CENTER ON
PBIS Positive Behavioral
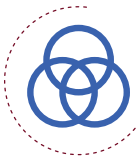Interventions & Supports

Family-School-
Community Alliance

ENHANCING FAMILY–SCHOOL COLLABORATION WITH DIVERSE FAMILIES

AMANDA WITTE, FELICIA SINGLETON,
TYLER SMITH, & PATTI HERSHFELDT

June 2021

# Enhancing Family–School Collaboration with Diverse Families

Authors   Amanda Witte   Tyler Smith
              Felicia Singleton   Patti Hershfeldt

A collaborative publication of the Family-School-Community Alliance and the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Introduction

This brief is designed to help inform school leaders about how intentional collaboration with diverse families can be created through environments in which educators work alongside families on behalf of the students they serve. Recommendations for action are included.
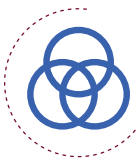
Key Takeaways

- Family-school collaboration results in positive outcomes for children, families, and teachers and may be particularly beneficial for families that are culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse.

- There are challenges to engaging culturally, linguistically and racially diverse families in the educational experiences of their school-aged children; however, these challenges can be addressed through changes or enhancements to current systems and policies.

- Key strategies for promoting equity in family-school partnerships include developing relationships, two-way home-school communication, and shared decision-making.

Benefits of Family-School Collaboration

When family-school collaboration is effective, it involves coordination, two-way communication, and a shared responsibility between families and schools. When collaboration is focused on improving children and adolescents' wellbeing, decades of research shows that children benefit. Benefits for school-aged children include improved academic (e.g. gaining knowledge, better grades; Smith et al., 2020), social (e.g., enhanced social skills, stronger relationships with peers and adults), behavioral (e.g., responsible decision-making, increased engagement, and enhanced understanding and respect for diversity), and mental health outcomes (e.g., decreased levels of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem; Sheridan et al., 2019).

Families also reap the rewards of effective collaboration, as research shows that parents and teachers have better relationships, families and schools communicate more often, and parents report improved attitudes about school (e.g., seeing school as more welcoming, and seeing themselves as partners in their child's learning experience; Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, family-school collaboration has been linked to greater teacher job satisfaction (Li & Hung, 2012) and higher teacher retention (Buckley et al., 2004). Lastly, family-school collaboration is also associated with improved school climate through authentic communication, solution focused problem solving and increased staff morale (Povey et al., 2016).

School personnel, including teachers and principals, play a key part in promoting family-school collaboration. For example, principals help shape school climate and facilitate family engagement in children's education by setting clear expectations, communicating effectively, and demonstrating support for family-school collaboration (Barr & Saltmarsh,

2014). Further, when teachers reach out to families about how to engage in their children's education, parents typically respond positively, appreciate teacher guidance, and report greater confidence in helping their children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; 1995.)

Evidence of Inequity

Many of the benefits discussed above are echoed for students and families of color (e.g., Jeynes, 2003; 2005); however, schools often struggle when attempting to partner with culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse families and report less engagement with minoritized families in comparison to White families (Smith et al., 2019). This may be due to differing values and beliefs between schools and families that are culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse (CLRD), which can lead to misunderstandings, a lack of trust, and poor relationships between parents and school personnel (Nieto, 2010; Wildcat, 2001). Others have argued that current U.S. family engagement policies are based on White, middle class beliefs about equity and parent roles (Gonzales & Gable, 2017), limiting their effectiveness for many families.

Unfortunately, these issues continue to negatively affect students and families that are CLRD when compared to White students on important educational outcomes (e.g., academic achievement; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). Further, students who are CLRD are more likely to receive referrals for discipline (Smolkowski et al., 2016) when compared to White students. Recognizing the benefits of family-school collaboration, it is extremely important to consider how culturally responsive practices can address these gaps, reduce inequity, and improve the wellbeing of students and families that are CLRD. Therefore, the current brief aims to provide research-based, equity-informed, practical strategies for school personnel to collaborate with and successfully engage diverse families.

Challenges to Equitable Family Collaboration

There are challenges to engaging families in the educational experience of their school-aged children; however, these challenges can be addressed through changes or enhancements to current systems and policies. Those challenges can be categorized into 3 themes: logistical considerations, family considerations, and educator considerations.

Logistical Considerations

Logistical challenges may be as simple as the time or location the meeting or event is scheduled. Families may be less likely to attend meetings scheduled during the school day due to jobs that allow little flexibility with scheduling or because of responsibilities at home (e.g., caring for younger children or aging family members during the day). Additionally, some may not have transportation to attend a school meeting or event when not a resident of the school's neighborhood. For families who are linguistically diverse, communication may also be a challenge. Not all school systems provide translators and certainly not all reproduce school communication and materials to reflect the various languages spoken in their school community.

Family Considerations

School can be an intimidating place for some families unless educators intentionally create a climate that welcomes family voice and choice. For instance, families have reported feeling judged when making attempts to engage in their children's school experience. Additionally, families with limited English language proficiency may lack an understanding of the hidden curriculum associated with schools and therefore are not always comfortable advocating for their children (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011). Those feelings of inadequacy and distrust prevent true partnerships between families and schools.

