

# ABCs of Family Engagement: Key Considerations for Building Relationships with Families and Strengthening Family Engagement Practices



In general, *family engagement* can be defined as a relationship between families and educators that is:

- **Ongoing** because it should span a child's educational journey from early childhood through 12th grade
- **Mutual** because the relationship should meet the needs of both families and educators, and promote meaningful two-way communication
- **Built on trust and respect** because these are essential components to any relationship, including relationships between families and educators
- **Focused on student learning and achievement** so that students are better prepared to face the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century

## Introduction

Families<sup>1</sup> engage in their children's development and education in a variety of ways. Recognizing and respecting the many ways that families support the learning and development of children and youth, both at home and in formal learning environments, is critical to the success of school-based family engagement practices. In fact, some would argue that this is an essential first step for schools looking to establish strong relationships with racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse families (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013).

To support educators working with families of language learners, we present the *ABCs of Family Engagement*, six key considerations that are essential for strengthening family engagement practices and building relationships with families. This document is grounded in research and can be used by educators to initiate reflection and dialogue on local efforts to engage with families. The *ABCs of Family Engagement* does not provide a step-by-step approach to family engagement, nor are the considerations easily implemented. As with any relationship, home-school relationships take time and effort to develop and sustain. We encourage educators to consider ways to include families' in the process of establishing a vision for family engagement, as well as planning school-based events or activities for families. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement, ensuring families have a voice in the process is critical (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). The sections that follow present the ABCs and provide guiding questions to facilitate reflection and dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> The term families is used within this document to refer to parents, siblings, extended family members, close family friends, guardians, and other adults who contribute in significant ways to children's development and education (definition based on Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

## The ABCs of Family Engagement

### **A** Awareness

Awareness-raising is an important first step toward transparent and transformative home-school partnerships. One way to raise awareness is to reflect on one's beliefs about working with families and/or one's beliefs about how families should support their children's education. Such beliefs may not be obvious to educators, but they may in fact impact how educators approach family engagement. Another way to raise awareness is to reflect on the school or district's implicit and explicit expectations for family engagement. For example, are families expected to engage in their children's development or education in traditional and/or nontraditional ways? Traditional forms of engagement are often school-based and aim to have parents follow the school's agenda for supporting student learning at home. Examples of traditional forms of engagement and parent roles include checking homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering in the classroom. Nontraditional forms, on the other hand, recognize that family engagement may not be tied to school-based learning and that families engage in their children's education in a variety of ways and across multiple settings (e.g., home, community). Nontraditional forms of engagement often aim at ensuring families have a voice in setting the agenda for how schools and families work together. Examples of nontraditional forms of engagement include activities that empower families by equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate schools. Awareness of the approach to family engagement, and its underlying goals, is important because research has shown that when traditional forms of engagement drive home-school partnerships, diverse families, such as families of language learners, can be subjected to deficit thinking when their ways of engaging do not conform to what is expected (López & Stoelting, 2010; Ramírez, 2003; González-Mena, 1994).

### **A** Advocacy

Advocacy is a tool that parents and educators can use to fight injustices and improve children's educational experiences and trajectories. Advocacy requires a certain knowledge base and skill set. Often, families from historically marginalized populations, such as families of language learners, have not had the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills needed to advocate within the U.S. education system. Educators can support parents' advocacy efforts by providing parents with workshops or other learning opportunities that address school-system regulations and decision-making processes. Such opportunities can help parents feel empowered to seek help if issues or concerns arise. Additionally, they help to create welcoming spaces where families can network with others that share common goals (e.g., children developing bilingualism) and/or concerns. In the case of families of language learners, advocacy also requires knowledge of, and a clear understanding of, their children's language development (Brown & Souto-Manning, 2008). Educators can support families of language

### Guiding Questions

How does my personal experience inform my work with families? How might my personal experience differ from the experiences of my students' families?

What do we expect from families? How do families know what is expected of them? What do families expect from us?

### Guiding Questions

Which families need support in advocating for their child, and why? How can we identify the type of support families need?

Is our staff equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to support parent advocacy? If not, how can we support our staff?

learners by providing families accessible, parent-friendly information on children's language development and the available school-based language programs. Moreover, educators can also support the advocacy efforts of families of language learners by learning about families' language goals for their children. By supporting the advocacy efforts of families, educators ensure that families have a voice in the education of their children.

