Home-school partnerships: What schools can do

Successful and effective partnerships are multi-dimensional and responsive to family and community needs. They are socially responsible and focus on building collaborative relationships based on mutual respect. They are also comprehensive, well-planned, embedded in whole school development plans, and long-lasting. Effective home-school partnerships are characterised by:

- A belief that schools, families and students share responsibility for student success

- A commitment to joint action

- A student focus

- Positive attitudes about the perceived benefits of partnership for student learning

- A degree of shared understanding about the purpose of the partnership and each partner's role, developed through responsive dialogue

- Shared decision-making, aims and goals, based on a common understanding of children's educational strengths and needs

- The allocation of complementary roles that take account of families', students' and teachers' unique characteristics

- Approaches that are solution- focused and emphasise active collaboration to create optimal learning conditions

- Frequent, two-way communication

How schools can develop effective home-school partnerships

For successful and effective partnerships, schools need:

1. **A shared belief in and commitment to the importance of partnership for children's learning and well-being.** This should incorporate:

   - **Positive attitudes** towards the benefits of partnership for students' learning and

   - **Strengths-based, rather than deficit-based, views** of families' strengths, values, beliefs and home context

   - Awareness of each partner's **roles and practices**

   - Value for **family diversity** within an environment that is respectful, open and inclusive

   - The c**ommitment** of staff, and particularly the principal

   - **Common understandings and expectations** about the benefits and challenges of effective partnerships

2. **Collaborative processes and practices,** including:

   - **A written policy** which sets out a wide range of ways in which families can be involved in their children's education, and the ways in which schools and teachers support families to do this

   - **A focus on students' learning and well-being**, rather than just seeking involvement with school activities such as fundraising or governance

   - **A sensitivity to the wide-ranging circumstances** of families and students, so that a variety of options for involvement and opportunities to work together are offered

   - Efforts to **consult and listen** to find out the real needs of families rather than making assumptions

3. **Timely, positive two-way (home to school and school to home) communication,** incorporating:

   - A commitment to two-way communication and an understanding of how it is important

   - An understanding of barriers to communication

   - The alignment of school and home practices

   - Structures and processes for solving problems and resolving differences

   - Families' ready access to information about their child's learning, progress and achievement

   - Empowered families who participate in setting goals and developing career pathways for their child, shared decision-making, and sharing ideas and strategies for supporting their child's learning and well-being

4. **Partnership plans, resources and reviews,** which involve:

   - A strong, cohesive vision for home-school partnerships

   - School and community-wide commitment for partnership that makes family engagement a central priority rather than a bolt-on extra

   - A team to coordinate development and progress of home-school partnership work

   - Goal setting which focuses on student achievement and involves the regular sharing of student achievement data with students and families.

   - Ongoing professional development on implementing a range of aspects of parental involvement

   - Regular evaluations of the effectiveness of partnership practices

5. **Time,** on average at least **three years** to implement good quality, comprehensive multi-dimensional home school partnerships.

First steps for strengthening home-school partnership in your school

1. Conduct a review of partnership activities and relationships, find out parents' impressions of current partnership activities, and look to extend and consolidate successful practices.

2. Discover whether parents want to become partners with the school, what their vision of partnership is, and what goals they would like partnership to address. Make a thorough assessment of families' needs.

3. Seek to understand the strategies and supports that will be necessary to develop parents' skills and knowledge, implement two-way communication systems, tap into family and community strengths and resources, empower families in decision-making about teaching and learning in the school, and create meaningful opportunities for participation. Be aware that families are more likely to be involved in their children's education when schools make a greater effort to engage them, so be prepared to offer a number of invitations and opportunities for participation and involvement.

4. Examine carefully the models and rhetoric of partnership in your school, which might in fact be focused on shaping parents' attitudes and practices to meet the needs of the school, and to facilitate the schooling of the child, rather than supporting the individual students and families in appropriate ways. Create a staff room culture in which parents are seen as genuine partners in the students' education. This might mean overcoming negative stereotypes of certain cultural groups.

5. Embed partnership ideas in current practice and school development plans, and plan both long and short time scales for implementation that include indicators of success. Reflect and evaluate partnership activities, strategies and priorities at regular intervals.

Common pitfalls to avoid

Try not to:

- Confuse engagement with the school with engagement with learning. Parents might not be involved in partnership activities carried out in the school but be very involved with the learning of their children at home.

- Privilege the more visible forms of engagement or those more directly helpful to teachers and schools (such as attending parent-teacher interviews, helping with homework, or volunteering in school) as this can negate the 'invisible' ways that families are engaged in their children's learning. Instead find ways to uncover, document and validate the effectiveness of the many ways that families support their children's education.

- Be too specific about teacher-set goals to be supported by home-school partnerships, which may mean that partnership becomes skewed in favour of families following advice and directions from teachers.

- Overlook or undermine current family practices with school-championed initiatives for home-school partnership. Instead, find out about culturally valued practices that might support learning and discuss how these can be brought together to create learning opportunities for students that one partner could not provide on their own. The aim is not to make homes more like school, but to draw on families' areas of expertise to optimise learning for students and to add to family practices rather than undermine them.

- Fail to recognise deficit thinking in regard to parents. Any kind of attempt at home-school partnership will be undermined by deficit or stereotypical assumptions, while empowering approaches that are responsive to families and their context are will be most effective.

- Reduce support for families that are already involved in their children's learning, in order to focus on families who are not yet engaged.

- Offer one-way communication. Make it clear that families are respected as partners that have something valuable to contribute.

- Have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, assuming all parents are the same, or that there is one 'best' way to parent children based on your own experiences.

- Use externally created programmes without adapting them to suit your school, families and community.

Further Reading

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