Caregiver, Family, and Community Engagement for Diverse Learners

Educators, scholars, policy makers, and caregivers share a belief that when caregivers and educational teams work collaboratively, students benefit. Research confirms positive relationships between parent engagement and student outcomes (Jeynes, 2005¹). However, not all schools have parent engagement plans. The purpose of this section is to examine how educators can enhance and sustain parent engagement in pursuit of learning and achievement that result in reducing bias in the education and disproportionality of American Indian and African American children in special education programs.

Historically, the school system in the United States has produced less success for students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and for students identified with disabilities different from the American macro culture. Further, the education of American Indian and African American students lags far behind those of other U.S. ethnic groups such as Whites and Asian Americans as reflected by test scores, grades, urban high school graduation rates, and rates of disciplinary action (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000²).

As schools work to improve outcomes for American Indian and African American students it is important to recognize the strengths and cultural heritage of both groups.

“Indigenous Americans come from cultures rich in traditional knowledge, survival, resilience, and healing”, where they are “living in two worlds”, that of their traditional or tribal culture and that of the dominant culture (Dauphinais, Charley, Robinson-Zanartu, Melroe, & Bass, 2009, p1³). American Indian families are bicultural, seeking to retain their language, traditions, and spirituality.

The “Black community is a collection of African roots that embraces community atmospheres, spirituality as an integral part of all life domains, and interactive communication and learning (Chandler, A’Avant, & Graves (2008, p.1⁴). The Black community is broad and diverse within the group; educators must be careful about sweeping generalizations. African Americans have contributed to the development of the United States through advocacy and social justice, and contributions in science and education.

Our nation’s public school student demographics demonstrate increased diversity in cultural, racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball & Farr, 2003⁵; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES, 2008⁶]). However, the growth in diversity among student demographics has

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² http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/
⁶ http://nces.ed.gov/
not been matched with growth in diversity among educators and administrators, where their numbers have remained constant. The potential for cultural discontinuity rises when there are vast differences in backgrounds between those seeking services and those providing services. There is urgency for school leaders responsible for fostering positive change to develop effective plans for engaging diverse learners, their parents and caregivers, and fostering successful collaborative relationships with community members.

**Foundation For Enhancing Parent Involvement**

The foundation for enhancing parent engagement is built on the principles that educational settings view caregivers as true partners in the educational process. Educators and administrators work to proactively address known conflicts and challenges that are inherent in home-school relations. For example, there can be competing priorities of caregivers and educators. Each has an orientation they bring to the relationship.

Value and belief differences can exist between caregivers and educators. Other factors found to contribute to the need for dialogue between educators and caregivers include differences in communication styles and differences in culture and socioeconomic status. On any of these issues conflict can occur, and it becomes possible for educators and administrators to marginalize caregivers of American Indian students or African American students. When parents experience exclusion, their engagement with the school is inhibited (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha 2001; Olivos, 2006).

The development of cross-cultural communication skills is an intentional process for educators and administrators in public school settings. Effective education of students who are diverse involves understanding differences associated with the diverse families and their interaction with school settings. An expected benefit of effective cross-cultural communication is increased understanding between school professionals and caregivers about services for individual students.

Due to the interpersonal aspects of communication, factors such as respect and trust are also outcomes of effective connections between school staff and caregivers. As educators, administrators, and caregivers work collaboratively to address factors related to disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students in special education, matters of communication styles, use of professional language that can keep families at a distance (jargon), and understanding differences become important.

Educational leaders should respond to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilize community resources to work in ways to support the school. Yet, the role of school leaders in engaging parents of diverse communities is underdeveloped in the literature and in leadership preparation programs.

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Current literature often uses the terms *parent involvement* and *parent engagement* interchangeably. However, a distinction can be made between the term *parent involvement* and *parent engagement*. Ferlazzo (2009\(^9\)) differentiates between the two terms in the following manner:

When educational settings simply seek to *involve* parents, they are often leading from the self-interest and agendas of the institution or organization. However, when educational settings *engage* parents, they are leading with the parents’ self-interests and parent perspective regarding the education of their child to include creating structures that promote parent partnerships.

Simply involving parents can be typically viewed as expecting only service from parents such as attendance at school conferences or volunteering to help out for field trips or class celebrations without granting parents any power or authority within the school community. In contrast, *engaging parents requires educational settings to fully embrace parents as key partners in the educational process*. Engaging with parents and families in and out of the classroom provides a way for school leaders and staff to complete the picture of their students by capturing the personal story that cannot be fully captured in the students’ school records, in anecdotal notes of teachers, or in the face that students present in the educational environment.

