

Enhancing Parent Involvement:



Higher grades

Higher test scores

Better school attendance

Better social skills

A Practical Guide for Pennsylvania's Schools Supporting Students with Disabilities



Parent engagement concepts adapted from National Parent Teacher Association. (2009). *Family-school partnerships*. Retrieved March 25, 2009, from http://www.pta.org/family_school_partnerships.asp.



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Introduction

The vision of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is to ensure that every child by name reaches academic proficiency in core academic disciplines regardless of zip code, economic status, race, ethnicity, or disability. The work required to ensure a high-quality education is grounded in the understanding that effective schools focus on the following elements: (1) clear standards, (2) fair assessments, (3) curriculum frameworks, (4) effective instruction, (5) evidence-based materials and resources, (6) and interventions designed to support student success. The six elements of effective schools comprise Pennsylvania's Standards Aligned System (SAS). The SAS enables consistency and coherence in the design of programs, tools, technical assistance, and targeted supports for students. The overarching goal is strong outcomes for students, regardless of circumstances, that result in achievement and

graduation from high school of learners ready for postsecondary education, employment, or independent living.

In order to reach the vision and goals held for all students within the commonwealth, schools and districts need to consider the importance of parent engagement. Research clearly points to a strong correlation between parent involvement and student achievement (Epstein, 2005; Furger, 2006; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When schools implement intentional and intensive parent engagement strategies, there is a significant rise in student achievement scores (Redding, et al., 2004). Successful schools share key practices relating to parent engagement that include:

- the development of trusting, collaborative relationships and two way communication among teachers, families, and community members;
- the recognition, respect, and commitment to addressing families' needs, while bridging cultural differences;
- the adherence to a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared and families are seen as effective advocates for their children (Parent Advisory Council, 2007).

However, as compelling as the findings may be, federal legislation also informs education's commitment to parent engagement. 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, address parent involvement.



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Involving parents in school decisions and activities is a key principle embedded in the NCLB Act. Therein, NCLB defines parental involvement as the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring that:

- parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
- parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
- parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and
- other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Parental Involvement).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 requires all states to develop a State Performance Plan (SPP) that describes how the state will implement the requirements and purposes of IDEA, and improve results for students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. 1416). Included among the requirements is the measurement and public reporting of Indicator 8 of the SPP:

Percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.

Ultimately, parent engagement is as much a research-based practice proven to positively affect student achievement as it is a requirement for public schools.

This publication offers ideas on how schools and districts can address parent engagement as a means to ensure strong results for students. The publication is written for school and district

personnel as a practical tool to advise and guide practices supporting effective parent involvement at the local level. Herein, the term "parent" refers to anyone who shows responsibility for the well being of a child and is actively engaged in his/her education. The publication's content is structured around three themes: leadership, relationships, and trainings. Each of the themes rests upon two guiding principles.

- First, parents come from a variety of backgrounds. As such, school personnel should recognize and respect the varied cultural perspectives of the communities they serve. Parents approach engagement in many different ways. Thus, parent interest and participation in their children's education is not always evidenced by attendance at school functions. Connecting with parents in differentiated ways is as normal as it is necessary.
- Second, school and district efforts should be grounded in a system-wide belief that parents are capable, essential partners in the educational process. School personnel should encourage, support, and expect parents to be involved in school improvement efforts. Respectful, meaningful dialogue between school and home leads to significant understandings that bolster authentic parent engagement.

The ideas contained in this publication represent the joint recommendations of Pennsylvania's Federally Funded Parent Centers (HUNE, PEAL, PEN, and The Mentor Parent Program), ConsultLine, and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network's (PaTTAN) Parent Consultants. School and district personnel are encouraged to contact the referenced partners (*see Appendix C*) for support with training and/or technical assistance relating to effective parent engagement and increased student achievement.

Leadership

Effective leaders understand that schools and families share the common goal of strong results for all students. The role parent engagement plays in positively affecting student achievement should not be underestimated. Henderson & Mapp (2002) find that “when families of all backgrounds are engaged in their children’s learning, their children tend to do better in school and stay in school longer” (p. 73). The following section of this publication explains what school leaders should consider in support of parent engagement and how school leaders might go about effectively involving families in their children’s education.

What Should School Leaders do to Enhance Parent Engagement?

