Leadership Strategy 1

Create a School Environment To Support Family-School Literacy Partnerships

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, the school environment should foster effective family and school collaboration. The fifth principle of Michigan's Family Engagement Framework states that "Positive learning environments contribute to family engagement and learning." Therefore, this first leadership strategy brief focuses on how principals and other school leaders can create a school environment to support family-school literacy partnerships. The evidence supporting these practices is informed by rigorous research conducted in schools.

Leadership Strategies for Creating Family-School Literacy Partnerships

How can school leaders create a school environment that supports family-school literacy partnerships to increase children's literacy success?

As the literacy leader of your school, your decisions affect children's literacy progress, staff members' inclination to engage families as literacy partners, and families' involvement in the school and in their children's learning. Nurturing family-school literacy partnerships benefits children, school staff, and families. To create a school environment that supports family-school literacy partnerships, consider the following strategies.

Build Relationships: When the relationship between families and school is positive, families are more likely to engage with school staff and connect classroom literacy instruction with home literacy activities. The first principle of Michigan's Family Engagement Framework is: "Relationships are the cornerstone of family engagement." School leaders can build upon this principle through positive everyday interactions with families, children, and staff. Visibility and regular interaction with families will increase their support for their children's literacy growth. To help build relationships between school staff and families:

- Greet families as children arrive and depart from school. School leaders' presence shows that the school leadership is engaged and approachable; and

- Provide school staff with time and resources to refine family conference practices and family events to focus on building relationships for literacy learning; and time to conduct family home visits to get to know families and their values and literacy goals for their children.
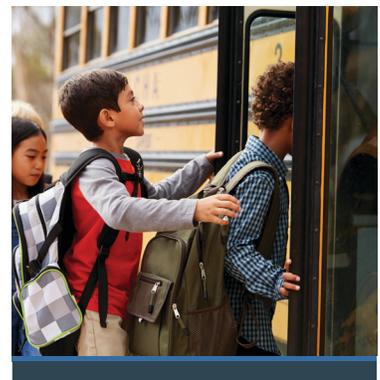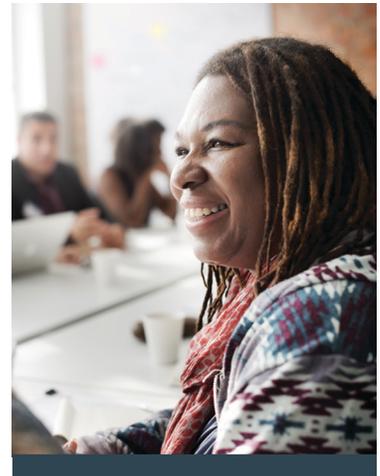
Foster Respect: As the school leader, establish a school literacy environment based on shared respect between families and educators. When school staff respect families as literacy partners, families will be more likely to connect classroom literacy instruction with home literacy learning activities. Remember that young children do not begin their formal education as blank slates. Families and caregivers are a child's first teachers. From the time children are born, their families are teaching them the venerated traditions and language patterns of their culture. To help foster respect between school staff and families:

- Regularly ask families for feedback on literacy efforts that may affect their children, and use family feedback to inform literacy-related decisions;

- Learn about families and the language and literacy practices in which they engage;

- Anticipate and address potential barriers to literacy learning at school and home;

- Ensure that all children have access to highly qualified instructional staff and high-quality literacy instruction; and

- Provide school staff with time and resources to design classroom and family literacy activities that involve families; and time to personally invite families into the classroom during literacy instruction to share their assets.

