

Capacity Building Series

K-12

SECRETARIAT SPECIAL EDITION #29

A Call to Action ...

“When parents are engaged and involved, everyone benefits, and our schools become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn and grow.”

(Supporting the Ontario Leadership Strategy, 2012, p. 1)

Please note that in this monograph, the word parent is used broadly to refer not just to parents but to guardians, caregivers and other family members who help children learn both at home and school.

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Parent Engagement

Working with Families/Supporting Student Learning

Schools that successfully engage parents are inclusive – they reach out to parents who may not feel included in the life of the school and to families whose children may be experiencing challenges with the curriculum. They work at building positive relationships and a welcoming school climate and at providing parents with practical strategies to build a stronger educational culture in their homes. Such authentic family-school partnerships are focused on improving attitudes to school and enhancing students’ future success; they are engaged in what Ken Leithwood calls “co-producing learning” (*Webcasts for Educators*, 2012).

Engaging parents in the life of the school yields many positive benefits and rewards for families and schools alike; leveraging home-school partnerships so that parents are encouraged and supported to be involved in their children’s learning at home and school is the focus of this monograph.

Shifting the Focus

There are many ways parents make a difference in their children’s success at school. Parents who talk with their children about their day at school or who make sure there is a quiet place to do homework or who serve on school councils or who volunteer on school trips are all examples of engaged parents. Parent involvement that is focused on student learning has the greatest impact on student achievement. Ken Leithwood, in fact, has suggested we need to think about shifting our focus from “how to get more parents into the school to how we can support them at home,” where he says, “half of the achievement we’re responsible for as educators happens” (*Webcasts for Educators*, 2012).

Student Achievement Division

The *Capacity Building Series* is produced by the Student Achievement Division to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. The series is posted at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/. For information: lns@ontario.ca

It's all about student learning ...

"Schools have an important role in helping parents learn the language of schooling so that the parents can provide every possible assistance to their children in terms of developing the child's learning and love of learning, and in creating the highest possible shared expectations for learning."

(Hattie, 2009, p. 33)

Other researchers support this re-orientation, urging educators to become even more attuned to the values and the culture of the "home" and to find ways to engage parents in their children's learning in ways that are meaningful for them (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In shifting the focus from getting more parents into the school to working collaboratively with them to support their children's learning and well-being, it is more important than ever before to become familiar with one another's "worlds":

- How can we effectively open doors to each other's world so that we foster close and common understanding? What role might both students and parents play?
- How might we interact and co-learn with families? How can we build from a position of asset and acceptance?
- In what ways can we build on the strengths, interests and talents of students and their families?

A Professional Inquiry

School teams who are making plans to strengthen their learning partnerships with parents may wish to engage in a professional inquiry based on such reflective questions as:

- Are we sensitive to the differentiated characteristics of the students and families we serve?
- Do we demonstrate a flexible "outreach" mindset?
- Are we developing an awareness of our own potential biases, stereotypes and assumptions that may impact or even serve as a barrier to parent engagement?
- Are we patient and persistent enough to make meaningful connections one family at a time?
- Are we looking at ways to connect with parents who face barriers to traditional approaches to parent engagement?

Opening the Door

From formal "meet the teacher" nights to telephone conversations and interviews to school-sponsored family barbecues, fun fairs and informal schoolyard chats, educators have many occasions to engage directly with parents and gain a more fulsome understanding of their worlds.

Many administrators use online and/or print surveys to find out what parents may be interested in – strategies for reading with children or helping with homework, time-management skills or communicating with teens. Surveys may also be used at the classroom level to gauge parent interest in such topics as literacy, problem-based mathematics instruction, integrated learning and so on. (Some sample parent engagement surveys can be found at http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent_Engagement/Parent_Engagement.html.)

One way for parents to connect to the school is through the involvement of their children. If students are performing, presenting or competing at the school, family members will often be in attendance. It has been the experience of many educators that drama productions, musicals, concerts and sports events generate family audiences. In a recent study of schools in challenging circumstances, one teacher commented:

"We had a Literacy Night last year that bombed because it smacked of 'we're going to teach you how to be better parents'. And that just makes them back away ... basically what we thought [this year] is that we'd have the kids perform ..." (Flessa, 2010, p.14)

Innovative strategies such as “Living Museum,” where students share artefacts attached to significant family stories also serve to connect the school with families and can be the beginning of building strong relationships.

Working with community organizations further enhances school and classroom efforts to support parent interests and student needs. Public libraries, health units, service groups, the YMCA and so on offer programs ranging from local literacy/author events and home reading packages to clubs and sports programs. In helping parents access these programs, schools not only deepen their connections with the families in their community, but they also contribute to building a multi-pronged, whole-community approach to student success.