School leaders are called upon to address the establishment of an inclusive school culture. To that end, a message should be developed at both the district and school level, indicating that the responsibility for educating children is a collaborative enterprise involving parents, school personnel, and community members. Dedication to parent engagement and leadership is evidenced where schools encourage and support parents’ involvement in school improvement decisions, including assistance in both the implementation and monitoring of reform efforts. Enhanced parent engagement is contingent upon an internalized belief that all systems are improved through true, reciprocal respect for all members of the school community. Therein, parents should be welcomed and viewed as capable and valued partners. Administrators who wish to capitalize on the potential of enhanced parent engagement may want to consider developing and disseminating a school or district-wide belief statement and/or parent involvement policy, which identifies and embraces the following beliefs:

- Meaningful parent involvement enhances positive student learning outcomes.
- Effective parent/educator communication, collaboration, and

cooperation are critical components of meaningful parent involvement and positive student learning outcomes.

- Improving parent engagement is in the best interest of schools. Parent involvement assists administrators and teachers in accomplishing their core mission: educating students.
- Thoughtful planning and follow-through are necessary in an effort to achieve and maintain meaningful parent involvement.

How Can School Leaders Foster Parent Engagement and Leadership?

Adopt a system-wide culture of hospitality

Hospitality is the number one strategy and an overarching principle in fostering parent engagement. It is one of the most effective and efficient investments school leaders can make. It costs nothing, it does not involve extra time, and everyone has the capacity for hospitality without additional training. School leaders need only to think of how it feels when receiving a warm welcome. Moreover, all school personnel are responsible for promoting positive communications and respect.

Adopt a family-school partnership policy

Educational leaders are encouraged to adopt a policy addressing family-school partnerships. In development of the policy, school personnel should work in partnership with parents to develop a set of measurable outcomes for parent engagement, including a method by which to evaluate annual progress toward the defined outcomes. An organized, systemic approach to parent engagement assures success. Research suggests that schools with highly rated partnership programs make greater gains on state tests than schools with lower-rated programs (Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

Collaborate on activities supporting increased student achievement

Many opportunities exist for family-school partnerships to advance an inclusive school culture that focuses on student performance. The following represent examples of collaborative, meaningful parent engagement in activities that support student achievement:

- Establish teams comprised of school personnel and family members to design and deliver workshops and activities that assist families in supporting their children's learning needs.
- Offer professional development for school personnel on working productively with families and engaging families in improving student achievement. Invite families to plan, present, and/or attend these types of professional development sessions.
- Sponsor workshops for parents on helping their children at home. Research suggests that higher reading and math scores are linked to parents helping students with homework (Shaver and Walls, 1998).
- Include parents as members of district, school, and community advisory groups that examine, define, and design school or district policies that affect student achievement. Moreover, parents should be consulted on identifying what types of advisory groups may be needed.
- Develop transparent plans, with parent involvement, that clearly define opportunities and roles for parents in school and district improvement planning.

Foster a learning community that supports parent engagement and learning

As previously suggested, parents should be involved in the selection of workshop topics that address parent engagement and support the delivery of such workshops for other parents. Involving parent groups in the creation and delivery of events for parents and school personnel creates buy-in, helps parents feel



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comfortable at an event, and ensures that parents' needs are represented.

However, educational leaders can foster an authentic learning community by providing supports for all its members: staff, families, and community partners. To that end, school personnel should work to ensure that parents receive information on training and networking opportunities available through a variety of agencies and groups, including:

- The Parent Training and Information Centers (PTI);
- The Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRC);
- Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRC);
- Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN); and
- Community agencies that support education, such as the Local Task Force on the Right to Education.

Again, include parents as trainers for both parent and staff inservice events. When working to foster this community-based approach, consider the following as possible resources: the Parents as Presenters Program in PA, the PTIs, CPRCs, and PIRCs. Ultimately, encourage parents to present the parent perspective within the schools and across the community.

Additionally, consider how to communicate and share such information specific to parent and family engagement. Educational leaders should add reader-friendly content and resources on their school and district websites, including research on parent involvement and effective practice.

Reach out to the community

Schools should dedicate themselves to establishing high levels of cooperation and coordination with other community agencies that provide services to children and families. Community agencies are essential partners in removing nonacademic barriers to learning. School staff should seek out ways to collaborate with all willing organizations to support parents and advocates in addressing individual student needs. When engaging the broader community, advisory groups and committees comprised of parents, staff and community members should be encouraged to address the following questions.

- Where are students spending their after-school hours and summers?
- Are students attending community programs in which the program staff are aware of the school's curriculum?
- Are the community programs aware of the students' specific learning needs related to school success?
- How can all partners strengthen communication and establish a shared vision for success?
- How can all partners contribute to a positive school culture that supports students' social and emotional wellness?

Engage parents to act as cultural brokers for the community

Staff should be encouraged to recruit, develop, and support a cadre of diverse parents to serve as liaisons to the community. Parent liaisons can provide information to parents as well as take information from parents back to the schools.

Involve parents in decisions that affect student achievement

Clearly the role parents play in affecting student achievement goes beyond the individual student level. Parents should be encouraged to serve as members of advisory groups and councils at the state, district, and local school levels. However, schools should work with parents in identifying and removing barriers to parent participation on such councils.

