



Moving Beyond Open House: Building Meaningful Relationships between Parents/Families and Schools

QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On May 1 and 2, 2013, the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) hosted a School Climate Series webinar to review the importance of engaging parents with schools and highlight effective strategies for increasing parental engagement (at the elementary, middle, and high school levels). During the session, the presenters (**Dr. Gary Blau**, Chief of the Child, Adolescent & Family Branch in the Center for Mental Health Services at SAMHSA and Director of Building Bridges; **Dr. Joyce L. Epstein**, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University; **Ms. Barbara Shinn**, Assistant Director of the Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC)) received several questions from the audience. Because the presenters could not answer all of the questions submitted during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Q/A Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (ncssle@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

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Q1. How do you recommend connecting families of a diverse community together? Sometimes, it's difficult to do when there are language differences. Are there any particular strategies that have worked with in economically depressed urban communities, with different cultural groups living together (i.e. African Americans and Latinos)? Can you share activities that specifically address cultural and Linguistic issues?

Gary Blau: It's important that we ask this question on a regular basis. It's important to understand the diversity of your community, in terms of age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation among other cultural considerations, in order to effectively engage with the community. We have so many different cultures and languages, and not just ethnic or racial cultures (although that is important because what happens in an inner-city African-American community is different than a low-income Southwest Latino community). It's really important to identify these differences because the cultural indices of how you engage with these communities will depend upon that. Reach out to those communities and ask them the best way to communicate with them; engage cultural brokers from those communities to help you bridge any divides. For example, I work with tribal nations; and while we are not allowed to accept gifts, it would be disrespectful and alienating for me to refuse food offered during a home visit. Also, I wouldn't think of starting a meeting with

these communities without first respecting the elders. The ability for us to know the customs of people we're interacting with is critical in developing relationships. This includes the types of food, customs, meeting organization, and information processing for communities.

For specific activities, celebrate the different cultures within your school community, using months designated for different groups' histories (e.g., Black History Month in February, Asian-American Heritage Month in May, Gay Lesbian Pride Month in June). Really identifying strategies and opportunities to not only address or work around, but celebrate and bridging differences are ways that we really do specifically address culture. Language is also important not just for communicating, but also showing respect and not every family speaks fluent English. Ensure that the documents you have may be translated into various languages or that there are interpreters available if there is a need. Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with that but using the young people to do the interpretations is clearly not the best approach. We try to reach out for a different approach so that the children aren't in the middle of issues.

Q2. Do the children without families have a voice? Who represents them [in the system of care model]?

Gary Blau: There are caregivers, foster families, and other providers (e.g., case workers) that represent families. You can bring these people in and really try to create that welcoming environment and demonstrate, depending on the age of the youth, where they are valued. For example, one agency identified the 25 most difficult cases and they were youth without families. They found that there were actually family members or peripheral folks for 24 of those 25 that they could engage in some way, shape, or form. Don't let the lack of a nuclear family stand in the way. Ask the child who they consider family; ask them to get those people involved. Sometimes, you'd be surprised who they identify.

Q3. How do you recommend emphasizing the importance of parent engagement to schools that are unreceptive or unwilling to involve parents?

Gary Blau: Get the data that demonstrates that engaging parents in this process improves outcomes. One thing that unites us all is that we want better for our kids. The schools and districts have this issue with achievement and improving test scores. While it may be a struggle engaging parents, it can improve attendance rates, graduation rate, scores on tests, and achievement. Those are things we do have information and data on. I would then find champions who can really promote the concept and be respectful to both sides (e.g., understanding that there may be legitimate difficulties in schools reaching out to parents but helping those schools think of unconventional or new ways to approach the problem). Leadership is another important component – leaderships must communicate the expectation that we will engage parents; if everyone can't do it that becomes a performance issue to be discussed separately. Leadership includes: "Here are the reasons why we're engaging parents. Here are the strategies to do it. And here is the support."

Q4. How do you convince schools and others the most important first step is building trusting and respectful relationships, which does not involve spending money – just time and energy?

