



# Strategies for Strong Parent and Family Engagement

## Part I – Understanding Different Cultures

### Overview

#### What is culture?<sup>41</sup>

- Culture is “not necessarily an ethnic label but ...an internal value system.”
- “One definition of culture emphasizes its arts, artifacts, traditional dress, culinary practices, rituals and ceremonies and norms of social interaction. It is focused on material elements and observable patterns of behavior and customs.”
- “Another approach to defining culture focuses on the ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of groups ”
- A third definition incorporates both, recognizing that they are intrinsically related. It emphasizes the ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and ways of acquiring knowledge and passing it on.

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#### Why This Matters for Schools

It is important to recognize, understand, and respect students’ unique cultures:

“Students do not enter school as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Rather, they bring with them rich and varied language and cultural experiences. All too often, these experiences remain unrecognized or undervalued as dominant mainstream discourses suppress students’ cultural capital.”<sup>42</sup>

Successful learning depends greatly on our ability to accept, listen to, and embrace cultural diversity. This will enable us to celebrate our unique strengths and contributions to our school community composed of families, children and youth, educators and administrators.

“Culture encompasses everything around us; it is a part of every environment. Often we forget that children and youth bring their very own culture from home into school, and as a result they may struggle with trying to make it all fit.”<sup>43</sup>

When learning about different cultural groups, it is important to note that the perspective from which individuals of different cultures conduct themselves has an impact on their behavior within and outside of social groups. For example the

concepts of individual-focused vs group/community focused has an impact on how students and/or parents may behave within and toward a school or district.

While individualistic (individual-focused) cultures stress self-reliance and personal achievement, collectivistic (family/group) cultures focus more on developing and sustaining a stable, mutually dependent group. These key differences help form the ideas of people's rights and responsibilities, what roles they may take within societies, ways of communicating, and ideas of how to raise and educate children.<sup>44</sup>

Many mainstream parents consider social and economic independence a goal for their children. Conversely, collectivist cultures encourage their children to participate as responsible, contributing members of the family unit. Self-worth and self-esteem are not determined solely by individual achievements, but rather are derived from the self-sacrificing acts that create social links and bonds.

Below is a chart that compares and contrasts individual-focused vs family/group focused cultures:

### Individual Focus and Family/Group Focus<sup>45</sup>

Individual (Representative of prevailing U.S. culture)	Family/Group (Representative of many immigrant cultures)
Fostering independence and individual achievement	Fostering interdependence and group success
Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, and personal choice	Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/ elders, group consensus
Associated with egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles (e.g., upward mobility)	Associated with stable, hierarchical roles (dependent on gender, family background, age)
Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life	Understanding the physical world in the context of its meaning for human life
Associated with private property, individual ownership	Associated with shared property, group ownership

## Strategies – Understanding different cultures

### Avoid “one size fits all mentality.”

Cultural frameworks, such as the individualist and collectivist framework developed by the Bridging Cultures project, are not intended as one-size-fits-all guide to improving cultural interactions.

### Use as a learning tool to stimulate thinking.

Instead, this framework should be used to “stimulate thinking about how to meet the challenges of education in ...a society made up of people from many different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds.”

### Consider the “Whys”.

In your interactions with students and parents, utilize the cultural framework to consider the cultural influences that might be inspiring their actions. Likewise, use the framework to find culturally appropriate ways to approach and respond to your school’s students and families.



### Cultural Tensions<sup>46</sup>

The individualism and collectivism framework can be used to illustrate the conflicts faced by children, specifically children of immigrant families, as they struggle between the values and expectations of their native or home culture and those of “mainstream” society. These conflicts can interrupt the child’s education process as well as hinder communication between the child’s school and family.

Parents and teachers (the latter representing the mainstream culture) may observe the same behaviors in children but interpret them differently, because they are viewing them through very different cultural lenses. When the individualistic teacher says the child is “able to work well independently,” the collectivist parent may hear the teacher saying the child is too separated from the group.” When the collectivist parent asks more than once about his child’s social development, the individualistic teacher may hear the parent saying “I don’t really care whether she does well in school.”<sup>47</sup>

These tensions can lead to common home-school conflicts, in which the beliefs associated with individualism and collectivism clash.<sup>48</sup>

INDIVIDUAL	FAMILY/GROUP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child as individual</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Praise (for positive esteem)</li> <li>• Cognitive skills</li> <li>• Oral expression</li> <li>• Parents' role is to teach</li> <li>• Personal property</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child as part of the group</li> <li>• Helpfulness</li> <li>• Criticize (for normative behavior)</li> <li>• Social skills</li> <li>• Listening to authority</li> <li>• Teacher's role is to educate</li> <li>• Sharing</li> </ul>