Families that are CLRD have also reported structural racism as a barrier to partnerships. Schools are designed to follow certain norms that do not necessarily represent the values, cultural expectations, and practices of the communities they serve (Moody & Ramos, 2014). For example, Latinx families have highlighted the conflict between the education system's promotion of independence, which is contrary to many Latinx families' belief that education is a community responsibility and should focus on collaboration and teamwork rather than independence. Similarly, Black families have indicated that it is typical to involve extended family and friends in caring for and educating children, yet this extended family network is often excluded from school communication and events. Instead, schools would benefit from broadening their outreach to include the extended network without passing judgement on the way in which many Black families define family (Moody & Ramos, 2014).

Educator Considerations

Educators often report wanting to build connections with all students and their families but feel unprepared to do so. The first step in building confidence may be to build cultural competency (both at the systemic and individual level) and commit to authentically 'inviting' ALL families to collaborate. Educators should approach family-school collaboration with transparency and empathy without judgement. On occasion, educators may express an unwillingness to recognize (or even label as "wrong") family practices that differ from those expected at school. Behaviors, however, have situational appropriateness, and the definition of "appropriate" varies across race, culture, and settings. For example, what may be taught as safe at school (i.e., telling an adult) can be dangerous in some communities. Thus, educators must teach which behaviors are appropriate for the particular time and place (i.e., school). It is prudent for educators to engage in self-reflection in order to identify potential biases that can interfere with or influence interactions with families.

Educators sometimes make assumptions that families have a basic understanding of the educational system when in fact they do not. This is especially true for immigrant families who may not have attended school in this country. Using educational jargon and referencing various evaluation tools and approaches to education can be confusing and may push families away.

It is important to also note that most teacher and educator pre-service programs do not include training specific to family engagement, so some

CENTER ON
PBIS Positive Behavioral
Interventions & Supports

Family-School-
Community Alliance

JUNE 2021

of the disconnect can be attributed to a lack of understanding and skills for building relationships with families. That said, when teacher training programs focus on family engagement, research shows that teachers' family engagement practices (e.g., home-school communication), attitudes (e.g., beliefs about families' roles in supporting children's education), and knowledge (e.g., understanding of beliefs/values of families that are CLRD) improve (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Thus, it is important for teachers to seek opportunities regarding training and professional development in family engagement.

Fundamental Attitudes for Creating Equity

Given the clear importance of family-school collaboration, it is important for educators to consider the need to address biases and utilize specific strategies needed for collaboration with all families. In particular, this section focuses on recognizing the education of children as a privilege and viewing parents/families as essential partners to establishing effective family-school collaboration.
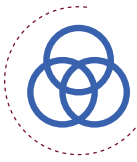
Educating Children is a Privilege

When families trust relative strangers—educators—with their children, there is an obligation to uphold that trust. Educators should work to ensure culturally relevant curriculum, responsive leadership, and meaningful cultural celebrations. Educators have a responsibility to deliver on the promise of education and create conditions where children feel safe. This can be achieved by treating each child with kindness, encouraging their curiosity, and igniting a love of

learning, believing, and achieving. By affirming for children that they are enough, the message to children is that they matter. Educators should honor racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a liability. They should focus on the stories behind statistics, know the names and not just the numbers. Learning students' names (the correct pronunciation), their families, and their stories can demonstrate an authentic desire to truly know the learners in the school community.

See Parents/Families as Partners

Be willing to operate from the "with" perspective by building bridges and crossing borders to cultivate a welcoming environment for families. This can help

CENTER ON

PBIS Positive Behavioral
Interventions & Supports

Family-School-
Community Alliance

JUNE 2021

to disrupt negative beliefs about school that parents
may have developed from their own experiences
when they were students. Understand the community
from which families come. Be careful of assumptions
and perspectives. Be authentic and intentional about
wanting to know what school means to families.
Do not minimize the contributions of each family.
Value them and weave them into the fabric of the
school culture. Value families as partners and offer
authentic invitations to families that include translation,
flexibility with locations and schedules, and offer
the necessary supports to allow for full participation
and engagement. Seek to take in diverse families'
stories and unique experiences. Dismantle privilege
by understanding and embracing culturally diverse
narratives beyond the dominant culture. Acknowledge
the many cultures flowing in and out of schools and
the unique individual significance and interpretation
(Brooks & Normore, 2010).

Strategies for Family-School Collaboration Equity in Tiered System of Supports

The following section provides key strategies for
promoting equity in family-school partnerships.
The recommendations align with the Family-School
Collaboration: Tiered Fidelity Inventory (Garbacz et al.,
2019), a tool to help educators measure the extent to
which they are integrating the core features essential
to family-school collaboration within schoolwide
positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

Develop Positive Relationships

- Connect school to the community.
  - Be visible in the community outside of school.
  - Hold school events where parents are: community centers, housing complexes, local industry, places of worship.
  - See learning as mutual - community elders and leaders have something to teach educators that may not be offered in teacher and leadership programs.
- Reflect on current parent-teacher and parent-administrator relationships. How would you characterize those relationships? How would the parents?
- Ask cultural liaisons or community leaders how best to foster positive relationships.