Through conversation and feedback from parents and students, educators develop a growing awareness and understanding of the diverse cultures and communities in their schools. They begin to explore what researchers describe as “the nature of relationships and shared meanings and practices within the school – between teachers, between staff and students, between teachers and school leaders – and beyond the school, into children’s families and communities” (Epstein & Sanders, 2010; Flessa, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Leading with Our Ears

Sacramento educator Larry Ferlazzo uses the metaphor of “leading with our ears” to emphasize the importance of listening to our parent communities. He writes that a school beginning to involve parents, “often leads with its mouth, identifying projects, needs and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears – listening to what parents think, dream and worry about. The goal of family engagement is ... to gain partners” (2011, p. 8).

Every parent has hopes and dreams for their child. And, in turn, children and adolescents harbour their own evolving dreams and goals, big and small. What are their imagined futures? By engaging with parents and students in conversations that illuminate relevant family narratives, educators show they appreciate those things that define who the student is, not only as a learner but also as a person. Listening to both parent and child, we come to know what is important and valued and to develop shared high expectations. So we need to ask:

*What do you think I should know about your child? As a person? As a learner?
What are your hopes for your child this year? And beyond this year?*

The knowledge gained through listening to parents in the many ways they express themselves serves to frame not only possible discussion points with students, but also entry points for further conversations with parents; what is learned provides insights and information that ultimately enables teachers to provide better support for students. When families “are able to share that knowledge, as well as their understanding of their child ... they will be more supportive of their child’s learning” (Charles Pascal, cited in *The Full-Day Early – Kindergarten Program, 2010–2011*, p. 9).

Open, reflective and empathetic listening is essential to building relationships with parents. At the same time, we need to listen reflectively, to hear and question our own voice. We need to be aware of, and recognize, how we are positioned in the conversation, how we listen, what we say or don’t say, and what we choose to do or not do. This all holds the potential to influence perceptions, attitudes and ultimately our relationships with families – to build the foundations for an authentic partnership on behalf of student learning.

Maintaining ongoing communication ...

“Direct communication, seeking information from parents about what they want and need for their child’s success, helps build strong school-family connections. A shared understanding about what the child will learn this year and how their learning will be assessed helps parents support their children and helps maintain communication all year.”

(Patel, Carter & Pelletier, 2008)

Ways to ask questions ...

There may be value in sharing with parents the types of questions and prompts that are used by educators in the classroom to deepen student thinking.

Reflective questions, such as those written for work or assignments that go home, may be one way to model “leading with our ears” and to encourage an open-to-learning stance all round:

- Tell me more about...
- What did you notice...?
- What are you wondering about...? How can you find out about...?
- Tell me about the learning you think has been the most important for you...
- What moves you forward in your learning/helps you to learn? What holds you back?
- What do you think you need to learn next? What are your (short- or long-term) goals?

The power of three ...

“Education is a triangle with three legs: parents, child, school and if any of the legs fall, the triangle falls as well.”

(Harris & Goodall, 2007, p. 2)

Trust Is the Key

Parents have a primary influence on their children’s attitudes toward school, learning and their future success. As their child’s first teacher, their aspirations for their child matter intrinsically. Student perception of how the school views their parents should therefore not be underestimated. Joseph Flessa found, for example, that educators were able to draw “connections between student attendance and the positive or negative reputation the school had among parents.” As one teacher in his study bluntly put it, “If you pass judgment on the parents ... the kid just doesn’t show up in school” (Flessa, 2010, p. 12).

So, building trust with parents and students is vital to developing productive relationships. Trust promotes dialogue; the more reciprocal the dialogue, the more awareness is fostered. Awareness is necessary to identify the needs and challenges that families are facing; without it, the student’s underlying challenges may not surface and without understanding root cause, it becomes very difficult to target differentiated support.

As educators, do we reflect on our own threshold of tolerance for difference? When welcoming families, do we recognize only a “narrow band of acceptable behaviours?” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 49). In conversation with parents, are we aware that what is said and how it is said, tone of voice used, body language demonstrated, the environment, can all have an impact? Do we reflect on what respectful interaction looks and sounds like? In order to establish trust, we may have to demonstrate “respect for others ‘before [we] have earned the right to be respected’... and then do the things that build ... trust over time” (Fullan, 2011).

Aspirations Matter

In a large meta-analysis of research evidence in education, John Hattie found significant positive correlation between parents’ aspirations and student learning. He states unequivocally that “parents need to hold high aspirations and expectations for their children, and schools need to work in partnership with parents so that the home and the school can share in these expectations and support learning” (Hattie, 2009, p. 70).