Establish Trust: To bring school staff and families together to benefit children's literacy achievement, trust is essential. Trust enables the principal, families, and school staff to reach decisions together that benefit children's literacy development. Building trust is an ongoing endeavor. There are always new families, new school staff, and unexpected events. How you respond to change will determine your success. As a school leader, you build trust each day with what you say, what you do, and with the decisions you make. To help establish trust between school staff and families:

- Lead by example by developing open lines of communication, practicing active listening, clarifying expectations, and seeking input from others;

- Offer school staff and families joint literacy learning opportunities with varied formats and at different times of day; and

- Include reflection and discussion time within the opportunities so school staff and families can network; express their thoughts; and share knowledge, skills, and resources with one another that support application of learning at home and school.
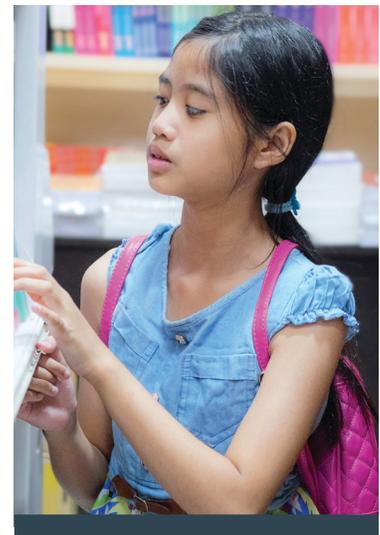
Promote a Safe and Supportive Culture and Climate: As the school leader, you must ensure that all children and families feel safe in the school and supported academically, socially, and emotionally by school staff. It is often said that school leaders influence the literacy culture and climate of the school. In other words, they influence the expectations of how members of the school community interact with one another; and what they say and do as it relates to literacy. A safe and supportive culture and climate is predicated on a shared belief that all children can learn to read and write successfully and that high expectations exist for all children's literacy performance. It does not mean that every child is provided with the same literacy instruction or supports. Children have a range of literacy learning needs. It does mean that all school staff are knowledgeable and responsive to the individual literacy needs of children. Additionally, a safe and supportive culture and climate is rooted in a shared belief that all families want their children to succeed in school and life and want to help them do so. It's about valuing the cultural diversity of the school community and encouraging families to share their knowledge and skills to enrich the literacy learning environment. Likewise, schools are also responsive to the individual strengths and needs of the families they serve, including drawing from families' daily routines that build on culturally developed knowledge and skills accumulated in the home to inform literacy instruction.[4] To help promote a safe and supportive culture and climate between school staff and families:

- Increase access to literacy materials by expanding the school library hours so that books, videos, and other literacy materials are available when families can visit the library.

- Share examples of the various ways in which families can contribute to school literacy efforts, from making decisions about their children's literacy learning to representing the needs and perspectives of families schoolwide.

- Visit classrooms frequently to observe classroom literacy instruction and the climate of the classroom. Notice the materials that are used and listen to the questions and discussions directed by school staff. For example, do school staff invite families to share texts they read and write as part of their daily lives? Do children see themselves positively represented in school literacy materials? Are children provided with differentiated and intensified literacy instruction when needed?

- Provide school staff with time and resources to reflect on their beliefs and assumptions about families and how they shape partnership efforts; identify and harness family strengths in classrooms; and help families see their strengths to support children's literacy learning.[5]

Resources

The following resources offer additional information and guidance to help principals provide effective literacy leadership in their schools, including creating a school environment to support family-school literacy partnerships.

- 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.

- *MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework* includes five Principles of Family Engagement to guide building a strong connection between schools and families.

- *The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships* provides a systematic way to think about how to strengthen conditions and achieve capacity outcomes for effective family-school partnerships that support children's literacy and school improvement.

- The International Literacy Association developed a literacy leadership brief that provides guidance for principals as literacy leaders.

- This practitioner guide from the National Center for Family Literacy has bilingual materials to promote the importance of family involvement and literacy support at home.

- Reading Rockets explains what a literacy-rich school environment looks like and provides strategies and ideas for principals and teachers.

- Colorín Colorado is a bilingual site that provides information on creating a welcoming environment for English language learners and immigrant students.

- The Family Reading Partnership provides a variety of materials in multiple languages, including family literacy activities, read-aloud tips, read-aloud book lists, and literacy-rich environment checklists.

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. (2019). *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/documents/mde/MIFamily_Family_Engagement_Framework_683447_7.pdf

[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] Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 4: Engaging all in data conversations* (REL 2016–152). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509

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