Parents should be invited to be decision makers in issues that are larger than those that immediately affect their own children. This type of broader engagement can take place in many ways. For example, parents can be represented on school and district committees to select textbooks, adopt curriculum, and if possible inform staff development and staff hiring where appropriate. Again, parents and stakeholders should be involved in authentic work addressing all areas of school improvement at both school and district levels. School leaders should consider establishing family and community involvement



advisory councils at all levels – local and state. It is recommended that parent participation on advisory councils should include shared responsibility for developing objectives for family and community involvement in which performance descriptors are drafted to assist with monitoring the progress towards agreed upon objectives. Encourage school staff to develop parent leaders who contribute regularly to other parents’ understanding and who assist school personnel in meeting other parents’ learning needs. In short, educational leaders should recognize that workshops presented for parents are more apt to be successful when they are jointly planned and are supported by parent organizations and advisory councils. Ultimately this type of engagement stands to positively affect student achievement.

Leadership: Summary

Educational leaders play a vital role in developing a school system that effectively engages parents in meaningful ways. Knowing how to engage parents in ways that will lead to increased student achievement takes careful consideration and deliberate actions. The “Leadership” section of this publication addresses two critical elements for school leaders: (1) what to consider and (2) how to go about enhancing parent engagement. The practical recommendations framed in this section are founded on best practices and informed by the research addressing parent involvement in schools.

Relationships

Whereas leadership is but one lens by which to consider parent engagement, the same core concepts may also be framed conceptually from the perspective of relationships. Merriam-Webster (2008) defines relationship as “the fact or state of having something in common” and/or “the state of having shared interests or efforts.” Parents and educators have a shared interest in ensuring the best outcomes for children and youth. The following section of this publication focuses on what school leaders need to consider with respect to parent relationships and how to go about building strong parent relationships.

What do School Leaders Need to Consider When Building Relationships to Increase Parent Engagement?

The key to family involvement is establishing communication and building relationships with parents and family members. Research is clear about the kinds of parental involvement that lead to student learning. In considering the research on

this topic, Henderson and Mapp (2002) analyzed 80 studies of parental involvement in K–12 schools. The following represent key findings from their work:

- Family involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement.
- Family involvement that supports student learning at home is linked to improved student achievement.
- Families of all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels can have a positive influence on their children’s learning.
- Family involvement efforts that recognize cultural differences, address family needs, and build on families’ strengths are effective in engaging diverse families.

Such findings may be used as a theoretical basis for effective communication supporting parent engagement at the school and district levels.

Relationship building begins and is sustained by ongoing, two-way communication. Effective communication takes time and planning. In order for parents to be actively involved in their children's education, they must feel like partners. Open and honest communication is necessary for building a strong relationship with parents. It is important to have regular and frequent opportunities to communicate information and gather feedback from families. When parents feel included and heard, and appreciated for their perspective, they can see themselves as part of a team within the school. The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement (Fullan, 1991).

Family involvement is not a one-size fits all model. Family involvement and parent engagement in schools varies by cultural and economic status. Acknowledging other's values, beliefs, and ideals is essential to creating lasting relationships between school and home. Strategies for engaging parents can be organized using a three-tiered approach (Osher & Huff, 2006).

Activities that support parent engagement may be organized at the tier one level, which is directed to all families. Parent engagement activities may also be organized at strategic levels, targeting parents and families in specific contexts. For example, universal strategies that reach all families might include the dissemination of a monthly newsletter or planned activities such as annual parent conferences. A second tier of strategies, such as providing child care during Individualized Education Program (IEP) conferences or offering training that addresses specific parent needs, could be used to assist families requiring additional supports in order to successfully engage in school events and activities. Educational leaders should be sensitive to specific families' needs. Some families lack the means to effectively support their children at home or may already be engaged in their children's education but desire more involvement. Intensive strategies

designed specifically for individual families can be employed to reach out to those that need substantial support to participate in school events and/or support the education of their children at home. An example of a third tier strategy might involve a school employee, such as a home-school visitor or social worker, paying a home visit. Many types of tiered strategies exist to build effective parent relationships (*See Appendix B for additional resources on parent engagement.*). However, consider that strategic efforts to engage parents and families need to be differentiated.

Cultural competency is yet another critical factor in developing meaningful relationships with parents. For example, the number of children who are learning English as their second language has doubled since 1979 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). By 2050, 60 percent of the population is predicted to be families of multicultural/bilingual backgrounds (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). School professionals will need to be equipped with a strong knowledge base in the customs and practices of cultures that are different from their own in effort to achieve respectful and responsive relationships with children and their families. Families may have long-standing traditions and customs that may seem unfamiliar to others outside their culture. In some cultures, for instance, children are taught that it is disrespectful to look an adult in the eyes. Armed with this type of knowledge ahead of time will help to avoid needless frustration, wrongful discipline, and conflict. Staff development and cultural sensitivity training can assist school leaders in building a sense of cultural competency.