Joyce Epstein: In our work with districts and schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools, we find that the “first” step is for the educators to recognize the need to improve their programs of school, family, and community partnerships—whatever their starting point. Every school already conducts some activities to communicate with families and most already have one or more successful engagement activities. Few, however, are satisfied with their outreach efforts—recognizing that, presently, only some families are productively involved. *If* there is a desire to improve leadership and programs of partnership, and *if* there is a desire to use research-based approaches to better organize goal-linked plans and practices to engage more and different families in ways that support student success in school, *then* we can help districts and schools attain these goals. *Building trusting and respectful relationships* (as you note above) is, actually, a RESULT of—not a prerequisite for—developing and sustaining excellent partnership programs.

You are correct that these approaches are very “thrifty” once they are organized, though some funds are required. Many schools have targeted fund (via Title I and other programs) to take these steps.

As messages about good partnerships are shared and good activities that build a welcoming school climate and that focus on the students’ success are conducted, parents who were skeptical about the school or who did not feel welcome begin to see that they are valued partners in their children’s education. Equally important, teachers who were skeptical of parents begin to see that just about all parents are doing their best, are interested in their children’s education, and have much to offer in talents and ideas.

Q5. You suggest multiple levels of leadership are necessary for the best results. How have you seen that demonstrated? What seem to be the most important tasks, especially for district leadership, to achieve the best outcomes?

Joyce Epstein: Multi-level leadership is one guiding principle of the work we do in the National Network Partnerships Schools (NNPS), by strengthening the skills of district leaders for partnerships to work with clusters of their schools on this agenda. District leaders can guide or “shepherd” up to 20-25 or more schools’ Action Teams for Partnerships so that they develop a “district culture” of good partnerships in all schools. District leaders can learn to provide research-based professional development to school teams, guide the teams in their work, motivate the teams to improve their programs, help teams share best practices, require teams to evaluate their progress, and so on.

This approach mirrors districts’ practices to have reading coaches, math coaches, ELL experts, etc. In this case, each district must identify and support a leader for partnerships. NNPS can help that person become a true expert, able to guide many schools’ teams to organize, implement,

evaluate, and improve their programs of family and community engagement linked to goals for student learning and success in school.

Without district leadership, each school is left on its own to decide whether or not to improve its outreach and design for effective family and community engagement, and whether or not (and how) to keep improving its program. Our recent research showed that when district leaders support their schools for 3 years or more, the schools do much better in planning their partnership programs, conducting activities, engaging parents who were not engaged before, and learning from the successes and challenges in other schools. I encourage district leaders to visit our website and see what award-winning partnership district leaders are doing.

Q6. Many states have adopted the national PTA standards for school-family partnerships as the U.S. Department of Education has done a lot of work in recent years to revise these with PTA. While I know that Epstein's 6 standards came first and were the basis for the PTA standards, how should both be used as it appears these standards can be competing between schools and districts within the same state? What is the difference between both frameworks?

Joyce Epstein: The six types of involvement (based on research) and PTA standards based on the six types are not in conflict with one another. The six types are important because they have been proven to reflect different practices, pose different challenges that must be solved, and produce different results for family and community engagement and for student outcomes. They guide schools in how to plan partnership programs so that all families can be engaged in various ways and in various locations— not every parent can come often to the school building. Adopting the six types of involvement means that schools know they should not point fingers at parent as “uninvolved” if they cannot volunteer at the school building or attend many meetings or workshops. The PTA used the six types in a reordered way for several years, then revised the standards—still based on the types—to include a couple of “outcomes” or results of good partnership programs. In the National Network of Partnership Schools we keep the processes and practices of the six types separate from the desired outcomes so that effects of practices of family and community engagement can be monitored and measured.

The real message, however, is that whether schools “use” the framework of six types of involvement or the PTA standards, they must understand that other structures and processes are needed for the types of involvement to have any effect. We have learned that, at the school level, it is necessary to have an Action Team for Partnerships, Write an Action Plan, Implement the Plan, and Evaluating Quality and Progress. Without these program-development steps, the types of involvement are good ideas, but not good practice.

