



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Family and Community Engagement

As a classroom teacher, you may ask yourself, "How effectively do I involve family and community members in the education of my students?" This issue of *Teachers' Desk Reference* provides practical strategies for involving these members as partners in education. It also provides valuable resources for increasing successful outcomes for all students.

The "Who"

When home, school, and community come together to educate a child, everyone benefits. To reach the goals and visions for all students in the commonwealth, local educational agencies (LEAs) must consider the importance of engaging their stakeholders. Teachers, paraprofessionals, superintendents, related service providers, school nurses, psychologists, administrators, families, guidance counselors, community members, and others have a direct impact on the success of students.

Today, the family unit is comprised of many different individuals raising children. A child's "parent" may be a biological mother or father

or another adult who has legal responsibility for the child's physical and educational welfare, including foster parents. Community members can play an important part in a student's life, not only during the student's school years, but into adulthood. They are potential employers, employees, coworkers, neighbors, and caregivers for our students. The community has a vested interest in the academic and social outcomes of its youth.

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The "Why"

There are many research-based reasons to increase family and community engagement in schools. Thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a powerful influence on children's achievement in school.¹ Research clearly points to a strong correlation between

parent involvement and student achievement.² When schools implement intentional and intensive parent engagement strategies, there is a significant rise in student achievement scores.³

¹Henderson & Berla, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1994.

²Epstein, 2005; Furger, 2006; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002.

³Redding, et al., 2004.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, PL 107-110, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, PL 108-446, also address parent involvement, adding a legal component that directs this practice. Research shows the following benefits:

- Reduced absenteeism and drop-out rates
- Greater occurrence of post-secondary education
- Increased homework completion
- Increase in students' positive attitudes and behaviors
- Improved relationships between home and school
- Greater job satisfaction for teachers
- Reduced conflicts

The “How”

What does successful family and community engagement look like? The Pennsylvania Department of Education, in collaboration with its stakeholders, has developed a Family Engagement Training Series, based on the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Standards for Family-School Partnerships. The goal of this series is to enhance family and community engagement in the commonwealth to positively impact the outcomes of its students.

Below are brief descriptions of the six standards of family and community engagement, modeled after the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships. Under each standard are a few practical strategies taken from the Enhancing Parent Involvement Training Modules developed in Pennsylvania. These approaches will assist you in achieving effective family and community engagement.

Standard 1: Welcoming All Families –

Schools that offer a welcoming environment and respect and recognize the value of family

and community involvement produce positive outcomes for all. Establish and foster an inclusive, supportive, and accepting culture in your classroom that engages students, their families, and the community.

- Consider cultural beliefs as they relate to greetings, matriarchal or patriarchal lines of authority, and cultural values regarding issues such as time and privacy.
- Make your classroom physically accessible and inviting to all, including individuals who use wheelchairs or walkers, who are blind or have low vision, or who have other impairments.
- Be positive when describing differences. Avoid negative and judgmental language.

Standard 2: Communicating Effectively –

School staff and families should engage in consistent, two-way, meaningful exchanges about student learning. This helps in establishing and maintaining healthy family/school partnerships.

- Vary the method of delivering correspondence. Use technology, correspondence sent home with students, even home visits.
- Vary the days and times of events. Most families have working adults with varying schedules. Offer events (in person or electronically) more than one day or time, to give families a greater opportunity to participate.

Standard 3: Supporting Student Success –

Information must be shared between school and home. This ensures that students are supported across settings and strengthens their depth of learning and academic performance.

- Host meetings of school administrators and families to discuss school policies, state initiatives, benchmarks, assessments, and grading and evaluation procedures.
- Maintain portfolios of students' work for viewing by families upon request or at events.

- Develop a two-way communication system between school and families, centered on students' social, emotional, and academic goals and progress.
- Offer workshops for families to engage them in their child's educational experience, based on families' needs and interests. Do they need help understanding the new math curriculum? Social media? Bullying prevention?

Standard 4: Speaking Up for Every Child –

Each student should have a family member or another adult who takes personal responsibility for understanding the student's needs academically, physically and emotionally, and who communicates the student's learning needs effectively.

- Guide families in accessing the services of the guidance counselor and school psychologist.
- Personally invite families that you feel are less likely to attend an event by making a phone call or sending a personalized email. Showing concern and compassion by reaching out to families whose child is at risk for emotional, academic, social or behavioral issues.

Standard 5: Sharing Decision Making –

Families who understand their child's program and program options, rights, and responsibilities are better able to meaningfully participate and contribute to their child's successful outcomes. This knowledge gives parents an equal playing field when participating in educational decision making.

- Ask family members to sit on policy-making committees in your school.
- Involve families in decisions regarding curriculum for students.
- Invite family members to participate in learning communities, training, and professional development activities.

Standard 6: Collaborating with Community –

All stakeholders need to become aware of the benefits of successful partnerships and how each contributes towards positive effects for students.

- Match access to community services with families' needs so that school becomes the "hub" of the community network.
- Recognize how a community's historic, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural resources can generate interest and strengthen family/community relationships.
- Develop a variety of outreach tools to inform families, businesses, and the community about family engagement policies and programs.
- Invite community members into your classroom, or visit their establishment to increase awareness of community services and responsibilities.

For more information about the Standards, visit <http://tinyurl.com/pattan-parent-training>

Additional Considerations

Here are some other suggestions for increasing family and community engagement for the purpose of strong student outcomes that result in learners ready for postsecondary education, employment, or independent living. Key considerations should be the development of trusting, collaborative relationships with two way communication, as well as the commitment to addressing families' needs while recognizing cultural differences.

- Post homework assignments electronically, as well as having the student record them on paper.
- Ask a student's family member to share a skill, talent, or career with your class.

- Vary routines and family events, such as Back-to-School Night. Employ creative ideas to encourage families engage and participate, not simply be the recipients of information from school personnel.
- Use resources available to you. Who in the community can make a positive impact on your class? A local service provider? A business owner? A member of a faith community? How about a civil servant or veteran? Solicit ideas from them on working together to benefit the education of your students.
- Engage family members by asking them what teacher they remember most from their school days. Why? What was it about that particular teacher that stuck with them? What can you learn from this information?
- Invite former students to speak with your class and offer insight and encouragement.
- Ask your students' siblings (younger or older) to volunteer in your classroom.
- Family members can help without coming into the school building. Consider having phone calls made by volunteer parents to inform families about an upcoming field trip or school event.
- Ask parents to help coordinate community/school partnerships, or items for a classroom activity. Perhaps a parent can collect gently used items you can use in your class.

Family and community involvement is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the school, district and community. Efforts should be grounded in a system-wide belief that parents are essential partners in the educational process supported through the leadership and enhanced through a culture of hospitality, teaching and learning.

Resources

Two PaTTAN publications, as well as professional development opportunities, are available through the PaTTAN website (www.pattan.net) to assist in the process of family and community engagement:

- *Top Five Reasons Schools Need to Engage Parents*
- *Enhancing Parent Involvement: A Practical Guide for Pennsylvania's Schools Supporting Students with Disabilities*

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