Educational leaders need to recognize that a solid home-school relationship is essential. After all, home and school are the primary environments in which students grow and develop. Effective home-school relationships require continuous effort. However, the process will ultimately lead to better outcomes for students, their families, and schools.

How Can School Leaders Build Relationships to Increase Parent Involvement and Engagement?

It is acknowledged that healthy home-school relationships are a key factor in supporting students' growth and achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Strategies to increase parent engagement should be differentiated and reflect cultural sensitivity. Thus, the means by which to involve parents in their children's education are many. The following are but a few matters that school leaders should consider in building relationships with parents.

Establish communication means

Identify and use the best method for communicating with parents based on individual preferences and needs. Inform parents that various options are available to them. Aside from meeting parents in face-to-face sessions, consider communicating by email or phone. Make interpreters available to parents upon request. Also, consider options that facilitate parent attendance at meetings, trainings, and conferences via distance learning formats (e.g., Skype, iChat, webinars). However, please remember that not all parents have access to or utilize technologies that support electronic communications.

Establish communication methods

Use strategies such as asking clarifying questions, paraphrasing, and reframing for solution-oriented communication with parents. Educational leaders should appreciate that information-sharing should be an ongoing, reciprocal process. When in doubt, don't be afraid of sharing "too much" information with parents, families, and community members. Avoid making assumptions: too much information is not too much for every family.

At times, written communication can be confusing or overwhelming. Thus, ask someone outside the educational field to proof read and edit written documents for clarity. Also, include contact information in written documents on how parents



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can get further explanation, clarification, and/or resources specific to the content addressed. School leaders can develop a glossary of school terms and acronyms that is simple, concise, but explicit enough to get concepts across for parents. Remember: parents are not informed until they understand.

Create a welcoming environment

As parents enter the main office, make them feel welcomed. Staff should greet all visitors with a smile, assist them with sign-in procedures, answer questions, contact the person the parents are visiting, and escort parents to their destination if they are not familiar with the building. Also, creating a list of expected daily school visitors for office staff can assist personnel with anticipating parents' needs before their arrival.

In a meeting, which is generally held in a conference room or classroom, it is always good to diminish the "home field advantage." School leaders should use the same rules of etiquette

one would with a guest in one's home. Begin with introductions so relationships can form and flourish. Don't assume everyone in the room knows one another. If possible offer parents and family members a choice of seats and a beverage. Anticipate that parents may become emotional during meetings, and be prepared to support them as may be appropriate. After all, discussing concerns about one's child can be very difficult and upsetting to a parent. Being sensitive to parents' emotional states will help bolster relationships.

Ensure school events attract and accommodate families

Offer parent and community events more than once, at different times and on different days of the week. Provide childcare at the events, notifying parents in advance. If meeting events are scheduled in the evenings, keep the events brief. Also, school leaders should consider maintaining a library of events for parents who are unable to attend school events in real-time. Similarly, establish online resources such as podcasts and webinars that parents and families can easily access from home. In-home conferences between teachers and parents who are unable to travel to the school may be a viable option for maximizing parental involvement and participation.

Consider offering parent incentives for attendance at school meetings and events. For example: a homework pass for the night, coupons donated by a community establishment, and door prizes and drawings are crowd pleasers. Hold events that bring parents into the school in positive, nonstressful ways (e.g., "Donuts with Dad/ Muffins with Mom"). Provide presentations on various topics of interest to parents that highlight children's talents, such as plays, art shows, and talent shows.

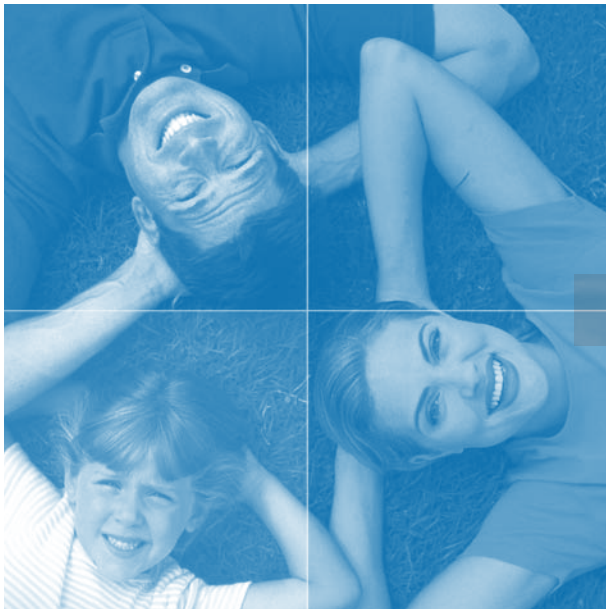
Send thank you notes or emails to family members attending school events. Consider publishing a newsletter that includes the names of the families that participated in school events as an easy, free way to encourage participation.