Q7. Considering the six principles of engagement, how can all stakeholders be held accountable? It is challenging as a community stakeholder.

Joyce Epstein: The principles for good partnership programs that I shared in this Webinar aim to help district leaders and school-based Action Teams for Partnerships develop their knowledge and skills to plan programs that will engage all students’ families and many community partners in

support of student success in school. We focus on the fact that schools are responsible for helping every youngster do his/her best in school and succeed at each grade level.

Parents and community partners should be mobilized by the district and school and recognized as valuable resources to help teachers, counselors, and others so that more students do their best in school. If partnership programs are well-planned and evaluated, the district and each school-based team will learn if all or some parents are engaged, or whether they need to improve messages, outreach, interactions, and follow up with parents and community partners to mobilize these resources more successfully to benefit more students. The ultimate outcomes of good partnerships are improved student achievements and talents, few drop outs, and many who graduate from high school with plans for the future. All partners—schools, families, community, and the students themselves—must keep their eyes on these important prizes.

Q8. How do you suggest a teacher partner with families regarding their child's progress on an ongoing basis? Besides report cards and progress reports, are there other good practices that can share a student's strengths and areas for improvement?

Joyce Epstein: Each teacher works with his/her students' families in many ways throughout the school year, starting with the transition into a new grade level and classroom. Individual teachers, traditionally, communicate with parents at an Open House Night, on report cards, in parent-teacher conferences, and in connections with student activities and celebrations for and with the class. Each teacher may attend to the six types of involvement to account for, classify, or add to activities with his/her students' families.

As we work with hundreds of schools, we are learning that it is not efficient or effective to leave everything concerning partnerships up to individual teachers. Rather, an Action Team for Partnerships may include individual teachers' practices, grade level teams' activities, and whole-school partnership practices in the school's One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships. The full account of everyone's efforts enables the principal, team members, individual teachers, the PTA/PTO, and others to describe, strengthen, and sustain the school's *program of partnerships*. Every school should have one partnership program that includes all of the activities that any/all individuals and groups in the school conduct to welcome families and community partners and engage them in goal-linked ways in their children's education.

Q9. How do positive, effective family school partnerships compare over elementary, middle, and high school levels?

Joyce Epstein: Every school and every school level is different in what is planned in programs of school, family, and community partnerships. Every school is different because the annual One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships must be based on the school's own School Improvement Plan, goals for its students, and knowledge of the backgrounds, interests, and needs of its students and families, as well as the resources in its community.

Every school level is different because elementary, middle, and high schools have set different goals and targets for student success, and because the students are at different developmental

levels in their own responsibilities for their education. In NNPS, we have schools at all levels—preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools—that use the same structures and processes that I have described, but must *customize or tailor* their practices for family and community engagement so that activities are age-appropriate and goal-specific.

If schools are not taking research-based approaches to organize and implement their partnership programs, then preschools and elementary schools tend to do more with students’ families than do secondary schools. We find in NNPS, if secondary schools put the “essential elements” (discussed in this webinar) in place, their partnership programs can be as high in quality and as inclusive and effective as programs in the elementary grades. See the various Partnership School Award recipients on the NNPS website at www.partnershipschools.org in the section Success Stories. Check the books of *Promising Partnership Practices* in the same section and use the search function to see how Action Teams for Partnership at each school level are designing and implementing creative activities for the six types of involvement.

Q10. What is your recommendation to engage teachers and get their buy-in regarding engagement/partnership efforts?

Joyce Epstein: Surveys dating back decades tell that teachers strongly agree that family and community engagement in students’ education at school and at home is important. Each teacher presently connects with students’ parents in several, often traditional yet important ways (as addressed in a question above). We find that when District Leaders for Partnerships help schools organize Action Teams for Partnerships (which include 2-3 teachers from different grade levels, 2-3 parents, the principal and others) and the teams plan school-wide activities as well as individual and grade level engagement activities, all teachers see that that they can benefit from the team’s work, without having to design, organize, and implement every involvement activity on their own.

