

Collaborative Practices with Families

In today's world of education reform and the goal of having students ready for college and career, we must think out of the box and incorporate strategies that may be challenging yet effective in improving outcomes for all students, especially students with special needs. Effective Communication and Collaboration are included in evidence based practices that are keys to improving educational outcomes for all students. Meaningful stakeholder involvement in education has proven to reduce conflict and improve overall performance in a school environment. The good news is there has been years of work around this concept. There are strategies, practices and curriculum that can be formally implemented into pedagogy; but educators, families and the professionals that work with them must embrace the importance of collaborative practice as a priority. Although, as educators we must collaborate with all team members; in this article, I will focus on the importance of family engagement and parent involvement while citing publications that are available to review and find direct resources to improve on meaningful collaboration. First let's touch on the research, followed by resources and strategies!

Taken together, decades of research strongly suggest that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. When schools support families to be involved at home and a school, students achieve at higher levels, no matter what their background. In short, when parents are involved in education, children do better in school and schools get better. According to *A New Wave of Evidence; the Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement, a review of recent research published by National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, SEDL, students with meaningfully involved parents are more likely to:*

- Earn higher grades and test scores
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post-secondary education

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. This fourth edition of Evidence confirms that the research continues to grow and build an ever-strengthening case. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. (Ann Henderson, Karen Mapp; 2010)

Family, school, and community engagement in education should be an essential strategy in building a pathway to college---and career---readiness in today's competitive global society. Research repeatedly correlates family engagement with student achievement, yet this strategy is rarely activated as an integral part of school reform efforts. Now is the time to transform family engagement strategies so that they are intentionally aligned with student learning and achievement. (Heather B. Weiss, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg; National Policy Forum on Family, School and Community Engagement; Harvard Family Research Project)

Henderson and Mapp, along with Heather Weiss and Joyce Epstein are some of the pioneers in the field of family engagement and parent involvement. Their websites and publications are FULL of resources, activities and evidence based strategies to improve school, family and community collaboration.

- Harvard Family Research Project: <http://www.hfrp.org/>
- Dr. Karen Mapp ; Lecturer on Education at Harvard University, talks about the recipe for school improvement. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PO2dZsshoMg>

The five ingredients are:

- i. School leadership
- ii. Professional Capacity (talented staff willing to learn)
- iii. Instructional Guidance (professional development for staff)
- iv. Student center learning climate (keeping students at the center of the school)
- v. **Parent and Community Engagement**

In addition her book *Beyond the Bake Sale; the Essential Guide to Family/School Partnerships* – is a must read for all educators, you will be shocked at how simple strategies can shift conflict to support and collaboration! Link to a CADRE Webinar power point that includes the framework in the book.

<http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/pdf/BuildingCapacityEffectiveFE%202013.pdf>

- Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Dr. Joyce Epstein; Johns Hopkins University: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>
- Recognizing the need for overall improvement in collaborative practice, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announces release of the U. S. Department of Education's Family and Community Engagement Framework for families, schools, districts, states, and the broader communities to build capacity for student achievement and school improvement. <http://www.ed.gov/family-and-community-engagement>
- IDEA Partnership; National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE); Leading by Convening – Authentic Engagement - <http://www.ideapartnership.org/documents/NovUploads/Blueprint%20USB/NASDSE%20Leading%20by%20Convening%20Book.pdf>

I could go on for pages giving you resources to help you implement meaningful stakeholder involvement but you must want it and embrace it as a priority. There will always be a very small percentage of parents who may not want to work collaboratively or thrive on conflict but they are not the majority! We know that parents care about their children, as do the majority of educators. We all have the same goal, if we can keep the child's needs as the center of our work we can typically come to consensus around any issue. Remember consensus can sometimes mean to agree to disagree but overall we can live with the decision made in the best interest of the child.

The bottom line is we are here to help, whether it is a family that you are working closely with and need some ideas and support or there is a family that historically becomes adversarial and is difficult to collaborate with, we can help you move forward. As you all know, our services are free and our goal is

always to avoid conflict and create agreement whenever possible. If I could leave you all with one strategy that is sure to improve outcomes it would be this one:

Have all staff make at least one positive call to every family, introduce themselves and tell the parent something positive about their child. I know you are all busy, grading papers on a weekend night, doing lesson plans during lunch break and you may be thinking... "how could I possibly fit 10/25/60 phone calls into my schedule?". The time spent to make these phone calls can save you hours of time in the upcoming academic year. Unfortunately, parents and students are used to only punitive phone calls, when there is a problem or an issue that must be resolved. There is nothing better than a professional calling to tell a parent how great their child is and how happy they are to have this student in their class/school building. Think about it...put yourself in the parent's shoes, most of the time the parents recognize that their child may present with challenges but is unaware of how to help the situation. Build a bridge, build a relationship, and work as a TEAM!

The mission of the Long Island Parent Center (hosted by the Center for Community Inclusion @ LIU and funded by the NYS Education Department) is to provide parents of children with disabilities, in conjunction with the professionals who service their children, with information and resources necessary to promote meaningful involvement in their children's education programs. Please visit our website to contact us or get more information. www.liparentcenterliu.org

The Long Island Parent Center and the Long Island Association of Special Education Administrators have a commitment to each other, we will work together, collaboratively whenever possible always focusing on the interest of our students.