Engage parents in conversation about their children

Parents know their children best. Ask parents to discuss their children's strengths. Invite parents to offer suggestions on how their children learn and to explain their children's likes, dislikes, and habits – both positive and negative. Engage parents in a conversation about their vision for their children's future. Such conversation can help school leaders to build rapport with parents, while letting them know that their children are important.

Affirm parents

Explicitly acknowledge parents' contributions and positive impact on their children's education (e.g., "I respect the dedication you demonstrate towards your child's education." or "I appreciate the perspective you provide about your child.").



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Establish procedures and policies that support parent engagement

Consider establishing procedures for follow-up with parents. Such procedures could be as simple as making phone calls or sending notes or emails to parents after school meetings and events. Identify points of contact, possibly from existing school staff, to provide information to families. School leaders can develop communication distribution lists that include additional recipients for family/school communications. Adopting a policy to ensure communication is sensitive to cultural, linguistic, and literacy differences stands to support more effective communications with parents.

Build cultural competency

Effective school leaders appreciate the cultural and ethnic diversity of their communities. Provide teachers with access to information in a parent's native language in order to ensure understanding and diminish linguistic barriers to parent relationships. To that end, publications should be available in other languages so that parents can function as active participants in their children's learning. Such publications should include information on homework help, parent support, and English as a Second Language (ESL)

classes for adults and local parent advocacy groups (especially those groups that specialize in a certain language or disability). In short, school staff should recognize that parents who speak a second language hold an asset, not a deficit.

School leaders can draw upon community assets to support parent relationships. Again, be sensitive to publishing announcements and invitations to events in both English and the language(s) predominantly used by the community at large. Schools and districts should be prepared to direct parents and community members to resources and agencies that support non-native English language speakers. Consider using local community resources to inform parents of school events (e.g., churches, community centers, public agencies). In order to support parents, school leaders should utilize the community infrastructure including, but not limited to school personnel, students' siblings, and friends of the students' families to translate for parents who do not speak English and to encourage parents to participate in their children's education.

Drawing from families' experiences to teach others about varying cultures is an important dimension to establishing an inclusive school environment. Ask parents and family members to come to school to share their histories and heritages.

Relationships: Summary

Relationships, by definition, indicate a state in which shared interests and efforts are evidenced. School leaders need to be proactive in building strong, open relationships with parents. The "Relationships" section of this publication addresses why it is important for school personnel to foster strong parent relationships and offers sensible guidance on how such work may be accomplished. Ultimately, enlisting parents in the educational process provides all school personnel with an invaluable asset – a school-home partnership that is proven to support student achievement.

Training

Training and professional development are a means by which school leaders can foster healthy, strong relationships with students' families and increase meaningful parent engagement. The following section of this publication focuses on two different dimensions of training. First, matters concerning training for parents and families are addressed. Such training suggests a means by which parents may be engaged and receive critical information on their children's education. The second part of this section focuses on professional development appropriate for school staff. Given both focus areas, the training content is framed by rationales that delineate why such training is necessary and suggestions as to how such training may be advanced. Particular to this section of the publication, training and professional development focuses on supporting parents of students with disabilities.

Part I: Parent Training

Why Should School Leaders Provide Parent Training Opportunities?

When school leaders implement intentional and intensive parent engagement strategies, student achievement is shown to increase (Epstein, 2005; Furger, 2006; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, parent engagement is more than a best practice that positively affects student performance. Federal legislation leads schools and districts to directly consider how to substantively address parent involvement.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 PL 107-110 defines and requires parental involvement through regular, two-way, meaningful communication specific to student academic learning and other school activities. More specifically, Section 1118 of NCLB requires that every school district and every school receiving Title I dollars must have a written



parent involvement policy, as well as build school capacity to effectively implement the parent policy provisions. Such a policy must be developed jointly with, approved by, and distributed to parents of participating children and the local community. It must ensure that strong plans for parental involvement are in place in every Title I school, and should be designed to encourage and sustain active parental involvement.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, PL 108-446, requires all states to develop a State Performance Plan (SPP) that describes how the state will implement the requirements and purposes of IDEA 2004, and improve results for students with disabilities. Included among the requirements is the measurement and public reporting of parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities. Specifically, states must report annually to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the public on SPP Indicator 8, which identifies the percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities. Like many other states, Pennsylvania collects this data through a large-scale survey. The survey currently used by Pennsylvania can be viewed at http://www.leadingservices.com/pasurvey/PDE_parentsurvey_SA.pdf.

