

# Family Engagement in Community Schools

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

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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



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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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.

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## 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.)

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## 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 of 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

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## 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

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## 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...

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## 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

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- ▶ So this is a whole lot of work— is it really worth it???



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### 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!

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▶ Keep engaging--your efforts will pay off!



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