### Strategy:

Learn about their culture and their views on parent involvement.<sup>49</sup>

### Action Steps:

1. Establish a rapport and comfort level with your diverse and ethnic parents
2. Ask them to please describe what schools are like in the country from which they came.
3. What are the big differences between schools in the country from which you came and schools in Michigan?
4. How do parents help the teachers? What is their role in helping a child learn? How can the schools help your children be successful? What do you want or expect from the schools?
5. What kind of information do you want from the teacher? The school? What would help you?
6. What is the best way to give you this information? To whom should we give the information?
7. What do you do to help your child do well in school? What would you like to do? How can parents and teachers work together to help the child do well in school?
8. What would help the teacher/school better understand your child and your family?
9. What can the teacher/school do to help you feel more comfortable contacting us? Working with your child at home? Coming to school?

### Additional Information & Resources

1. *Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What can Schools do to Foster Family-School Connections?*  
<http://cretscmhd.psych.ucla.edu/announcements/research%20and%20reports/rb5-diverse.pdf>
2. National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME). <http://nameorg.org/>
3. The Equity Alliance at ASU <http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/>

[The Parent Engagement Committee](#)  
[Why Parent Engagement is Important](#)  
[Resources for Parents](#)  
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[About the Toolkit](#)  
[Legal Requirements](#)  
[Resources for Schools and Districts](#)  
[Reference](#)

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# Strategies for Strong Parent and Family Engagement

## Part II - Overcoming The Barriers

### Overview

Parent engagement perspectives have shifted from surface participation by parents (classroom party volunteer, field trip chaperone, etc.) to a more family engagement perspective (parents involved with the design, implementation and evaluation of programs). This shift has uncovered challenges and barriers encountered by many schools as they attempt to increase the level and type of parental engagement.



Effort to increase the level of parent engagement challenges schools to comply and complement the United States Department of Education (USDE) legislative requirements and guidance regarding parent engagement.

The following section provides a look at possible barriers and offers a variety of proven strategies as possible solutions to address such issues and challenges.

### Communication Barriers

#### Reason for Contact

**Barrier:** Many parents express frustration regarding the reason their child's school contacts them, noting that they mainly receive negative communication. While they appreciate being notified of their child's disciplinary referrals, academic problems, etc., these parents desire positive interaction as well.<sup>50</sup>

**Strategy:** Positive culturally-sensitive communication.

**Action Step:** Contact parents with good news about their child, but consider cultural implications first.

**TIP:** A teacher's positive expression about a child speaking up in class may be confusing to a family whose culture encourages respect for authority; they may feel the child is being disrespectful by speaking out. Conversely, a family with a cultural emphasis on interdependence and group success might appreciate learning how their child is contributing to the class's overall success, rather than hearing about his or her individual achievements. Continue notifying parents of any problems their child is having at school.<sup>51</sup>

**TIP:** A 2008 survey of high-school parents noted that 61% of parents would like prompt notification if their child is having academic problems, skipping school, or cutting classes.<sup>52</sup>

### Method of Communication

**Barrier:** In a study of Latino parents, many expressed frustration that their child's school does not communicate with them. Some parents noted that they receive regular mailings or flyers sent home with their child, but they discount this as communication because it is so impersonal. Moreover, the papers are generally in English and take much time and effort to translate. The Latino parents reported that they would prefer direct contact from their child's school.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, a study of American Indian parent involvement in education discovered a desire for more personal communications – one parent noted “they more or less just send a flyer home and expect you to be there.”<sup>54</sup>

**Strategy:** Direct Contact

**Action Step:** Teachers and school administrators should contact parents directly, through phone calls, emails, and home visits.<sup>55</sup> Attending local events can also help illustrate that school staff is truly engaged and interested in the community. This can foster a spirit of reciprocity and encourage parent involvement in the school.<sup>56</sup>

**Strategy:** Parent Ambassadors

**Action Step:** Encourage experienced or comfortable parents to invite other families to school events and to share information on how to work with the school, teachers, and the education system.<sup>57</sup>

### Lack of English Proficiency

**Barrier:** Poor English skills can often inhibit communications when working with the parents of immigrant, migrant, and refugee students. Often, the student speaks better English than his or her parent and serves as a translator between school staff and the family; however, this limits the confidentiality of parent-teacher interactions and belittles the parent.<sup>58</sup>

**Strategy:** Translation Services<sup>59</sup>

**Action Step:**

1. Allow the school to become a clearinghouse for community organizations and materials that serve bilingual clientele.