Family Engagement in Community Schools  
Eric Werge  
Executive Director, Community Schools Initiative  
YMCA of Metro Chicago

Why Is Family Engagement Important?

- First and most important role models
- Family involvement (parenting style, parent expectations, and family participation in learning activities) a more accurate predictor of student achievement than family income or socioeconomic status (U.S. Dept of Education)
- When families are involved, students tend to have:
  - Higher attendance rates
  - Better grades
  - Higher test scores
  - Better behavior
  - More developed social skills

Evolution of Family Engagement

- Family engagement used to mean parent engagement
- Old model was a small core of parents who does everything (volunteer in classroom, lead special events and fundraising events, etc.)
- Broader definition of family today
  - Grandparents
  - Older siblings
  - Extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins)
  - Court-appointed guardians
  - Foster parents
- Can make engagement more challenging but provides new opportunities

Contextual Challenges

- Families may have had negative experiences with school
- Language and cultural differences
- Lack of school commitment to or history with family engagement efforts
- Overextended families often living in stress-filled circumstances

On the Ground Challenges

- Getting school support for family engagement efforts
- Making families aware of all opportunities for engagement being offered
- Securing family buy-in and commitment
  - (consistent attendance at programs and events)
- Navigating policies and procedures which may serve to discourage family involvement

Keys to Successful Family Engagement - ISBE Framework

- Develop a Family Engagement System
- Build a welcoming and supportive environment
- Enhance communication
- Include family members in decision-making
Develop a Family Engagement System

- Create a shared vision with the school
- Define your vision of family engagement broadly
  - Day to Day interaction – regular communication with families about their children’s progress in programming – positive updates
  - Adult Programs – opportunities for individual family members to develop personal knowledge and skills
  - Family Programs – opportunities for families to participate in learning together
  - Volunteer Opportunities – chances for families to contribute to program’s success
  - Leadership Opportunities – mentoring, training
- Meet families where they are

Create a Welcoming Environment

- Reach out to families of all backgrounds (strategize to address potential barriers (language, cultural, etc.)
- Send clear message that everyone is not only welcome but their contributions are desired and needed
- Establish a culture where there is a shared responsibility and value for learning
- Share student accomplishments with family
- Build on family assets

Enhance Communication

- Establish meaningful two-way communication
- Accessible to people of all backgrounds
- Use a varied number of strategies (face-to-face, phone, text, social media, etc.)
- Consistent communication about their children
- Solicit input whenever possible

Include Family Members in Decision-Making

- Conduct needs assessments – what do families want and need
- Identify key family members who will help connect you with other families and keep you current and informed on community issues
- Find the right venue for involvement – advisory boards, parent councils, volunteer roles, recruitment liaisons, etc.

Successful Welcoming Environment and Communication Efforts

- Starts with building a diverse staff that reflects the populations we serve – bilingual Resource Coordinators at every predominantly Hispanic school
- Daily communication with families about their children (good and bad) – builds relationships
- Use tech to keep families connected to programs and events occurring at school (text blasts, apps, school website, social media, etc.)
- Integration with the school to promote family engagement (advertise programs on school website, work with PAC/BAC/LSC to promote awareness, flyers, announcements, social media, etc.)

Successful Engagement Efforts Through Programming

- Solicit input on days of week and times of day that work
- Stick with consistent days and times that work
- Incentives help attendance (prizes, gift cards, food) – Provide programs that families want and will attend based on needs/interest assessments
- Provide a wide variety of programs for families to cast as wide as a net as possible (i.e. job training, health and wellness, the arts, financial literacy)
- Develop opportunities where families can participate in programs their students participate in (service learning, dance, fitness, etc.)
  - Particularly exciting to families when program is developing skills that can help the family at home (i.e. cooking)
  - Youth-led programs are highly successful
Successful Engagement Efforts Through Programming (con’t)
- Offer programs where families and teachers can participate together
- Organize family nights with students and family members participating together (literacy nights, STEM nights, movie nights, Bingo, etc.)
- Organize family outings (sporting events, skating, circus, college and workplace visits)
- Special events (resource fairs, health fairs, high school/college fairs) where families can play a meaningful role
- Leverage resources whenever possible to meet families’ outside needs – builds trust and value

Successful Leadership Development Efforts
- Family members serving on advisory boards
- Partnerships with parent/family leadership and mentoring programs
- Enlisting involved families to recruit other families
- Utilizing families for advocacy efforts and special events
- Identifying areas of family member expertise for programming options
- Still a long way to go...

Continuous Quality Improvement Cycle
- Continually evaluate how family engagement efforts are progressing
  - School leadership
  - Advisory board
  - Key family stakeholders
- Be open and willing to change things up based on feedback you receive
- Provide opportunities for families to take lead on initiatives you are implementing

So this is a whole lot of work—is it really worth it???
The Answer Is Yes!!!

- Some final words...
- Do not get discouraged – relationships and trust take time to build
- During the challenging times, remember why family engagement is so critical
- Promote successes!

Keep engaging—your efforts will pay off!