While some parents approach their children’s schooling with confidence, comfort and trust, others are more hesitant and may not respond well to “traditional” strategies which unintentionally ignore or negate their realities (Olivos, 2006). Yet families of all backgrounds have aspirations for their children and they want to help them learn, irrespective of income, educational level or cultural background. Families “express care in culturally relevant ways that reflect their cultures, specific communication norms ... and approach to social networking and advocacy” (Copper, Riehl & Hasan, 2010).

Parents, therefore, may be very interested and committed to the education of their children, but their roles and efforts may not be as apparent (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). Starkey and Klein emphasize that “parent programs and interventions work best when the strategies respect the needs of families” (cited in Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 46). Ken Leithwood suggests that schools need to “assist parents to build strong educational cultures in their homes” and help equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to support their children’s learning (*In Conversation*, 2010).

The challenges of poverty are all too real, and although income continues to be statistically linked to school performance, the “curriculum of the home” is a more powerful predictor of academic learning than the family’s status (Protheroe, 2010). Simply put, “...half of the achievement we’re responsible for as educators happens ‘out there’, so if we can do something ‘out there’ to encourage more productive learning conditions, we can hit some home runs!” (*Webcasts for Educators*, 2012)

Supporting All Efforts – Big and Small

When fostering family engagement, perhaps a more organic, “expanded definition of involvement” would be helpful (Weis & Lopez, 2009). We need to open up the notion of “volunteer” to mean anyone who supports children’s learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time – not just during the school day and at the school building (OPC, CPCO, & ADFO, 2011, p. 82).

In their work with families, it is important for educators to concentrate on supporting them in their efforts to provide nurturing, learning environments for their children. Hong and Ho (2005), for example, concluded that parent aspirations were a more important influence on their children’s achievement than parent supervision (including, for example, monitoring students’ homework, time watching television and time going out with friends).

A Professional Inquiry

It may be helpful to reflect as a school team on how you are helping parents recognize that their efforts to support learning at home, regardless of how big or small, are important to the success of their child and to the school as a whole.

Sample reflective questions:

- Do our existing parent and community partnerships reflect the diversity of our families both in the school and wider community?
- Are we offering a range of support strategies (e.g., workshops, tip sheets, translation of materials) to enable parents to contribute to their child’s learning in the home environment?
- Are we encouraging school council members and other parents to share ideas for improving student learning and achievement? Are these ideas part of our school improvement planning?
- Are we monitoring school climate both to help identify barriers and to address them?

The Power of Positive Beliefs

It may be stating the obvious, but when engaging families we need to maintain positive beliefs in ourselves and, in turn, inspire positive beliefs in students and in parents. Inspiration and belief often grow through action, as does the building of relationships, connecting through the work that is accomplished together. Therefore, we need to:

- Move from empathy to action.
- Start small – be patient and persistent.
- Accept that it may be messy, it may not be perfect.

Importance of a common language ...

“Some parents know how to speak the language of schooling and thus provide an advantage for their children during the school years; while others do not know this language, which can be a major barrier to the home contributing to achievement.”

(Hattie, 2009, p. 71)

Building parent efficacy ...

“The results of studies of parent training workshops show that parents who are assisted to become more effectively involved in reading-related activities conduct more and better interactions about reading with their children and that the students improve their reading and literacy skills.”

(Sheldon, 2009, p. 43)

Educators and parents working together for students and student learning is the central focus.

Evidence from Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) review of transformational leadership and large-scale reform indicates that parent engagement is nurtured when parents believe they have the skills and know-how to make meaningful contributions to the school’s efforts and when they believe that school staffs, as well as their own children, value their participation in the school. But what do meaningful contributions actually look like? How can we help parents come to believe they have the know-how to engage with their child’s learning?

Simply acknowledging, for example, that “You don’t need to know how to do the homework to help” can begin to open up the concept of engagement for many parents. Recognizing and helping parents understand and define other important roles they can assume with their children is important – roles such as being a listener, a mentor, a coach, a co-learner or a guide. When parents assume these types of supportive roles, they encourage their children’s learning (*Building Parent Engagement*, 2011).

The challenges that families experience – being pressed for time, scheduling conflicts, thinking they do not have anything to contribute – are real and should not be ignored. Given the realities, the challenge for educators is to ensure that their parent engagement strategy is differentiated to meet the needs of the individual families within their community. Recognizing and acknowledging family realities, whatever they may be, is key to an open and integrated approach to engagement; however, educators need to move beyond empathy to providing concrete actions and suggestions for parents (*Building Parent Engagement*, 2011).

