ELEVATING *FAMILY* VOICE

Across Learning Environments

Excerpt from A Message to Families on the First Day of School from New York City Chancellor David C. Banks, September 8, 2022:

"I can't write to families without recognizing you as the lifeblood of our school communities and our true partners in your child's education. Be on the lookout for improved ways to access the information and support you need to help your children succeed. This will include expanded language access supports for families who speak languages other than English and more opportunities for us to work together."

A Sense of Belonging at School

Research has shown that students with involved families, no matter their income or background, were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These studies have also demonstrated beneficial outcomes for educators and families. Yet in many schools, family engagement remains a challenge.

Families have reported that feeling welcome and respected by school staff is the top reason they become connected with a school and stay involved (Henderson et al., 2007).

WELCOME

How would families in your school answer these questions:
- Do you feel welcome at your child's school?
- Do you feel comfortable talking with your child's teacher?
- Do you feel respected by educators at your child's school?

A "no" response to any of these questions might be difficult for us to hear, but challenges provide us with opportunities to improve and build our capacity. Throughout Module 5, we have explored family engagement (Session 1), identified opportunities for engagement (Session 2), how family engagement is connected to student learning (Session 3), and the strategies that will empower families to participate in goal setting and decision-making (Session 4). This session will explore the equity issues faced by some families and how we, as educators, can develop an understanding of and appreciation for families from diverse backgrounds (e.g., racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious).

In *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (Henderson et al., 2007), the authors suggest four core beliefs that are important for educators to hold:

- All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- All families have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- Families and school staff should be equal partners.
- Responsibility for building and sustaining partnerships between school, home, and community rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

Key concepts to explore in these core beliefs are "all families" and "partners." Envision school not as a physical place, but as a co-created experience where all families are partners. How would we grow and improve our practice to achieve this vision? We must first acknowledge that some families are less engaged than others, we must explore the root causes for the differences, and we must establish goals to attain equity in family engagement.

We should begin with defining equity. The Equity Collaborative defines **equity** as the elimination of the predictability of success or failure by any social or cultural factor *and* the dismantling of inequitable practices and policies.

To make meaningful change, we should consider common barriers to engagement experienced by families. Based on research (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003; Öztürk, 2013; Stephens & Pate 2015), these are some common barriers:

- Family members may not be able to attend school meetings or functions due to scheduling conflicts, time constraints (often involving child care, commute time, or multiple jobs), and other challenges.
- Family members (especially recent immigrants) may have had different, few, or no experiences with formal education.
- Educators may hold expectations for family engagement that do not realistically reflect the schedules or cultures of families.
- Family members may experience language barriers that impact engagement.

Family Voice, Defined

Family voice can be defined as "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving students' academic learning and other school activities. Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school. Parents are full partners in their children's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in their children's education."

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Including Family Voice in Education, REL Institute of Education Sciences

From Inclusion to Cultural Reciprocity

Once we acknowledge challenges, we can begin to formulate steps to break down the barriers and build up our connections. Engaging in a reciprocal exchange of information with families will help us to understand any cultural, linguistic, or social contexts or family experiences that impede or enhance engagement.

Cultural Reciprocity

refers to an exchange of knowledge, values, and perspectives between two or more individuals of different cultural, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or religious backgrounds. We can gather valuable information from families early in the school year that can set us on a path for meaningful and reciprocal communication. Essential questions include learning about the families' preferred method of communicating with school(phone, email, virtual meetings, in-person meetings).

Collaborative Scheduling

considers the best times for meetings to accommodate work and child care considerations. Learning about the family structure ensures that we use inclusive language and terminology and key familial relationships.

When we learn about our families, we can become aware of any cultural or language considerations so that we can offer accommodations that allow every family to access and respond to the information we share. Translation apps and/or interpreters can strengthen the two-way engagement and communication between you and families.

Additional strategies to practice cultural reciprocity and enhance our family knowledge include the following:

- Ask families about the best method for communication. Express a commitment to open and frequent **two-way communication.**

- Inquire about the family's goals and expectations for their child, you as their child's teacher, and the school. Discuss the student's educational growth and the student's social development.

- Provide the family with an opportunity to ask questions and invite them to express their expectations. Paraphrase, restate, check for our understanding, and acknowledge the expressed emotions.

- Learn how the family supports the student and discover how the family might contribute to the student's learning and engagement within the school.

- Convey gratitude for the teacher-family partnership. Summarize how the conference has helped you better understand the student and how the partnership will help the student achieve success.

Factors that Foster Trust Between Schools and Families
From Partnerships to Shared Decision-Making

Creating a welcoming and engaging school involves finding a variety of ways to achieve an environment where families are welcomed and engaged. Meaningful actions to build our own cultural competence, such as learning how to pronounce names, can add to our families' feelings of connection. We can consider how we greet family members and how and how often we invite them to attend or participate in learning. Scheduling meetings at times that best accommodate their schedules and providing translation services are additional steps we can take to enhance collaboration.

Families may also benefit from an introduction to basic information about our education system and how they can ask questions, raise concerns, and seek services for their child. An authentic partnership is one where we work together with families to define challenges and develop shared goals. By intentionally developing and practicing culturally responsive family engagement strategies, we can convey to both our students and their families that they are understood and valued. The New York State Board of Regents Policy Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (May 2021) recommends that districts should ensure that family and community engagement practices are based on mutual trust, confidence, and respect.

Part of reimagining education is creating a meaningful role for family voice in the decisions that matter greatly to them. After reaching out as thoroughly as possible, the next step is to add deep listening to important decision-making processes. Families and caregivers have opinions on matters such as school climate and student success measures, and these can be solicited across modalities through digital surveys, live-streamed community forums, or virtual focus groups. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that when families advocate for their children, their children are more confident at school, take on more, and achieve more.

Excerpt from A Parent's Bill of Rights
Developed by The New Teacher Project:

I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE TREATED AS A VALUED PARTNER IN MY CHILD'S LEARNING.

- I feel welcome in my child's school and classroom. I have the contact information for my child's teacher, and I know how to connect with my principal.

- Before the year begins, my school reaches out through introductory phone calls, welcome back events, or home visits. During the year, my child's teacher gets in touch with me on a monthly basis to share my child's successes, as well as challenges.

- I receive information from my school on a monthly basis about academic priorities and programs. If needed, all materials are translated into my native language, and trained interpreters are provided to help me communicate with staff.

I HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW HOW I CAN SUPPORT MY CHILD IN SCHOOL.

- I know exactly what my child needs to master this year to be on track to meet his or her goal of being prepared for college, career, entrepreneurship, and service to the community. I am provided with information about how I can support my child in reaching those goals.

- I know how my child is progressing academically compared to his or her peers, and I know how my child's school is performing compared to other schools in the area.

- At the first sign that my child is struggling, teachers reach out to me right away to let me know and work with me to create an action plan so that we can intervene before it's too late.

Now It's Your Turn!

In this session, we have explored the theme of equitable relationships in family engagement. After all, we do want families to respond "yes" when we ask if they feel welcome, if they feel comfortable talking with their child's teacher, and if they feel respected by the educators at our school.

To elevate the voice of the families we serve, we must earnestly commit ourselves to a partnership. In Session 7, we'll look at extending that partnership to learning and teaching across learning environments.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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