - Parent/family groups
 - Scholarship resources for field trips and extracurricular activities
 - Tutoring and Mentoring programs
 - Interpreter and translation services

Culture in communication

Educators who develop awareness and competency in cross-cultural communication create a climate of belonging within the school. This helps students, families, and community members to feel welcome at the school, and it enhances partnerships.

Understanding styles and norms

Cultures use varied styles of communication. Educators can learn about diverse cultural conversation norms for: greeting, loudness, speed of delivery, silence, attentiveness, personal space, taking turns, time to respond to another's point, how to enter a conversation that is already in progress, and how to leave one.

For Educators – Part 3: Building Effective Family-School Partnerships

Navigating potential challenges.....

Possible barriers in communication

It is vital that both families and educators are aware of barriers that can hinder effective communication and partnerships. Barriers to look for include:

- Unequal relationships—using instructional or directive styles of communication, attempting to exert power, not viewing or valuing families as equal partners
- Miscommunication—language barriers, jargon, unclear or conflicting information, too much information at once, assuming knowledge, not specifying next steps (to take or to watch for)
- Differing styles of responding to conflict
 - ➔ Assertive verbal responses interpreted as threatening and aggressive
 - ➔ Passive responses viewed as agreement or compliance
 - ➔ Families who include an advocate or administrator in conflict resolution are seen as manipulative and untrustworthy
- Differing agendas—issues approached from a “right” or “wrong” perspective, placing blame rather than looking for solutions, the well-being of the student is secondary
- Cultural factors—educational values and priorities may vary by culture
- Appropriate resources are not available (translations, interpreters, cultural liaison)
- Lack of pro-active communication—families benefit from getting information about their child’s progress often and early

Cultural beliefs and experiences

A family’s cultural beliefs can influence their expectations and priorities for their student’s education. A family’s negative past experiences with education (both personally and within their culture) can create unique concerns. An educator may make assumptions and hold beliefs that misinterpret cultural differences as academic performance and behavioral issues. All of these can be potential barriers to building strong partnerships.

Educators can use these strategies to overcome these barriers:

- Find out the family’s views about what they want their student to learn
- Explore how the family views the roles of educators, students, family members, and community elders in their child’s education
- Reflect on and challenge any personal (or institutional) assumptions and beliefs about a specific culture
- Be aware of words, images, and situations that reinforce cultural, racial, and ethnic stereotypes

Family-teacher problem solving

Communicating concerns about student progress is most effective when approached from a strength-based and problem-solving perspective. It is important to contact families as soon as a concern arises and to state your concern in a clear and respectful manner. Cite specific behaviors, using neutral terms and avoiding labels. Collaborate with the family to brainstorm solutions. Identify and use the student’s and family’s strengths to find a solution and implement a plan of action. When teachers work with a family in this manner, “the concern” can become an opportunity to develop mutual respect and build a stronger partnership.