



The Missing Piece: Meaningful Professional Learning to Improve Family-School Partnerships

Every day in classrooms and schools across the country a familiar scene occurs. Committed teachers worry that their students are not mastering the content and are in danger of falling behind because there is not enough time in the school day to work with their students. These same teachers ask parents to work with their children at home to help support what is being taught in the classroom, but wish there was more parent involvement. Unfortunately, most educators state that engaging parents in their children's education is challenging because their coursework and preparation did not provide the requisite skills to work with families as partners in helping students learn and achieve. As you picture this scenario, reflect back on your road to education and recall what, if any, formal training and support you received in preparation to work with families.

- Nearly all teachers (97%) indicate that they want parents to get more involvedⁱ
- Almost one out of every two teachers (47%) identify a lack of parent involvement as a source of frustration
- The majority of both principals (72%) and teachers (73%) identify engaging parents and the community in improving the education of students as challenging or very challenging for school leadersⁱⁱ

Over fifty years of research consistently points to family-school partnerships as one of the pillars of high-achieving schools and an effective strategy to support student academic achievement. However, educators often report that they are unprepared to actively engage parents and receive little or no training in developing effective practices to work with families. Under Title I, Part Aⁱⁱⁱ, the regulations clearly state that schools and districts are responsible for educating their staff on the value and utility of parent contributions including how to reach out to, communicate with and work with parents as equal partners. With increasing awareness to strengthen family engagement programs, there is a practical concern that this will add even more to the educator's already crowded plate. However, building partnerships with families should be seen as a proactive measure that will improve communication and create positive relationships so faculty and staff can foster the additional support to assist students. Studies show that parent involvement is not only associated with higher levels of student academic achievement, but also reduces teacher turnover and fatigue^{iv}.

Attention to the value of family-school partnerships is not only found in federal policies and university research, but teacher and administrator evaluations also include family engagement criteria. The Georgia Department of Education's Leader and Teacher Keys Effectiveness Systems^v both include professional standards that assess an educator's ability to create an accessible, positive school climate for all stakeholders and communicate effectively with parents and guardians. To ensure educators meet the expectations for their profession, there is real merit and clear need to provide them with the resources and means to learn how to build and sustain family engagement initiatives that are linked to student learning.

As you continue reading, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How can Title I schools provide their faculty and staff with meaningful professional learning to strengthen their skills and knowledge to build family-school partnerships that increase student achievement?
2. How effective are the current methods for educators to learn about family engagement? How do we measure the effectiveness?
3. What changes do we need to make to better prepare educators in Title I schools to partner with families? ^{vi}

The first step towards answering these questions is to determine and develop the school conditions that will build the staff's capacity to work with parents. Meaningful professional learning is more than just a singular faculty meeting conducted during the most convenient time. As defined by the Metlife Study^{vii}, "effective professional development also encompasses helping teachers address aspects of the school context that are beyond their capacity to handle alone, but if left unchecked could hinder their ability to teach". While not all faculty and staff may view family engagement in the school as their primary responsibility, it could negatively impact the overall school environment and individual

classroom settings if ignored. Educators in Title I schools must be particularly sensitive to this notion of family-school partnerships as they are tasked with reaching out and assisting not just the active and available parents, but all families in ways to help their child succeed academically. When designated to only one individual, this responsibility becomes a difficult challenge that is rarely met with overwhelming success. Many families of the students they teach face additional obstacles such as negative perceptions or experiences with schools or time, transportation or childcare that limit their availability and accessibility to be actively involved in school events and activities. Therefore, it is critical and logical that all faculty and staff receive the proper training surrounding family engagement so the entire school can collaboratively develop strategies and opportunities that allow families to actively support their child's education and overcome these barriers.

We know that the most effective family engagement programs are systemic, integrated and sustainable; therefore, teachers need the same level of assistance in order to implement and strengthen those programs. The most constructive professional learning methods allow educators opportunities to learn and practice new skills as well as provide ongoing support to encourage development. In classrooms, teachers provide instruction that improves students' knowledge and skills as determined by informal and formal assessments. When students do not reach their goals, they receive feedback and assistance. Comparably, we need to move away from a schedule-based view of our own professional learning and shift towards a growth-based mindset that focuses on effectiveness and measures progress.

Meaningful professional learning to improve family-school partnerships should be:

- Leadership Driven – set the standard and provide feedback and assessment
- Need Based – align with school improvement initiatives
- Schoolwide Investment – encourage collaborative efforts and mentorship
- Goal Orientated – determine objectives to track individual and school progress
- Regularly Supported – provide ongoing opportunities to share ideas, develop and practice skills

Building professional capacity and sustaining parent-community ties are recognized as essential supports for school improvement.^{viii} To develop these supports, schools need to first provide their staff with the ongoing support and training to implement the best practices that will actively engage families in their children's education. In doing so, family engagement will no longer be seen as a challenge or source of frustration for educators, but an effective strategy to achieve school goals and improve student academic achievement.

Please visit the following websites to learn more about developing effective professional learning practices to strengthen family-school partnerships in your Title I school as well as discover additional family engagement topics.

[Georgia Department of Education's Parent Engagement Program](#)

[U.S. Department of Education Family and Community Engagement](#)

[Harvard Family Research Project Family Involvement](#)

ⁱ This survey was conducted online within the United States by Harris Poll on behalf of University of Phoenix between Oct. 7 and Oct. 21, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Markow, D., Macia, L., & Lee, (2012). *The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*. New York, N.Y: Metlife.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Section 1118 (e).

^{iv} Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). *The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago public schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

^v Georgia Department of Education (2014). Teacher Keys Effectiveness System and Leader Keys Effectiveness Systems Implementation Handbooks.

^{vi} Lopez, M. & Patton, C. (2013). *Strengthening Family Engagement Through Teacher Preparation and Professional Development*. Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter, 5(4).

^{vii} Markow, D., & Cooper, M. (2008). *The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present, and Future*. New York, N.Y.

^{viii} Anthony S. Bryk et al, (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, (University of Chicago Press).