Commit to Meaningful Home-School Communication

- Secure multiple methods of two-way communication: email, telephone, postal mail, face to face. communication apps (e.g., REMIND, Blackboard).
- Ensure all family preferences for communication are carried out whenever possible.
- Communicate both good and bad news.

Develop Systemic Processes for Shared Decision-Making

- Seek input and involvement on decision making committees and boards.

- Solicit broad parent and family input on surveys.

- Collaborate with a diverse group of families and equity experts to create egalitarian policies/structures by identifying implicit and explicit forms of inclusion and carefully reviewing the following:

  - Staff and student handbooks

  - Student code of conduct and discipline policies

  - Schedules/academic programs

- Consider your current practices. For example, how are students identified for gifted/talented programs? Is it teacher nomination? Parent nomination? Are all parents asked about their children's gifts? Is screening available to all students?

Conclusion

Effective family-school collaboration results in positive outcomes for children, families, and teachers. Unfortunately, family-school collaboration is often not experienced by families of color due to a variety of challenges. The good news is that with careful attention to attitudes and practices educators and school leaders can overcome barriers and foster strong family-school collaboration with families that are CLRD. Within PBIS, effective family-school collaboration at each tier can promote equitable practices with families of color through relationship-building home-school communication, and shared decision-making that ultimately supports child development.

References

Barr, J., & Saltmarsh, S. (2014). "It all comes down to the leadership" The role of the school principal in fostering parent-school engagement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(4), 491-505. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213502189

Bolivar, J. M., & Chrispeels, J. H. (2011). Enhancing parent leadership through building social and intellectual capital. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(1), 4-8. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210366466

Brooks, J. S., Normore, A. H. (2010). Educational leadership and globalization: Literacy for a glocal perspective. *Educational Policy*, 24(1), 52-82. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904809354070

Buckley, J., Schneider, M., & Shang, Y. (2004). The effects of school facility quality on teacher retention in urban school districts. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for *Educational Facilities*, 24, 2005-132.

Garbacz, S. A., Minch, S., Cook, S., McIntosh, K., Weist, M, & Eagle, J. (2019). *Family School Collaboration: Tiered Fidelity Inventory (FSC: TFI)*. Family School Community Alliance and Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Measure under development.

Gonzales, S. M., & Gabel, S. L. (2017). Exploring involvement expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse parents: What we need to know in teacher education. International *Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(2), 61-81. https://doi.org./10.18251/ijme.v19i2.1376

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Bassler, O. C., & Brissie, J. S. (1992). Explorations in parent-school relations. *Journal of Educational Research*, 85(5), 287-294. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1992.9941128

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Bassler, O. C., & Burow, R. (1995). Parents' reported involvement in students' homework: Strategies and practices. *Elementary School Journal*, 95(5), 435- 450. https://doi.org/10.1086/461854

Jeynes, W. H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, 35(2), 202–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124502239392

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relation of parental involvement to urban elementary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education*, 40(3), 237–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085905274540

Li, C. K., & Hung, C. H. (2012). The interactive effects of perceived parental involvement and personality on teacher satisfaction. Journal of Educational Administration, 50(4), 501- 518. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231211238611

National Center for Educational Statistics (2009). *The Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.

Nieto, S. (2010). The light in their eyes: *Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Povey, J., Campbell, A. K., Willis, L. D., Haynes, M., Western, M., Bennett, S., Antrobus, B., Pedde, C. (2016). Engaging parents in schools and building parent-school partnerships: The role of school and parent organization leadership. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 79, 128-141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.07.005

References *...continued*

Sheridan, S. M., Smith, T. E., Kim, E. M., Beretvas, S. N., & Park, S. (2019). A meta-analysis of family-school interventions and children's social-emotional functioning: Child and community influences and components of efficacy. *Review of Educational Research*, *89*(2), 296-332. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09509-w

Smith, T. E., Holmes, S. R., Sheridan, S. M., Cooper, J., Bloomfield, B., & Preast, J. (2020). The effects of consultation-based family-school engagement interventions on student and parent outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*. Advance online publication. http://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2020.1749062

Smith, T. E., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., & Huang, F. H. (2019). Understanding family–school engagement across and within elementary- and middle-school contexts. *School Psychology*, *34*(4), 363-375. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000290

Smith, T. E., & Sheridan, S. M. (2019). The effects of teacher training on teachers' family- engagement practices, attitudes, and knowledge: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *29*(2), 128-157. https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1460725

Smolkowski, K., Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., Nese, R. N., & Horner, R. H. (2016). Vulnerable decision points for disproportionate office discipline referrals: Comparisons of discipline for African American and White elementary school students. *Behavioral Disorders*, *41*(4), 178-195. https://doi.org/10.17988/bedi-41-04-178-195.1

Wildcat, D. R. (2001). Indigenizing education: Playing to our strengths. In V. Deloria, Jr. & D.R. Wildcat, *Power and place: Indian education in America* (pp. 7-20). Boulder, CO: Fulcrum.