As stated by Guerrero and Leung (2008\(^10\)) "every student and family member is shaped and influenced by his/her environment and experiences (p.19)". The experience of each family shapes their communication styles, expectations, and beliefs. As educators and administrators consider culturally responsive practice it is important to confront issues that create stress when cross-cultural communication occurs.

Due to data that shows that the positive outcome of education for many American Indian and African American is less than that of their White Peers (high school graduation rates, performance on state standards testing), some negative assumptions have developed about American Indian and African American students. Educators and administrators must challenge these assumptions wherever they are found.

Some educators assume that American Indian or African American caregivers don’t value education in the manner of White middle class peers. The same assumption exists about families in poverty; that the value of education is not perceived as important. Yet Gorski (2008\(^11\)) reported that parents who are in low income settings, a setting for many American Indian and African American families, value education to a degree similar to wealthy parents. Factors related to poverty or need to maintain income is associated with less likelihood to attend school functions.

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The University of Minnesota Extension, through their *Partnering for School Success* program, offers consultation on promoting collaboration between caregivers and educators. The project is a collaboration between the extension program and the University of Minnesota Children, Youth, & family Consortium.

The *Partnering for School Success* is a research-based educational program designed to offer practical ideas and tools for schools to increase parent engagement. Through their research they have focused on culturally specific training materials to assist school staff in cross-cultural competence and communication.

From their research six factors have emerged as important for improving relationships between home and school and ultimately school performance.

1. **Expectations**: caregiver and educator beliefs
2. **Structure**: routines that facilitate development
3. **Learning**: connection to learning opportunities outside of school
4. **Support**: methods caregiver can communicate praise to students
5. **Relationships**: respect in all environments and positive school climate
6. **Modeling**: role models and models of appropriate behaviors

Within their research the *Partnering for School Success* program has conducted focus groups Latino, African-American, Hmong, Somali, and American-Indian parents to gather representation about critical issues for parents from different perspectives.

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12 Partnership for School Success, University of Minnesota Extension. Kathleen Olson, Program Director kolson@umn.edu
A Framework for Implementing Engagement of Caregivers

Building a partnership with both students and their parents is not always easy, but is essential to positive educational outcomes. **Parent engagement is a key component of a healthy school climate.** It is necessary for educational settings to adopt a vision for the outcomes and sustainability of their parent engagement initiatives to inform policy and practice for equitable school reform and leadership preparation.

**Educators and Staff Can:**

- Commit to personal contact
- Educate themselves on cultural values of families
- Plan for meaningful, two-way communication
- Intentionally reach out in to the community
- Repeatedly invite families’ participation
- Evaluate their setting for inclusivity
- Create an intentionally welcoming environment for families in the school
- Support families’ needs for transportation, child care, translation

**School administrators and leaders can:**

- Adopt a vision of proactive caregiver support policies, procedures and actions that reduce disproportionate representation, share such a vision with their staff, and create an action plan to further the vision within their setting.
- Implement School-wide Staff Development on cross-cultural competencies
- Model and maintain high expectations of achievement and success for all learners
- Take time to build relationships and trust with Staff, Caregivers, Parents and Community-based organizations
- Reach out and proactively solicit input from under-represented families on the education of their children
- Teach families how to support students academically
- Identify and utilize the assets that parents and the community possess
- Utilize traditional means (letters, notes home) and technology (social media, email, text messaging, blogs) to connect with caregivers and families
- Create structures that give parent power and authority in the school community
- Promote positive interactions with caregivers (build on learner successes and communicate successes with families)
State Statute for Parent Involvement

124D.8955 Parent and Family Involvement Policy

(a) In order to promote and support student achievement, a local school board is encouraged to formally adopt and implement a parent and family involvement policy that promotes and supports:

(1) communication between home and school that is regular, two-way, and meaningful;
(2) parenting skills;
(3) parents and caregivers who play an integral role in assisting student learning and learn about fostering students' academic success and learning at home and school;
(4) welcoming parents in the school and seeking their support and assistance;
(5) partnerships with parents in the decisions that affect children and families in the schools; and
(6) providing community resources to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

(b) A school board that implements a parent and family involvement policy under paragraph (a) must convene an advisory committee composed of an equal number of resident parents who are not district employees and school staff to make recommendations to the board on developing and evaluating the board's parent and family involvement policy. If possible, the advisory committee must represent the diversity of the district. The advisory committee must consider the district's demographic diversity and barriers to parent involvement when developing its recommendations. The advisory committee must present its recommendations to the board for board consideration.

(c) The board must consider best practices when implementing this policy.

(d) The board periodically must review this policy to determine whether it is aligned with the most current research findings on parent involvement policies and practices and how effective the policy is in supporting increased student achievement.

(e) Nothing in this section obligates a school district to exceed any parent or family involvement requirement under federal law.

13 https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=124D.895