Whether it be in fulfillment of a federal mandate or in accord with research and best practice, it follows that training opportunities for parents need to be considered by school leaders as a means by which to engage students' families.



What Information and Training do Parents Need?

Schools and districts need to provide information on special education topics to parents of students with disabilities. Federal IDEA regulations (34 CFR 300.34) require local educational agencies (LEAs) to provide parent training, defined as, “parent counseling and training means assisting parents in understanding the special needs of their child; providing parents with information about child development, and helping parents to acquire the necessary skills that will allow them to support the implementation of their child’s IEP or IFSP.” Parents must receive thorough and accurate training to ensure that they understand the special education process and their procedural safeguards. For example, parents need to be informed of the options they have if they disagree with a decision the school has made. Additionally, LEAs must provide information about community organizations that offer support and assistance to parents of students with disabilities. Access to this information assists parents with such topics as parental rights, successful transitioning of their young adult child from school to adult life, and networking opportunities.

Parents need to know who to contact when they have questions about their children's academic, behavioral, and social/emotional progress or if they seek assistance with participating in the development of their children's IEP. It is suggested that school leaders provide parents with a simple visual flowchart describing the organizational structure of their children's school system, including information on whom to contact concerning questions about their children's education.

For parents of students with disabilities, the concept and process of transition to the adult world is significant. To facilitate successful secondary transition, parents of students ages 14 and older need to learn how their youth can explore and set goals to prepare for postsecondary schooling, employment, and/or independent living options. Also, they need to know how to receive district and school support to effectively work in partnership with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and other community agencies designed to assist youth with transition and disability issues.

The information needs of parents of students with disabilities are great. It has already been established that schools and districts are required to engage parents in meaningful ways to improve results for students. Moreover, parents of children with disabilities need to understand their schools' general education and special education processes and programs. School leaders should consider the importance of convening parents, teachers, and administrators for student-centered orientation meetings at the beginning of each school year. In these types of meetings critical



information such as the following may be shared and explained: the student handbook; curriculum; homework policies and expectations; and school and community resources.

How Can School Leaders Provide Information and Training to Parents?

Advertise parent training events

Advertisement of parent training events is significant and requires both a sense of creativity as well as diligence in reaching the target audience. Many options exist for publicizing parent events. However, school personnel should consider the most appropriate, practical, and meaningful ways to reach parents. School leaders are called to consider how to best advertise parent training opportunities through multiple media. For example, "save the date" announcements are helpful in informing parents of training events. Announcements may be communicated to parents through a variety of means including posting via U.S. mail, electronic distribution through email blasts, postings on school and district websites, features in school and district newsletters, and/or commercials on local public-access television stations. Other means by which to disseminate information concerning parent events could include prerecorded phone messages uploaded to school and district automated phone systems and/or announcements distributed by automated home-phone calling software. Additionally, personal phone contacts or home visits by school and/or parent leaders add a personal touch to reaching targeted audience members. Ultimately, school leaders need to consider any and all parent engagement methods.

Feature secondary transition as a keynote

Interest in career awareness, career choice, graduation pathways, and adjustment to adult roles is of great social importance and interest (Kochhar et al., 2007). Events addressing secondary transition for students with disabilities are relevant to parents, youth, and community

alike. School leaders should consider co-sponsoring a local college day or local career exposition in partnership with community agencies and businesses. Another way for school leaders to both engage and provide support for parents and community members is to suggest that students of transition age, 14 years and older, consider summer paid or volunteer work experiences as a means of career exploration and connecting with the community. School leaders should consider developing and distributing listings of local, paid, and volunteer summer opportunities for transition aged youth. Assembling local business leaders and social service agencies featured on such listings may draw a response from both parents and the community members at-large.

Partner with other agencies and advocacy organizations

School leaders need to promote parent trainings as collaborative parent/school interaction opportunities. To that end, consider seeking assistance from local and state education agencies and other parent and community organizations to provide trainings on parent identified areas of interest. Many resources are available from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education (BSE), the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), ConsultLine, Pennsylvania's federally funded parent centers, Office of Developmental Programs (ODP), Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), and advocacy organizations. Moreover, unique to Pennsylvania is the State and Local Task Force system, which provides an ongoing parent/educator/provider committee structure to work on solving local special education issues. Such organizations may be able to distribute information in multiple media formats explaining to parents what services they provide and how parents may contact them. Also encourage parents to register for PaTTAN training events and other sponsored sessions by organizations that feature special education topics. To that end, schools and districts are

encouraged to list scheduled PaTTAN trainings that would be of interest to parents in newsletters and on websites, including hyperlinks to make it easy for parents to register.