## **B** Brokering

Brokers are people with access to the knowledge, skills, and language of school who serve as mediators to provide families access to the school culture and language (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Hong, 2011). Culturally and linguistically diverse families, including families that are new to the country, can benefit greatly from having access to cultural and language brokers. Cultural brokers not only support families as they learn how to navigate the U.S. school system, they can introduce families to the role parents are expected to play in home-school relationships and inform families of their rights as parents (Martinez-Cosio & Lannacone, 2007). Such information is critical for families to have, especially given the fact that family engagement is firmly embedded in federal education policy (Mapp, 2012). In other words, within the U.S. school system, families are expected to partner with schools. Language brokers help facilitate communication between educators and families that require assistance with the English language. While many students serve as cultural and language brokers for their families (Orellana, 2009), federal policy recommends that schools and districts seek individuals who are trained in interpretation and/or translation, and who abide by confidentiality policies protecting student data (U.S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2015). In many schools, parent liaisons serve as cultural and language brokers. School leaders and educators must consider ways to provide families' access to brokers who can assist families as they navigate the education system.

## **Building Trust**

Building trust is a key consideration for working with families in general, but it is crucial for establishing relationships with families from groups that have been historically marginalized by schools, which includes families of language learners. Research shows that a lack of trust is often what keeps these families from spending time at school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2003). However, for many schools and families, building trusting relationships is often easier said than done. Teachers receive little training in family engagement strategies, and for a variety of reasons, some parents, especially those from historically marginalized populations, do not feel comfortable walking into school or speaking with a teacher (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Trusting relationships consist of the following four qualities: respect, integrity, competence, and personal regard (Byrk & Schneider, 2002). In other words, there is mutual respect. Educators and families act towards one another with integrity. Educators and families work together with a sense of competence by recognizing that everyone can contribute towards the common goal of supporting students. Lastly, educators and families demonstrate personal regard by genuinely caring for one another. Building trusting relationships takes time and effort, but it is well worth it. When there is a lack of trust, barriers are formed that prevent or hinder effective school-based family engagement practices (Hong, 2011; MALDEF & NEA, 2010; Mapp, 2003).

### **Guiding Questions**

How might families experience language barriers in our school, and what can we do to support them?

What resources are available in our school and/or community that can help families learn the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the education system?

### **Guiding Questions**

What might make a family feel unwelcome at our school? How can we address this?

What are we doing to build trusting relationships with families? What resources are we devoting to this? What resources do we need?

## **C** Communication

Meaningful, two-way communication characterizes effective home-school partnerships. One-way communication, such as communication that flows only from school to home, is inadequate for learning about families and engaging in family engagement practices that attend to families' experiences, strengths, and needs. Furthermore, one-way communication does not offer opportunities to ensure that families understand the message or content being communicated. Too often educators may operate under the faulty assumptions that families "will get it" or "ask questions if they don't." However, this assumption does not account for the many challenges linguistically diverse families face when trying to communicate with schools. For instance, one of the most important considerations in reaching families of language learners in particular is the language used in oral and written communication. Parents who need assistance with the English language have the protected right to request translators and interpreters, which schools are required to provide (U.S. Departments of Education & Justice, 2015). Nonetheless, misunderstandings may still arise for a number of reasons, including the quality of the translation or interpretation, and culturally specific content that require familiarity with U.S. schools to interpret and understand. Examples of such content include, but are not limited to, information about literacy, grading systems, and student progress data (Sosa, 1997; Blakley, 2003; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). For these reasons, it is especially important to ensure two-way communication exists between families and schools, and that schools use parent-friendly language when communicating orally or in writing with families.

### **Connect to Learning**

Connecting family engagement to what students are learning in school calls for focused, systemic, and sustainable approaches to family engagement (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2011). For example, if the purpose of engaging with families is to help them support student learning at home, then educators must have the time and resources available to provide families frequent and comprehensible information on curriculum, student progress, instructional strategies, and student assessment data. Giving parents access to such information paves the way for developing a partnership. In addition, when considering the needs of language learners, family engagement that is connected to learning must also focus on students' language development and language proficiency, because these students are learning both academic content and language. Connecting to learning, then, requires support from school leaders, ample resources, frequent communication, and a shared vision for family engagement that helps students meet the demands of a 21st century education. In short, connecting to learning calls into question "random acts" of family engagement that may be ineffective for supporting student achievement (Mapp, 2012).

### **Guiding Questions**

In what ways might we be overwhelming families with educator jargon? How can we ensure communication is parent-friendly?

How do we ensure translations actually make sense to families? What systems do we have in place to check the quality of translations?

### **Guiding Questions**

What is our vision for family engagement? How do we ensure families, staff, and students have a voice in establishing a common vision?

What are we doing to meet the needs of language learners and their families? How can we integrate language learning and development in our family engagement practices?

At WIDA, we value what families do to support their children, and believe that these diverse practices enrich school communities (WIDA, 2014). As an organization, we serve a diverse population, and in our mission to support the achievement and success of language learners in early childhood and K-12, we also recognize the need to support their families. Our vision in the area of family engagement is to promote student advocacy by supporting families' rights to engage meaningfully with educators about their children's academic language development and its relationship to academic achievement.

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