



Supporting Family
Engagement To
Promote Literacy

Leadership

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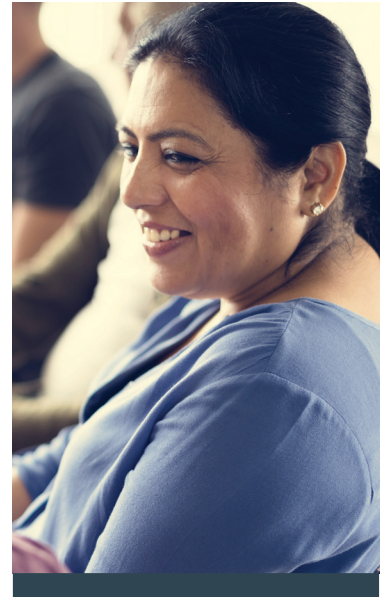
Leadership Strategy 2

Develop a Communication Network Between School Staff
and Families To Enhance All Children's Literacy Achievement



Introduction

When families and schools partner to support children’s literacy achievement, children have more opportunities to learn and practice essential literacy skills and grow as readers and writers. A dedicated school leader can initiate the collaboration needed to establish and maintain an effective literacy partnership between families and school (or family-school literacy partnership).¹ Recognizing the importance of family-school partnerships, many state and federal educational initiatives require schools to include family engagement as part of school improvement plans. In Michigan, family engagement is a priority component for Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) school improvement plans, as well as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).² This priority, as well as guidance from *MiFamily: Michigan’s Family Engagement Framework*³ and the Michigan Department of Education’s endorsement of *Literacy Leadership: Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy*,⁴ demonstrate the state’s commitment to family-school literacy partnerships. To use family-school literacy partnerships to increase children’s literacy success, communication between families and school should be two-way. The first principle of Michigan’s Family Engagement Framework states that “Relationships are the cornerstone of family engagement, including positive communication with all families.” Therefore, this second leadership strategy brief focuses on how school leaders can develop a communication network between school staff and families to enhance children’s literacy achievement. The evidence supporting these practices is informed by rigorous research conducted in schools.



Communication Network

How can school leaders develop a communication network between school staff and families?

When school staff members foster relationships with families built on mutual respect and trust, both groups will be more likely to communicate meaningfully with each other about literacy learning at school and home. It is important to think about communication as a system versus a series of isolated actions. Because families have different personal situations, the communication system must anticipate and respond effectively to families' needs to enable them to partner successfully with school staff in support of their children's literacy development. By strengthening the communication system between school and families, school leaders can better engage with families to meet their needs. To develop a communication network that supports family-school literacy partnerships, consider the following strategies.

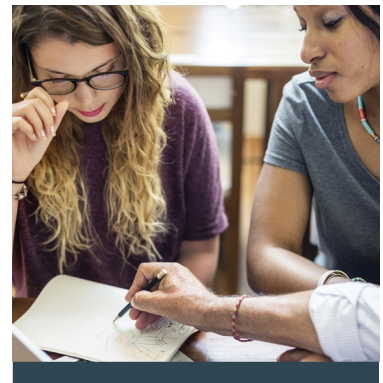
Seek Diverse Perspectives: To gain diverse perspectives on information and feedback about literacy learning needs, priorities, and supports:

- Convene school-based teams, committees, councils, and other groups that intentionally include families representing the diversity within the school community; and
- Recruit families who don't typically participate in school activities but possess important perspectives in the community to strengthen school strategies for family-school literacy partnerships.

Meet Individually and Jointly With School Staff and Families:

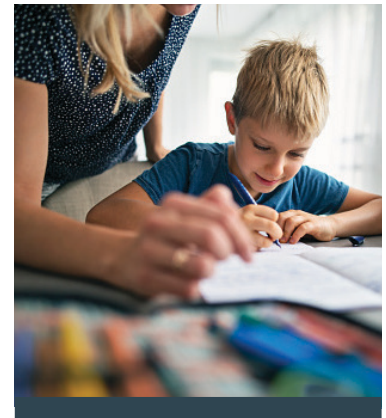
To create more opportunities to talk about family-school partnerships:

- Have open discussions with school staff and diverse families to better understand how to build a thriving literacy partnership; and
- Establish family-only groups so families can discuss sensitive issues in a supportive environment and obtain peer feedback and resources for supporting children's literacy development both at school and at home.⁵



