

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.¹²

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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

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.⁵²

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.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴

Strategy: Direct Contact

Action Step: Teachers and school administrators should contact parents directly, through phone calls, emails, and home visits.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

Strategy: Translation Services⁵⁹

Action Step:

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

2. Provide translation services at all school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and other parent engagement opportunities.
3. Provide a translated version of handouts, newsletters, and other information in the parents' native language.

Strategy: Access to ESL Classes

Action Step: Connect parents with ESL/Adult Education classes in the community or host these courses at the school as a part of other events. If possible, offer school transportation and childcare to further enable parents' attendance.⁶⁰

Strategy: Bilingual School Staff

Action Steps:

1. Hire bilingual school staff at all levels: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, etc.
2. Provide opportunities for educators, administrators and other school staff to learn or enhance their knowledge of the languages spoken in the community. Learning even a few phrases in a family's native language will demonstrate respect and contribute to an improved relationship with better communication.

Low Literacy Level in Native Language

Barrier: Parents may not be fully literate in their native language, further contributing to communication difficulties.

Strategy: Audio Transcriptions

Action Step: Schools should also provide parents with audio translations of important information. This information can be made accessible via a telephone hotline, the school's website, or regular emails.⁶¹

Strategy: Active Outreach

Action Step: Engage parents through direct, personal contact such as phone calls and home visits. This can be especially successful when done with culturally appropriate strategies and bilingual, bicultural staff who can eliminate barriers.⁶²

Strategy: Multi-lingual telephone homework line

Action Step: Provide a multi-lingual telephone line for non-English speaking or ESL parents to actively assist their child with difficult homework questions and engage in their child's learning

process. This phone line can be utilized to provide information about school procedures and standards through recorded messages in the languages of the local community.⁶³

Lack of Technology

Barrier: Teachers and school staff may assume parents have access to internet and email, but this is not always the case. In one study of American Indian families, their ability to monitor their child's progress through the school's online system and email his or her teacher was greatly limited as few parents had Internet access. Some parents did not even have telephones, further highlighting the need for alternative methods of school-parent communication.⁶⁵

Strategy: Personal Contact

Action Step: In the same study, the parents emphasized that regardless of their technological limitations, they prefer to have face-to-face contact with their child's teacher. Other reports echo the value of interpersonal communication with parents in promoting family involvement and suggest home visits as a method for establishing relationships.

District's Use of Technology

Barrier: It is still important to recognize the prominent role that technology plays in our society today. In fact, according to research from "Speak Up 2007," an annual national research project facilitated by Project Tomorrow that polls students, parents and school leaders, 91% of parents surveyed now regularly use technology to email their child's teacher. Moreover, 58% of parents say they believe technology accelerates learning opportunities for children.

Strategy: Education Technology and Social Media

Action Step: Offer interactive, informative, and easy-to-use features on the school district's website. These might include contact information for teachers and staff, an up-to-date and complete calendar, a regularly updated grade tracking application, and a forum for interaction between parents. Use the district website to seek parent input on major school decisions and investments, such as curriculum changes or construction projects. Providing parents with web-based information will enable them to instantly and easily learn more about their child's education.

Logistical Barriers

Unable to Attend Meetings

Barrier: Parents often have numerous other obligations that conflict with school programs or meetings, including work, family and community events.

Strategy: Meeting Time

Action Step: Vary the time and day of school events to minimize scheduling conflicts for all parents and encourage staff to be flexible and persistent in seeking parent involvement. For example, host multiple sessions of parent-teacher conferences that include after school and evening hours as well as a weekend session. Contact parents who are still unable to attend to schedule personal meetings or conference by phone or email.⁶⁶

Strategy: Offer Transportation and Child Care Services

Action Step: Provide parents with a method of transportation to get to the event, and provide childcare services to ensure that the parents' other children are taken care of and won't be disruptive. These simple accommodations can significantly increase parent participation in events such as parent-teacher conferences, committee meetings, and educational workshops.⁶⁷

Strategy: Host Meetings at Community Sites

Action Step: Parents who are new to the American education system may view the school as an authority or find it intimidating. To involve these families, host meetings in the community – where they are already comfortable – at locations such as public libraries, recreation centers, and parks.⁶⁸

Lack of Resources and Understanding to Provide Home Learning Opportunities

Barrier: Some families may lack the resources, such as books or calculators, to provide home learning opportunities for their children. Other parents who had a poor educational experience may believe they are inadequately prepared to help their child learn.

Strategy: Take Home Learning Packs

Action Step: Schools should help parents build a home environment that supports learning by providing them with the educational

resources their children will need to actively learn and complete homework assignments. School staff can also provide parents with information, in the appropriate language, on the importance of providing a quiet space and regular time for their children to complete homework and the value of reading to their children.⁶⁹

Additional Information & Resources

1. *Connecting Your K-12 Communities: An Imperative for District, School and Student Success* <http://cosn.org/>
2. *Parents Don't Do Nothing: Reconceptualizing Parental Null Actions as Agency* <http://www.adi.org/journal/fw10/SchneeBoseFall2010.pdf>
3. *One Dream, Two Realities. Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools* <http://www.civicenterprises.net/home>