For example, a good team that reaches out to all reading/English teachers for a Family Reading Night or Poetry Festival relieves each individual teacher from having to organize everything about these events themselves. A good team that develops workshops on how parents can use the school’s many new technologies to follow their children’s work and communicate with teachers saves each individual teacher from having to develop the materials and workshops from scratch. Teamwork helps all teachers and grade level teams “buy in to” school-based partnership programs.

Barbara Shinn: As Joyce shared, teachers already are communicating with their students’ parents in a variety of ways. By having an Action Team in place teachers will receive the extra support needed to contact the hard-to-reach parents. The team will also allow for oversight and consistency of parent contact and communication. I believe teachers know the importance of establishing relationships and rapport with families, time becomes the challenge for them. By having the extra support to assist them, they can make contacts in ways that that are meaningful and productive.

Q11. Deaf children are some of the most disengaged & underserved student groups. On average, they finish school with a 4-5th grade reading level. Since the 1970s, studies have shown that only 25% of their parents actually know Sign Language. Today, the percentage is not much better. How can we change this inequity and help them to improve outcomes?

Joyce Epstein: We always start at the school’s actual starting point on partnerships and work to improve outreach, engagement, and results for students. All aspects of school improvement are incrementally, not magically, changed. In NNPS, we have schools that mainstream students with all kinds of abilities in their classes. In these schools, all parents are engaged in the planned partnership activities, with accommodations made for parents and children’s special needs. We also have designated “School for the Deaf” schools in NNPS. These schools, like all schools that want to be systematic about improving partnerships, have an Action Team for Partnerships, write and implement a plan for outreach to the students’ parents—deaf and hearing—and focus on engaging parents and the community in ways that increase student achievement and other indicators of success in school.

Step 1 for schools is “know your families.” If some parents of deaf students do not know sign language, then engagement activities may include classes for parents conducted in collaboration with appropriate adult education groups in the community. Or, district leaders may design and test creative “homework” designs that enable students to show parents their work that enable parents to demonstrate their interest in their children’s work and progress.

Q12. In our work with immigrant Latino families in urban environments we see the need to address both traditional parenting needs as well as the need for support in addressing the academic needs of their children (i.e., reading or helping them with their homework). Do you have any suggestions as to how to address both of those areas when dealing with parents—especially those that have low educational backgrounds, have significant economic needs, and lack of English language proficiency?

Joyce Epstein: Our Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University authored a new resource: *Multicultural Partnerships Involve All Families* (Eye on Education, 2012). The book spotlights 18 different practices either developed by schools in NNPS or derived from research to increase outreach to families with diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, including new immigrant families.

Most schools in NNPS and most schools across the country now serve highly diverse populations in rural and urban areas, and including large numbers who speak different languages at home. The activities in the book and in our annual collections called *Promising Partnership Practices* at www.partnershipschools.org describe in detail activities that can be adopted or adapted by any school to welcome all families and engage them at school and at home in ways that will promote their children’s learning and development.

Two activities show very different ways that good ideas can emerge as teams of teachers, parents, administrators, and community partners work together on partnership plans. First, some schools have learned to use the local foreign language media (e.g., radio, TV, cable, newspapers, church networks) in their area because parents and other family members watch, listen, and meet with these resources. Another school organized “neighborhood reps”—bilingual volunteers who communicated with, perhaps, 10 parents who did not yet speak English. Each month the school’s Action Team for Partnerships provide a “script” to the neighborhood reps about upcoming family and community involvement activities that could be shared in the targeted families home language. This was a productive use of very talented volunteers who served as ambassadors and interpreters for parents who did not speak English but who wanted the best for their children in school.

Q13. What is the most effective way to engage parents in school climate/culture improvement efforts?

Barbara Shinn: The most effective way to engage parents in school climate/culture efforts begins by making sure they feel welcome when they are at school. For a school to function at its best it needs the support of its families. When parents feel welcomed and appreciated and also are given the tips and tools they need to help their students, a partnership will be established.

