

## ***Developing a Team Approach for Family and Community Connections With Schools***

Schools are required to involve parents in a “jointly” developed written parental involvement policy that describes

- **the school’s plan to ensure that all students reach academic achievement standards,**
- **processes for staff-parent communication, and**
- **ways parents can provide and support learning.**

How can we be sure to include those parents of children in special education? Think in terms of special education topics, processes, policies, and procedures. Be included in school related policy meetings.

### **What to Consider**

A first step in beginning to initiate collaborative efforts is to define the current status of school and family relations. What factors inhibit or foster family and community interactions with the school and its staff? Successful administrators are able to anticipate the inhibitors and soften their impact while promoting research-based strategies that encourage increased involvement. The following factors have been identified in the research on family and community connections with schools as key to promoting family interactions:

- Creating a family-friendly school
  - † Is there a language barrier between school and family?
  - † Are parents able to attend meetings at the times they are scheduled?
  - † Do parents have transportation to attend events/meetings?
  - † Do parents feel welcome at the school?
- Networking through community organizations
  - † What community organizations actively support the school through service projects that impact learning?
  - † How can these organizations help support student learning?
  - † How can these organizations help communicate school needs?
  - † How can these organizations help eliminate barriers to participation for family and community members?
- Listening actively to the concerns of individuals
  - † Do staff have the skills that are needed to be active listeners?
  - † Are the concerns of individual parents reflective of the needs of a larger issue the school should address?
- Influencing the creation of policies to encourage family and community involvement
  - † Does the district or school have policies in place that foster and promote family and community connections with schools?
  - † What mechanisms are in place to keep policymakers aware of involvement project progress and needs?
  - † How can school staff reach out to those who make policy in order to develop supportive policies?

By paying careful attention to the factors that can derail or encourage family and community connections with schools, administrators can cultivate an inclusive culture that encourages the involvement of all stakeholders in school improvement.

Research also provides a list of actions that school administrators should take in order to support collaborative efforts with family and community members.

- 1. Foster formal school- and district-level policies that promote family and community connections with schools.**
- 2. Institute communication processes that reach out to family and community through multiple pathways, both informal and formal.**
- 3. Address barriers to involvement that inhibit participation because of culture or language.**
- 4. Create an environment that honors families' and community members' concerns and needs in their support of student learning.**

The question for administrators is, what actions can school leaders take as they begin these efforts?

## ***Putting It Into Practice***

### **Gather School Community Information: Define Your School Community**

A school community consists of all the people and organizations that either affect or are affected by the school. How you define school community will determine how the team is formed and what actions the team will take.

1. Invite representatives from various community organizations, students' family members, students, and school and district staff to attend a meeting to explore the idea of increasing family and community involvement in student success. When determining the best way to invite attendees, remember that the more representative the group is of the school's neighborhood community, the more meaningful this process will be.
2. Begin a conversation with participants by introducing the following questions to help define the school community. Record the answers on chart paper and post within sight of all attending.

#### **History**

- Does the school have a unique history?
- How long has the school existed?
- Has the student population always mirrored its present population?

#### **Geography**

- How is the community around the school organized physically?
- Are there natural or man-made boundaries that people recognize?
- Are certain neighborhoods closely affiliated with the school?

#### **Administrative Organization**

- How is the school administration organized?
- What is the administrative structure at this school?
- How are decisions made and communicated?

### **Needs**

Who are the students served by this school?

Does any sub-group of students within the school need more services or perform less well than others?

What individuals, groups, or organizations currently help meet the needs of the students in the school?

### **Common Interests**

Does the school have issues in common with other schools in the area?

Do people from different schools have overlapping interests?

How do the feeder patterns impact this school?

3. Ask the group to scan the information recorded on chart paper. Next, ask them to create summary statements about the school community based on their answers to the questions. Record the summary statements on chart paper. Post these statements for later use.

4. Create labels for chart paper with “school,” “home,” “community,” and “student” written on them. Lead the whole group in a discussion that identifies individuals, organizations, and institutions that connect with students and their families in the school community. Record their responses under the appropriate chart labels. Ask them to keep their summary statements about the school community in mind as they do this. Sample questions to help lead this discussion might include:

- Who has been in the media lately advocating for students and their families?
- Who addresses issues (before the school board, city council, etc.) concerning students and their families?
- Who focuses on students and their families as part of their mission?
- Who is most affected by the school's or district's programs and policies?
- Who affects the school's or district's programs the most?

5. Divide team members into small groups of 5–7 people. Assign each group one of the summary statements that was created in the third step. Ask the small group to review the summary statement based on the discussion they had in the fourth step. Ask them to redefine the summary statement on a new sheet of chart paper. Sample questions to help foster this step might include:

- Does this summary statement reflect the involvement of individuals, organizations, and institutions that connect with students in or out of school?
- Are there intersecting points of action and interest among individuals, organizations, and institutions as they work with students in or out of school?

6. Have each group report to the whole group. Post the new summary statements and ensure that everyone agrees to them. Modifications may need to be negotiated.

These summary statements describe the school community and can be used to further the process of developing a collaborative culture to support student success. Participants can take the summary statements and use them as a tool to help school staff and interested family and community members determine who needs to be involved in a collaborative action team in order to create a team that reflects the multiple perspectives inherent in a school community.

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