Tips for Parent Engagement Focused on Student Learning

- Ask parents what they need.
- Provide materials on ways to help children/youth at home.
- Routinely communicate news about progress – especially accomplishments and evidence of growth.
- Encourage a broad understanding of what it means to “help” – listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, discussing and (most important) asking questions that elicit conversation all count.
- Remind parents that they exert their greatest influence on their children’s learning by talking to them about their interests and experiences – not by drilling for facts or grilling for test results (Carl Corter cited in *The Globe and Mail*, 2012, p. L2).
- Redefine “homework” to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive assignments shared with others at home or in the community (Joyce Epstein cited in OPC, CPCO, & ADFO, 2011, p. 83).
- Create classroom opportunities that call on parents and students to work together on tasks that have real-life applications.
- Display student work in public spaces such as libraries and malls to celebrate the value of what students are learning in the broader community.

Creating Authentic Connections

Classroom teachers have the most opportunity for ongoing, authentic contact with individual families. A caring, inclusive, co-learning classroom environment helps to create the context where open conversations can flourish, where we listen to understand and identify real, rather than perceived needs, where we listen to and honour all voices, where we work to build shared understanding with our students and their families.

Educators who proactively celebrate success – certainly with the learners in their classrooms, but also through contacts with parents – are making relationship investments. These investments become particularly significant when problems and issues arise. The quality of parent-teacher interactions has been shown to be “positively related to students’ social and emotional adjustment” (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999).

There are times where educators engage with students and their families in problem-solving conversations and communications. In terms of verbal, written or digital communication, listening and “reading between the lines” become synonymous. Allowing our “listening” in this broad sense to be disrupted by different, perhaps challenging perspectives is an opportunity to discover new questions and concerns, and to co-create resolutions to those concerns.

Seeking Emergent Possibilities

Suspending judgment, listening openly and focusing on strengths when entering into conversations with families can help all parties to arrive at a deeper understanding. Together, parent, child and educator can work to uncover the promise inherent in a true partnership. Competing needs and interests become “co-created” needs and interests. It is not always an easy thing, but by encouraging thinking and risk taking in a safe environment, respectful, solution-seeking relationships can be fostered.

It is through conversations with our families that we seek emergent possibilities. A parent, for example, may develop a new understanding of their child as a learner, which may lead to new ideas about parent support and involvement at home. An educator may be able to link observations and information shared by the parents with patterns of learning observed in the classroom, thereby, framing a more effective classroom strategy. And most significantly, the student, as a self-directed learner, may contribute to joint decision-making and shared high expectations in terms of a plan to propel learning forward with the support of teachers and parents.

Together We Can

In the words of the Ontario’s Chief Student Achievement Officer Mary Jean Gallagher, “Experience and research tell us that parents who have confidence in themselves, in their children and in their school can make a difference in their children’s learning and achievement. When parents hold high expectations for their children – and have concrete information on how to help them – everyone benefits” (*Webcasts for Educators*, 2012). The acknowledgement of the importance of partnership and the positive influence of parents on their children’s learning and their future success – lies at the heart of the Ontario approach to parent engagement.

As schools and boards reflect on their parent engagement strategies for the months and years ahead, four guiding principles may be helpful to consider:

1. Foster and sustain a positive, welcoming school climate in which all parent perspectives are encouraged, valued and heard.
2. Identify and remove barriers to parent engagement that may prevent some parents from fully participating in their children’s learning.
3. Support parents with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to support student learning at home and at school.
4. Review and expand communication and outreach strategies such as local workshops, presentations, tools, and resources, to share information and strategies related to supporting learning at home and parent engagement in schools.

When problems arise ...

Problem-solving models are used across all curriculum areas. When employed by parents and educators alike, students benefit from a common perspective. These questions form a four-step problem-solving approach.

1. Define the task or problem and describe the desired result.
2. Brainstorm ideas and decide which idea to use.
3. Make a plan.
4. Try it out.

Keep in mind that flexible and common-sense application is the key – “a tool, not a rule.”

Hitting Some Home Runs

“... half of the achievement we’re responsible for as educators happens out there, so if we can do something out there to encourage more productive learning conditions, we can hit some home runs.” – Ken Leithwood



Although there is no one formula or set of practices that guarantee success, schools with a proven record to engage parents in student learning keep focused on the following:

- Design parent engagement activities with busy family schedules in mind.
- Make parent engagement activities meaningful, relevant and authentic so that parents consider it worthy of their time.
- Acknowledge different parenting styles and family circumstances.
- Keep the partnership going through ongoing communication and dialogue to reinforce the importance of the role parents play in their child’s education.
- Make outreach inclusive, reaching out to all parents especially those who may not feel included in the life of the school and those whose children who may be experiencing challenges.
- Build positive relationships and create a welcoming school climate.

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