Q14. Can you give a brief description of the restorative practices program at Wichita West? Specifically, how does this program enhance family involvement?

Barbara Shinn: In this school, it’s been very helpful because it promotes healthy family-community-school relationships. It involves the community. It has really helped in this high school to work with individuals to be successful and improve behavior. Families must be engaged at this level. At this high school, they have seen great gains by having this particular program in place and bringing in family and community. We see it as a great opportunity for schools and districts to engage families at this level.

Q15. How can we get the families to transition their support from elementary school to the middle school level?

Barbara Shinn: As Joyce mentions, having the Action Team plan specific events for the transition is very helpful. In addition, it is very helpful for students to be assigned an advisor who gets to know him/her and helps the new student feel at ease. Some schools also have family mentors, where new families are matched with other families who are familiar with the school. The middle school years are full of challenges and changes. The school counselor and other support staff can assist parents with understanding the developmental stage the students are experiencing. Communication efforts at the middle level also need to be clear and frequent. Students do not naturally communicate as often with their parents during this time so it is very important the

school is making every effort possible to share weekly events, host family nights and be open to the opportunity for parents to volunteer at the school.

Joyce Epstein: In NNPS, we work with schools to put in place responsive “transition” activities at all of the important transition points: preschool to elementary, elementary to middle, middle to high, and high school to postsecondary education/training. The Action Teams for Partnerships and others at the “feeder” schools and the “receiver” schools must build into their partnership programs the transitioning activities that will help students and their parents move on and adjust successfully to their new school. These include meetings for parents and students at the feeder school before the transition occurs. Teachers, principal, counselors, parents, and/or students from the receiving school may talk with the “rising” students’ parents about the new school. Visits to the new school before or at the time of transition, a picnic before school starts, a well-publicized Back to School Night at the new school all help students and their families get to know the school, its programs, teachers, and resources. Transition activities are included in just about every annual book of *Promising Partnership Practices* on the NNPS website (www.partnershipschools.org in the section Success Stories). Click on Transitions for good ideas that have been tested and successful in the reporting schools.

Q16. What has been the role of parent liaisons in school-family engagement in Kansas? Is it a resource that is used in Kansas and if so, how is it working?

Barbara Shinn: Several districts have not only a Family Resource Director but also family liaisons who are assigned to individual schools. Not all districts are fortunate to have these positions because it can be cost prohibitive. The family liaison works very closely with the support staff and assists with families of students who are experiencing difficulties. They are often the leader of the Action Team who coordinates family events. The Wichita Public Schools has an extensive family engagement program. They are an exceptional resource.

Q17. You mention a series of supports your center provides participating schools (technical assistance, staff development, etc.). How essential is this kind of external support for schools to achieve success?

Barbara Shinn: We think it’s very important. It helps to hear it from another educator. It helps doing something that is ebbing nationally recognized and featured. It’s critical to have a support system outside the district to help you out. We are fortunate to still be supported at a state level and that helps so much in providing these resources. Schools just cannot do it all themselves because they have so much on their plates so we’re here to help them.

Q18. Which of the family school standards have you found posed the greatest challenge to Kansas schools? What has been most successful in addressing the challenge?

Barbara Shinn: I think, in particular at the high school level, communicating effectively has been the biggest challenge. And we do a very good job at the high school level typically of offering one-way communication. We do a very good job with our technology – being able to announce activities and grade reports but to really engage in two-way communication, it requires us to go a step further. And so we have to come up with different ways to involve that two-way communication. Our parent-teacher conferences are beginning to look a little different. Rather than having just a grade update, the interaction is more related to what is going on in the classroom and to postsecondary transition. We used the data from the class inventory to involve students and parents in planning. A lot of our schools are using a four-year plan to help that communication go back and forth so that parents can be engaged in the choices the students make for their classes. Another challenge is the size of the schools. Many of our teachers are seeing 100 to 150 students per day. Sheer numbers make it difficult at times.