Communicate Bidirectionally: The most meaningful communication between school staff and families is bidirectional, meaning there is both an expectation of a response and a way to receive it, as well as an invitation for further communication.⁶ The constant flow of information between school staff and families provides a critical support system for children’s literacy and social-emotional development.⁷ To facilitate bidirectional communication between school staff and families:

- Provide regular opportunities for staff and families to interact with and learn about each other and from one another; to listen and respond to each other’s questions, concerns, and wishes about literacy learning; and to share outside resources that connect families with literacy materials and supports.
- Empower families to provide feedback about and influence the school literacy environment and to strengthen the home literacy environment, regardless of family circumstance. For example, enable families to give and receive feedback through surveys, focus groups, email, text, phone calls, newsletters, and the school’s learning management system, as well as school events, organizations, and teams.
- Ask families what school staff can do to support the literacy partnership, and act upon the information received.
- Share information with families about what their children are learning in literacy instruction and what progress their children are making.
- Acknowledge what families are already doing to support their child’s literacy learning.
- Recommend specific ways families can support literacy learning at home and request feedback on their efforts.⁵
- Ensure that messages to families are linguistically and culturally appropriate, personalized, and linked to literacy learning. Promote positive interactions, such as celebrations of successes.⁸



Use Various Channels, Tactics, and Language: When leaders provide avenues for timely and ongoing communication, school staff and families can share crucial insights about a child’s literacy strengths and needs to support further development and achievement. To promote the use of various channels, tactics, and language between school staff and families:

- Identify the best ways (e.g., social media, emails, phone calls, text) and times of day to reach families.
- Provide continuous communication with families throughout the school year, meeting families at times that are convenient to them (e.g., evenings and weekends) and in community locations, if necessary.
- Conduct home visits. When school staff members visit a home to get to know families better, they go to a location where the family feels comfortable. Home visits can give school staff and families the insight they need to partner successfully for children’s literacy learning.
- Adapt information and materials for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Seek translators to aid in bilingual communication.
- Demonstrate stimulating ways of reading aloud at family events, and model the appropriate scaffolding and support to give children during literacy activities.⁵

Whatever the channels and tactics used for communication, the goal is to communicate often with families to establish positive, productive relationships to support children’s literacy learning.⁶



Resources

- The Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, General Education Leadership Network, Michigan Early Literacy Task Force developed [*Literacy Leadership: Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy*](#). It is an excellent resource for school leaders as they develop effective organizational practices in literacy leadership.
- This [information sheet](#) from the Education Endowment Foundation summarizes evidence-based recommendations for working with families to support children’s learning.
- REL-Pacific's [infographic](#) explains how to include student voice and family voice in classroom learning.
- This [information sheet](#) from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations provides helpful suggestions for communicating with early childhood families and is applicable to other ages, too.
- This [information sheet](#) from the Education Endowment Foundation provides evidence-based guidance for schools on communicating effectively with families.
- [Colorín Colorado](#), a bilingual site, provides strategies for communicating important information with English language learner families.

Endnotes

- ¹ Auerbach, S. (2011). Conceptualizing leadership for authentic partnerships: A continuum to inspire practice. In S. Auerbach (Ed.), *School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships: Research perspectives for transforming practice* (pp. 29–52). Routledge.
- ² Michigan Department of Education. (2020). *Michigan Department of Education (MDE) multi-tiered system of supports practice profile*. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MDE_MTSS_Practice_Profile_5.0July2020_ADA_700696_7.pdf
- ³ Michigan Department of Education. (2019). *MiFamily: Michigan’s family engagement framework*. <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-5233---,00.html>
- ⁴ Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force. (2016). *Literacy leadership: Essential school-wide and center-wide practices in literacy*. <https://literacyessentials.org/downloads/gelndocs/schoolandcenterlevelessentials.pdf>
- ⁵ Wilkins, J., & Terlitsky, A. B. (2016). Strategies for developing literacy-focused family-school partnerships. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 51(4), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451215589181>
- ⁶ Elish-Piper, L. (2015–2016, winter). Parent involvement in reading: Best practices for family engagement. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 44(1), 43–48.
- ⁷ Epstein, J. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (1st ed.). Westview Press.
- ⁷ Education Endowment Foundation. (2019). *Working with parents to support children’s learning: Guidance report*. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/ParentalEngagement/EEF_Parental_Engagement_Guidance_Report.pdf

Acknowledgments

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