Recognising the Role of the Family

Overcoming challenges to family engagement

It is important to first recognise that those families that are often described as ‘hard to reach’ are not purposefully being difficult or challenging for teachers and school leaders. Often the cause of families becoming ‘hard to reach’ is something over which families have no control.

There are many challenges that may prevent families being able to effectively partner with schools, including:

- Lack of time
- Child-care issues
- Lack of transport
- Financial or work demands
- Negative past experiences with schools and government services
- Uncertainty about their role or what they have to offer
- Feeling intimidated by the school environment
- Lack of invitation by the school
- Not understanding education system or educational jargon
- Inability to read school communications
- Cultural differences in the acceptability of interacting with teachers and school leaders.

Changing or non-traditional family structures can in some instances create challenges for families to be present at their child’s school. As an increasing number of children live in single parent and step families, in foster families and other non-traditional family forms, being aware of each child’s family structure, and any changes that occur within it, is it vital for schools.

These challenges do not necessarily prevent families from engaging with their children’s learning. A significant amount of research suggests that what families do in the home has a bigger impact on children and young people’s learning outcomes than what families do at the school.

So what can you do?

Increasing family involvement in the school environment is affected by:

- a family’s perception that the school and their child want them to be involved,
- what a family thinks they are supposed to do, and
- a family’s confidence in their ability to help.

There are a variety of programs and activities that can influence a family’s perception of a school or provide them with opportunities to get involved with their child’s school. The following headings provide a few ideas that can help.

A friendly school and front office

Special effort sometimes needs to be taken to ensure the school is welcoming. See the ‘Is Your School Family Friendly?’ checklist under Participating for further ideas.

Positive first messages

Positive phone calls or notes home at the beginning of the year are a great way to build relationships. If the only time families hear from the school is when their child is in trouble, it is hard to build a trusting relationship.
Hold family-teacher conferences promoting two-way communication

Effective family-teacher (or student-family-teacher) conferences encourage meaningful family participation in their child’s education. In organising family-teacher conferences schools should:

- identify the work patterns of families and schedule conferences at times that families are able to attend.
- set aside adequate time to enable meaningful discussion and to avoid families missing appointments or having to queue for extended periods.
- consider alternative sites to the school for those families who are reluctant to come to the school or where lack of transport is an issue.
- arrange interpreters if necessary and provide information that is free from education sector jargon.

Tips on how to help with homework

Families often appreciate specific suggestions on how to help their children with their homework. It is also worthwhile to explain to families that they don’t need to know the homework subject or even to be able to read to support their children’s learning – it is enough for them to ask their children to teach or explain the material to them.

Multifaceted communication

Communication must be two-way to be effective. See the “Communication Dimension” and “Communication ideas for teachers” tip sheet or ideas.

Focus on discrete groups

- Identify which groups are harder to reach than others and develop specific strategies for these groups.
- Ask specific families to communicate with other families and/or identify appropriate community members who may already have existing relationships with particular families to be part of your communication strategy.

The community

Draw on the resources of the community. Schools can facilitate the involvement of ‘hard to reach’ families in their children’s education by seeking cooperation and collaboration with resources in the community. For example:

- Approach human service, cultural, social and other organisations to suggest the development of programs and services that meet the needs of children and parents.
- Form partnerships with organisations that provide programs for children.
- Partner with businesses that may wish to provide lunch-time or after-school programs as part of their corporate-giving program.
- Use a variety of approaches to enable as many parents and children as possible to benefit from these programs.

Last section (‘The Community’) adapted from “Reaching All Families – Creating Family-Friendly Schools” Office of Educational Research and Improvement – U.S. Department of Education.