

Family Engagement: Opportunities for Involvement Est. Time: 1 Hour

Objective

Reflect on family engagement practices currently being implemented at your school and brainstorm and plan new opportunities to engage families, especially those of children with disabilities.

Overview

Family engagement—sometimes referred to as parent involvement or family-school partnership—is a practice in which families and school personnel collaborate to support and improve the learning and development of children. This practice involves an ongoing mutually beneficial relationship, one in which educators are committed to listening and collaborating with families and families are committed to prioritizing their children’s education. Effective family engagement requires school leaders and other educators to get to know families, build positive relationships with them, and create opportunities for families to be involved in meaningful ways.



Although research has shown family engagement to have a powerful influence on the success of all students, it is especially important for families of students with disabilities. The engagement of these families is essential in providing students with quality services, as they can:

- Help facilitate their children’s overall development—Parents can provide valuable insight about their children’s skills and abilities. They are often the only people (other than the students themselves), who remain part of their child’s individualized education program (IEP) team throughout the school years.
- Promote the continuity of services, interventions, and practices between home and school—Parents often serve as the bridge between the school and the community because students with disabilities often require assistance in areas other than academics (i.e., healthcare needs, behavioral therapy, transitioning from secondary school to work).

School leaders are responsible for ensuring that all families have the opportunity to be engaged in their child’s education. Many factors (i.e., limited resources, inflexible schedules, cultural differences) can negatively impact family engagement if educators are not thoughtful and proactive in planning meaningful opportunities for involvement. This is especially true for families of children with disabilities as they often face additional barriers, such as the need to take on additional roles that may impede their ability to be more actively engaged in their child’s education. To effectively engage all families, school leaders should provide a variety of opportunities for families to be involved in a manner that is meaningful to them. The table below details six common categories of family involvement.

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Category	Description and Examples
Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help families to develop environments at home to support their child’s learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offer parent education classes (e.g., GED or adult literacy classes). ○ Hold parent workshops on topics of interest to the families (e.g., behavior management, age-and-grade level expectations). • Develop an understanding of the families’ needs and desires for their child. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Visit the family at home. ○ Attend neighborhood events.
Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish procedures and create opportunities for two-way communication regarding a child’s performance, school policies, and programs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Host monthly coffees, socials, and other activities so that families and educators can meet informally. ○ Meet with parents at least once a year for parent conferences. ○ Communicate in as many ways as possible (e.g., emails, notes home, social media). ○ Schedule phone calls and in-person meetings at times convenient for families.
Volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit and train family volunteers to support students and programs within the school. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Invite parents to serve as room parents or school crossing guards. ○ Accommodate families’ schedules and preferences for volunteer opportunities.
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate families’ involvement in their child’s learning at home. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Share ideas about the ways families can support learning at home (e.g., employing strategies for completing homework, reading to child at home, talking to child about school). ○ Provide families with information about the skills being addressed in classrooms. ○ Collaborate with families when setting learning goals for their child and when planning for their transitions. ○ Inform families about the ways to link the learning in the classroom to home and community activities.
School Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include families in school-related decision making. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Encourage families to participate in PTA/PTO meetings. ○ Inform families about the school board, its members, voting opportunities, and other related issues. ○ Invite family members to serve on committees that review school improvement plans. ○ Include family members on school committees, as representatives or leaders.

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Category	Description and Examples
Collaborating with the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop partnerships with local businesses and organizations to provide resources for schools, students, and their families. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make available information about community resources and services. ○ Ask local businesses to conduct workshops for educators or parents about the resources in the community. ○ Hold workshops and parent meetings focusing on community health, social service agencies, and other programs. ○ Make connections with the disability organizations that families are involved with or that they might benefit from (e.g., United Cerebral Palsy, Vocational Rehabilitation, parent centers, support groups). • Create opportunities for families to connect with the community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Host a community service day in which members of the community can volunteer to paint or do other services in the school or students can volunteer to clean up a neighborhood playground.

(Adapted from School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action by J. Epstein, 2018 and 2002.)

Activity (For College Courses)

1. Make a list of the family engagement opportunities offered at your school last year. How did these activities mutually benefit schools and families?
2. Using the table below, record ways your school could provide opportunities for parental engagement throughout the school year.
 - a. In the second column, list at least one event or activity for each of the six types of involvement defined in the table above and note how often each event or activity will occur (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly).
 - b. In the third column, provide a detailed description for each activity.
 - c. In the fourth column, describe how this activity will specifically engage families of students with disabilities and/or address specific school, family, or community needs.
 - d. In the last column, describe how this activity will support mutually beneficial partnerships between the school, families, and community (must support partnership between at least two).

Activity (For Professional Development)

1. Using the table below, record ways that your school will provide opportunities for parental engagement throughout the school year.
 - a. In the second column, list at least one event or activity for each of the six types of involvement defined in the table above and note how often each event or activity will occur (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly).
 - b. In the third column, provide a detailed description of each activity.

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- c. In the fourth column, describe how this activity will specifically engage families of students with disabilities and/or address specific school, family, or community needs.
- d. In the fifth column, describe how this activity will support mutually beneficial partnerships between the school, families, and community (must support partnership between at least two).

For illustrative purposes, the first row has been completed for you.

Type of Involvement	Engagement Activity and Frequency	Description	Needs Addressed	Partnerships
<i>Communicating</i>	<i>Coffee and Conversations with the Principal (Quarterly)</i>	<i>Parents and community leaders will be invited to have a round-table discussion with the principal regarding school, family, and community needs.</i>	<i>The opportunity for open dialogue will help build trusting relationships and formulate creative solutions for school, family, and community concerns.</i>	<i>This activity will support partnerships among school, families, and the community as they will all have an equal voice.</i>
<i>Parenting</i>				
<i>Volunteering</i>				
<i>Learning</i>				
<i>School Decision-Making</i>				
<i>Collaborating with the Community</i>				