Assess parents' informational needs

School leaders might want to consider conducting an annual survey of parents of children with disabilities to learn what topics parents are most interested in learning about. Include open-ended questions that ask parents and guardians for suggestions on topics of interest. Administering the survey at IEP meetings may be an opportunity in which to assure higher parent response rate.

Compile and distribute informational resources

Prepare information packets, booklets, and/or CDs or DVDs on various special education topics of interest to parents. When doing so, make all efforts to include supporting resource information, such as contact information, mailing, and website addresses. Such materials should be made freely and easily available for parents. Such materials may also be used as a basis for facilitated parent education activities. Examples of prepared informational resource materials might include: explanations of the special education process; monitoring student progress; due process rights; youth transition to adult life; and listings of local and state parent resources, educational resources, and advocacy agencies.

Develop parent training policies and procedures

Schools and districts may choose to develop a parent involvement belief statement or policy. School leaders should consider conducting an information-sharing event to announce to parents the school's and/or district's policies, procedures, and beliefs about the importance of enhancing parent involvement.

Sponsor parent training events

Whether alone or in partnership with other agencies, school leaders might consider sponsoring a parent leadership seminar designed to foster knowledgeable parent involvement in student achievement and school improvement activities. Additionally, other types of parent training events are worth hosting, so long as they honor mutual respect for family and school, appeal to parent interests and involve parents as both planners and participants. Such events could be framed as annual Learning Matters Festivals or Pizza Pep-Rallies celebrating student, school, and/or community accomplishments.

Part II: School and District Training

Why Should Schools Conduct Professional Development Activities on the Subject of Enhancing Parent Involvement?

No mission is more important to schools and districts than ensuring that each student learns. While there is a full range of issues that affect student achievement, over forty years of research data consistently informs us that parent involvement is a critical factor in attaining high levels of student achievement. High performing schools have greater degrees of parent involvement (Epstein, 2005; Furger, 2006; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Again, as it has been established, schools and districts are required to inform parents on matters of special education and to facilitate parent

involvement. Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) PL 108-446 and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 PL 107-110 specifically address requirements for parent engagement.

What Professional Development is Needed for School Personnel?

School personnel, including administrators, teachers and staff, benefit from considering three key points concerning parent engagement. First, parents know their children better than anyone else; they are their children's first teachers; and they are the only constant influence in their children's daily lives. Secondly, parents affect their children's attitudes about learning and their learning outcomes. Lastly, parents are to be welcomed and respected for their expertise and embraced as valuable collaborators in their children's education. Such considerations establish a conceptual base that should inform a professional development plan for staff in which the significance of parent engagement is addressed.

To that end, school leaders who wish to capitalize on the potential of enhanced parent involvement will want to establish a belief system by developing a belief statement concerning parent engagement and/or a parent involvement policy that identifies and truly embraces the following beliefs:

- Meaningful parent involvement enhances positive student learning outcomes.
- Mutual parent/educator respect and collaboration is desirable, possible, and necessary.
- Efforts to enhance parent involvement without authentic mutual respect, as its core principle, will be ineffective.
- Effective information sharing through parent/educator communication, collaboration, and cooperation are critical components of positive student learning outcomes.





- Enhancing parent involvement is in the best interest of schools and districts.
- Parent engagement is a powerful tool to assist administrators and teachers in accomplishing their mission.
- Thoughtful planning and ongoing follow through are necessary to achieve and maintain meaningful parent involvement.

How Can School Leaders Provide Information and Training to School Personnel?

A commitment will need to be made by school leaders to leverage the necessary resources to achieve meaningful parent engagement as personnel (administrators, teachers, and staff) work to involve parents. Considerably, the first commitment schools and districts need to make is the establishment of enhanced parent involvement as a system-wide goal. It is advised that school leaders convene teams of educators and parents to develop a set of standards by which parent engagement might be measured. Moreover, school personnel should be designated as responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the engagement standards, with time provided

to assess progress and redirect efforts when necessary. Even so, professional development for school staff also needs to be addressed.

Effective implementation of such standards should include professional development that familiarizes all school personnel with the core tenets of parent engagement. Clearly, such professional development may include any number of topics. However, the following comprise suggestions for further consideration:

- Conduct school and district-wide professional development for administrators and teaching staff to explain why enhancing parent involvement is a valuable goal.
- Conduct school and district-wide professional development for administrators and teaching staff on how to enhance parent involvement by improving the quality of parent/educator interactions.

School leaders need to consider providing support, space, and adequate funding in order to maintain high quality parent/educator interactions and activities. School leaders should allot time for personnel to plan, develop, and implement professional development activities that are geared towards the needs of school staff and parents alike.

