

Bringing Families to the Table: Family Engagement for Struggling Students

Webinar Q&A

Question: Do you have any recommendations or ideas for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families?

Answer: School staff that work with ESL (English as a Second Language) and culturally diverse families are a vital part of ensuring that partnerships between schools and families are successful and that families feel comfortable. One of the key roles of these staff is to help establish trusting relationships. While there may be strategies that work better with certain populations, some examples include visiting with families in their communities, honoring different cultures through events at school, working with parent mentors, and partnering with community groups and organizations.

- ***Going into Communities.*** To help build trust, school staff may choose to spend time in the communities where the families live, make home visits, attend community events with families, or may even offer assistance and support in situations where translation is needed, such as doctor's appointments. By going into the communities where their families live, school staff may help reach families that face transportation barriers that make it difficult to get to their child's school regularly or to help those that might not feel as comfortable within school establishments to feel more at ease.
- ***Honoring Cultural and Linguistic Differences at School Events.*** Holding cultural nights based on the different ethnicities and communities that are served in the school can provide valuable opportunities to bring families together to meet one another, become more involved with the school, and to learn more about different cultures. Honoring and valuing the wide variety of skill sets families bring to the table can help increase the trust that families have with school.
- ***Parent Mentors.*** Parent mentors can be a valuable link between families and schools, often serving as community liaisons to help parents strengthen their interactions with their child's school. Schools may choose to hire culturally and linguistically diverse parent mentors to further promote the involvement of families from similar backgrounds. Additional information about parent mentoring programs can be found in the question below and in the presentation slides from Kelly Orginski.
- ***Partnering with Community Groups and Organizations.*** In some cases the challenge families' face is not only due to language or cultural differences, but may also involve questions of legal residency. In these cases, some districts have successfully employed the use of community groups or houses of worship as a medium. These connections have facilitated interactions between parents and led to the establishment of networks and parent groups that have been instrumental in helping parents to support one another.

Connections with local establishments can also be helpful in teaching staff more about the perceptions families of a specific culture may have of school.

Question: What roles can school counselors play in engaging and involving families? What is the role of a counselor to get parents on board to assist students to do better academically?

Answer: School counselors can play a vital role in linking schools and families and ensuring that families are involved in conversations about their child's needs and supports. Additionally, counselors often help schools understand the unique needs of families and ways in which they can be best supported. The role of a school counselor may vary by school, depending on each school's staffing structure. For example, in many schools, counselors and social workers often work together to address the needs of individual students and involve families in their child's education.

Question: How is the parent mentor program utilized to engage families? How are parent mentors selected and trained?

Answer: The parent mentoring program, mentioned during this webinar, provides schools with parent mentors who mentor, support, and makes connections to local community resources for parents whose children receive early intervention or special education services. Potential parent mentors are screened using a specific interview protocol before they are hired and are trained with ongoing web-based trainings and webinars that equip them with skills that they need in order effectively support families and address questions that they may face. These mentors are also supported by a leadership team help mentors to address any issues and questions that might arise.

Question: How can a small school/district engage families without having extensive services available near the school?

Answer: While utilizing nearby services to engage families can be helpful, extensive services may not be available in smaller districts or rural areas. Many districts have found that parents are often aware of resources in the community with which the school may not be familiar. Therefore, it is important to network with parents so that staff members and parents alike can learn of new resources through one another. While this networking may or may not happen within the school context, schools should aim to ensure that connections between school staff and parents are encouraged and accessible.

The Office of Special Education Programs funds Parent Centers at the national, regional, and state level to support to families of children with disabilities. Find a parent center serving your local area: <http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/parentcenterlisting.html>

You can find other helpful resources targeted to families of students with disabilities online at:

- National Center on Learning Disabilities: <http://www.nclld.org>

- SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections: www.sedl.org/connection
- Harvard Family Research Project: www.hrfp.org

Question: To what extent should parents be involved in decision-making related to their child’s supports and interventions?

Answer: For students that have been identified as having a disability, schools have a legal obligation to update parents on their child’s progress toward their IEP goals and involve parents in the process of setting these goals. In addition, in many states schools also have an obligation to inform parents when their child is receiving intervention supports through a tiered support system (such as RTI or MTSS) and the progress their child is making. Information about state specific policies can be found on state department of education websites.

Parents are very important for decision making related to their children as they often have strong insight into their child’s needs, preferences, and motivators. For example, parents may be able to offer insights and ideas related to behavior plans and incentives that may be motivating for their child of which school team members may be unaware.

School teams should clearly communicate to parents the specific skills and goals their child is working towards in order to address the child’s needs. Clear communication and involvement of families allows schools and families to work together to support the child.

Question: What suggestions do you have for engaging families of students at the high school level?

Answer: Family engagement at the high school level can be challenging due to the number of factors impacting students and their families at this stage of the child’s education (e.g. transition planning, accumulated academic and behavioral challenges over years of school, high stakes testing, and demands from multiple teachers in different subject matters). Working with high school students also provides opportunities for students to be more instrumentally involved in the education decision-making process. Young people can help to set their education goals, identify potential supports, and gain experience advocating for their needs. All these skills will be critical for them as they transition into adulthood and post-high school academic and career opportunities. Learn more at the links below:

- College & Career Readiness and Success Center: <http://www.ccrscenter.org/keyword/family-and-community-engagement>
- National High School Center: <http://www.betterhighschools.org/default.asp>
- High School Tiered Interventions Initiative: <http://www.rti4success.org/resourcetype/tiered-interventions-high-schools-using-preliminary-lessons-learned-guide-ongoing>
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepcontents/transition>