



## **Part III:**

# **Families and Schools**





## A Framework for Partnerships

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Topic



Despite the consistent findings that family and community engagement has a powerful effect on student success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2005), educational practitioners have tended to place the engagement of family members on a back burner, often viewing it as an afterthought or add-on to the delivery of instruction or outside the influence of teachers, school staff, or school administrators (Epstein, 2011). Research has shown, however, that family involvement is influenced by the actions of teachers and other school personnel and should be considered an important aspect of teachers' and administrators' professional roles (Epstein, 2011; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). In the majority of schools throughout this country, however, the implementation of family and community engagement practices are "random acts," dependent on the personal beliefs of teachers (National Family, School, and Community Working Group, 2010). For all students to benefit from a supportive home and community these efforts need to be coordinated across classrooms and supported by state, district, and school leaders (Epstein, 2011; National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, 2010). For this to occur, educators need a framework that can support and sustain family and community engagement practices.

### **Components of Strong School Partnership Programs**

At Johns Hopkins University, over 15 years of research and educational practice have focused on school, family, and community partnerships. Based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2011), a framework was developed about how family and community engagement can become a sustainable aspect of school organization and culture (Epstein et al., 2009). Four organizational principles can serve as the foundation for the development of a strong school, family, and community partnership program: (1) employing teamwork; (2) writing annual, goal-oriented action plans; (3) using a multidimensional definition of involvement or engagement; and (4) evaluating partnership practices. These principles have been shown to work with schools and districts to make family and community engagement a more integrated aspect of schooling.

### ***Teamwork***

As a first step in establishing a partnership program, schools need to form an Action Team for Partnership (ATP). The ATP members include teachers, school administrators, parents, community members, and, at the high school level, students. At least one member of the ATP should also be a member of the School Improvement Team (SIT) so that partnership efforts are in concert with other school improvement efforts. The ATP chair should communicate with the school principal and attend SIT meetings. A primary responsibility of the ATP is to construct an annual action plan in the spring that will coordinate, guide, and document the family and community engagement efforts the following school year.

### ***Annual Action Plans***

The annual action plan should link family and community involvement activities to specific goals, consistent with and supportive of those established by the SIT. Action plans with the same student and school goals as the school improvement team can work with, rather than in opposition to, other programs at the school. ATPs should set two academic goals (i.e., improved reading or math achievement test performance), one nonacademic goal (i.e., improved attendance or behavior), and a goal of improving the partnership climate at the school (see Epstein et al., 2009).

### ***The Six Types of Involvement***

For each goal on the action plan, schools should implement a variety of practices that will engage families in their children's schooling in multiple ways. A research-based framework outlines six types of involvement that help create effective school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, 2011). Schools with comprehensive programs of partnership implement activities encouraging all six types of involvement across the four goals: (1) parenting—helping all families establish supportive home environments for children; (2) communicating—establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress; (3) volunteering—recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other locations; (4) learning at home—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students

with homework and other curriculum-related materials; (5) decision making—having family members serve as representatives and leaders on school committees; and (6) collaborating with the community—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs.

In addition to providing opportunities for involvement, schools need to confront challenges associated with involving families in their children's education. Because research shows there is variation in family engagement according to the education levels of the child, educational attainment of the parents, and family structure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 2003), schools must examine their partnership practices and assess the degree to which they reach out to all of their students' families. For example, schools cannot solely provide family members volunteer opportunities at school, but need to develop ways in which families can support the school and students from locations including home, work, or the neighborhood (Epstein et al., 2009). By recognizing and addressing the challenges families face, schools can inform and involve parents across racial, educational, and socioeconomic groups.

### ***Evaluation***

Finally, school and ATP leaders need to conduct ongoing and end-of-year evaluations of their partnership program and practices. In evaluating the partnership program, ATP members are able to identify strengths and weaknesses, demonstrate outcomes from the activities, and send a message that partnerships are valued at the school (Epstein et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2009; Weiss, 1998). Studies demonstrate that partnership programs are more likely to improve and maintain a higher level of quality if the ATP

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participates in an end-of-year evaluation of the program and if feedback is obtained from families participating in family engagement activities (Sheldon, 2009; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

In addition to these four organizational principles, there are a variety of contextual factors within a school that are important to establishing a strong partnership program. Research shows that strong partnership programs have support from the principal (Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004), support from the school district (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011), and support among the teachers and school community (Sanders, Sheldon, & Epstein, 2005). Strong partnership programs, in turn, are more likely to get families involved at the school, have higher student performance on achievement tests, and are more likely to improve daily student attendance (Sheldon, 2003, 2005, 2007; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

### **District Level Partnership Programs**

Having multilevel leadership on family and community engagement reinforces the idea that this is a valued part of schooling. District leaders, therefore, have important roles in guiding and motivating principals and school teams to develop and implement strong partnership programs (Epstein et al., 2009; Epstein et al., 2011). District leaders for partnerships can develop clear policies to guide all schools' partnership programs, organize and offer professional development workshops to school teams, help teams write plans for goal-oriented partnership programs, share best practices, and help schools evaluate their program activities. These supports are also critical to sustaining the work in schools to support families in ways that can lead to improved student learning and achievement.

### **State Level Partnership Programs**

Support for partnerships is also needed at the state level. Finding a consistent framework to guide the work of all states, however, is challenging, given variation in state size, the number of school districts, and numerous other factors. State leaders can support district and school implementation of the partnership framework described above by writing a state-level policy supporting family and community engagement

practices. Also, states can offer or direct funding to provide district and school educators professional development on school, family, and community partnerships. Finally, at the state level, leaders can establish partnership advisory boards with representation from districts across the state. These boards can provide state leaders insight and perspectives about the local needs of educators to promote greater family and community engagement.

We know that schools and districts can develop and sustain strong school, family, and community partnership programs. The action principles described above set forth a foundation on which strong outreach to families and community partners can benefit all students. For further ideas about specific practices to engage families, visit the National Network of Partnership Schools on the web ([www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org)). There you can find additional information about the principles described here, examine promising partnership practices, and see examples of strong school, district, and state programs.

## **Action Principles**

### **State Education Agency**

1. Write a state-level policy supporting family and community engagement practices.
2. Offer or direct funding to provide district and school educators professional development on school, family, and community partnerships.
3. Establish partnership advisory boards with representation from districts across the state.

### **Local Education Agency**

1. District leaders for partnerships develop clear policies to guide all schools' partnership programs.
2. Organize and offer professional development workshops to school teams.
3. Help teams write plans for goal-oriented partnership programs.
4. Share best practices.
5. Help schools evaluate their program activities.

**School**

1. Form an Action Team for Partnership.
2. Link family and community involvement activities to specific goals, consistent with and supportive of those established by the SIT.
3. Conduct ongoing and end-of-year evaluations of their partnership program and practices.

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