Training: Summary

Parent engagement is more than a best practice with an evidence-base. Parent engagement is a legislative requirement for schools and districts. In an effort to assist schools and districts to meet this mandate, the “Training” section of this publication addresses suggestions concerning professional development activities for parents, families, and school staff members as well as engagement activities for parents, families, and community members. Such considerations are reflective of the core concepts from the “Leadership” and “Relationships” sections of this publication.

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Appendix B: Parent Engagement Online Resources

Family Involvement in Children's Education: Successful Local Approaches

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/>

Future of School Psychology Task Force on Family-School Partnerships

http://fsp.unl.edu/future_guidelines.html

Harvard Family Research Project

<http://www.hfrp.org/>

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

<http://www.ncpie.org>

National Network of Partnership Schools

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/>

Parent and Family Involvement

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/pa0cont.htm>

Parent Information Resource Centers

<http://www.ed.gov/programs/pirc/index.html>

Parent-Teacher Communication

[http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/
publications-resources?topic=-1](http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources?topic=-1)

Parents As Collaborative Leaders

<http://www.uvm.edu/%7Eepcl/modules.php>

Pennsylvania Listing of Local Task Forces on the Right to Education by Intermediate Unit

[http://parent.pattan.net/StateTaskForce/default.
aspx](http://parent.pattan.net/StateTaskForce/default.aspx)

Schools Moving Up: Parent Engagement

[http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/
tpc/6](http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/tpc/6)

SEDL: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools

<http://www.sedl.org/connections/>



Appendix C: Developed in Partnership by the Following Agencies

ConsultLine

(A service of the Office for Dispute Resolution,
Pennsylvania Department of Education)
6340 Flank Drive
Harrisburg, PA 17112
1 (800) 879-2301

Hispanos Unidos para Ninos Excepcionales (HUNE)

2200 North 2nd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19133
(215) 425-6203

The Mentor Parent Program, Inc.

270 Mayfield Road
Clarion, PA 16214
1 (814) 226-4151

The Parent Education and Advocacy Leadership (PEAL) Center

1119 Penn Avenue, Suite 400
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 281-4404

Parent Education Network (PEN)

2107 Industrial Hwy
York, PA 17402
1 (800) 522-5827

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)

PaTTAN Harrisburg
6340 Flank Drive, Suite 1200
Harrisburg, PA 17112
1 (800) 360-7282

PaTTAN King of Prussia
200 Anderson Road
King of Prussia, PA 19406
1 (800) 441-3215

PaTTAN Pittsburgh
3190 William Pitt Way
Pittsburgh, PA 15238
1 (800) 446-5607



Appendix D: Survey of Parents of Students with Disabilities

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
BUREAU OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

SUBJECT: Survey of Parents of Students with Disabilities

TO: School Districts
Charter Schools

FROM: John J. Tommasini, Director

State Performance Plan (SPP) requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) include collecting and reporting data on the involvement of families in special education programs. Specifically, states must report annually to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the public on SPP Indicator 8, which is: “Percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities.” Like many other states, Pennsylvania is collecting this data through a large-scale survey. Pennsylvania reports results of the survey to OSEP in the Annual Performance Report (APR). The APR is posted on PDE and PaTTAN websites. Reporting on LEA performance in meeting SPP targets, including targets for Indicator 8, is done through the Special Education Data Reports on the Penn Data website.

Over the course of a five-year cycle that began in 2006 every LEA in the state will have parents included in the survey. Parents receiving the survey were selected from Penn Data using a stratified random sample of school age students in each LEA. Surveys will be mailed directly to parents from Leader Services.

The survey Pennsylvania is using was developed by the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring under a grant awarded to that center by OSEP. The survey can be viewed at http://www.leaderservices.com/pasurvey/PDE_parentsurvey_SA.pdf. Additional information about the survey can also be found on the PaTTAN website at <http://parent.pattan.net/>.

A letter that accompanies the survey assures parents that their responses will be confidential. Parents are directed to address questions they may have about the survey to ConsultLine at PaTTAN Harrisburg. Should parents contact local agency personnel about the survey, we ask that your staff encourage them to participate in the survey process.

Questions regarding this Penn Link may be addressed to Sandy Zeleznik, Special Education Adviser, in the Bureau of Special Education, at szeleznik@state.pa.us.



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

Tom Corbett
Governor

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Ronald J. Tomalis
Secretary

Carolyn C. Dumaresq, Ed.D.
Deputy Secretary
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

John J. Tommasini
Director
Bureau of Special Education

Patricia Hozella
Assistant Director
Bureau of Special Education



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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Bureau of Special Education
Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network