Chapter 2
Caregiver, Family, and Community Engagement

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, 2005). However, not all schools have parent engagement plans or programs. The purpose of this section is to examine ways educators can enhance and sustain parent engagement in pursuit of learning and achievement that results in reducing bias in 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. Further, the education of American Indian and African American students lags behind those of White students, as reflected by test scores, grades, urban high school graduation rates, and rates of disciplinary action. Reports from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the achievement scores in mathematics and reading for American Indian and African American students, in comparison to those of White peers, are significantly lower.

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, p.1). American Indian families are bicultural, seeking to retain their language, traditions, and spirituality.

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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’vant, & Graves (2008, p.1)). The Black community is broad and diverse. 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 population demonstrates increased diversity in cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Ball & Farr, 2003). However, the growth in diversity among students has not been matched with growth in diversity among educators and administrators; where their numbers have remained constant. The potential for cultural dissonance 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 Caregiver Involvement**

The foundation for enhancing caregiver engagement is built on the belief that educators view caregivers as true partners in the education process for their children. Educators and administrators work to proactively address known conflicts and challenges that are inherent to home-school relations. For example, there can be competing priorities of caregivers and educators. Each has an orientation and perspective they bring to the relationship that must be heard, valued, and respected for genuine partnerships to develop.

Value and belief differences can exist between caregivers and educators. Other factors found to contribute to the need for open 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).

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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 the differences associated with diverse families and their interaction with school. 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 (jargon), and understanding of differences become important.

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

Current literature often uses the terms parent involvement and parent engagement interchangeably. However a distinction can be made between the two terms. 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 agenda of the institution or organization. However, when educational settings engage parents they are leading with the parents’ self-interests and perspective, regarding the education of their child to include creating structures that promote parent partnerships.

Simply involving parents can typically be 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 background story that cannot be fully captured in the students’ school records, in anecdotal notes of teachers, or in the face students present in the educational environment.


As stated by Guerrero and Leung (2008)\textsuperscript{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 be aware and to minimize issues that may cause stress when interacting with diverse families.

Due to data that shows positive outcomes from education for many American Indian and African American is less than that of their White peers (i.e., 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 caregivers. The same assumption exists about families in poverty; that education is not highly valued. Yet, Gorski (2008)\textsuperscript{11} reported that lower income parents, a condition for many American Indian and African American families, value education to a degree similar to wealthy parents.

**Improving Home-School Partnerships**

The University of Minnesota Extension, through their *Partnering for School Success*\textsuperscript{12} program, offers consultation on promoting collaboration between caregivers and educators. The program works in partnership another University Extension program, the Children, Youth, and Family Consortium. Many resources for parents and educators are available on the web site. http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/partnering-for-school-success/

*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.


\textsuperscript{12} *Partnering for School Success*, University of Minnesota Extension. St. Paul, MN. (Web page) http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/partnering-for-school-success/
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 with Latino, African American, Hmong, Somali, and American Indian parents to gather representation about critical issues for parents from different perspectives. Using information gained from focus groups, materials were developed to communicate information consistent with the needs of the various communities served.

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 leaders and schools 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 into 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)

**Minnesota’s Commitment to Diverse Students and Families**

Many school districts employ staff to work with students and families of diverse racial or cultural backgrounds. Districts use a variety of job titles for these personnel, such as cultural navigators or student advocates. The terms Cultural Liaison or cultural representative are frequently used in special education. The position is defined in the Minnesota Administrative Rules for Special Education as follows:

**3525.0210 DEFINITIONS**

Subp. 10. Cultural liaison. "Cultural liaison" means a person who is of the same racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic background as the pupil, and who:

A. provides information to the IEP team about the pupil's race, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic background;
B. assists the IEP team in understanding how racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic factors impact educational progress; and
C. facilitates the pupil's parent's understanding and involvement in the special education process.

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If a person who is of the same racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic background as the pupil is not available, then a person who has knowledge of the pupil's racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic background may act as a cultural liaison.

Further, Minnesota state law specifies how the state’s special education funds may be spent and allows districts to use special education funds towards the salaries of cultural liaisons, under the definition of “essential personnel.”

125A.76 SPECIAL EDUCATION REVENUE
(c) "Essential personnel" means teachers, cultural liaisons, related services, and support services staff providing direct services to students. Essential personnel may also include special education para-professionals or clericals providing support to teachers and students by preparing paperwork and making arrangements related to special education compliance requirements, including parent meetings and individualized education programs. Essential personnel does not include administrators and supervisors. (emphasis added)

Cultural liaisons that are funded through special education may carry out a range of activities:

• Information dissemination: helping families to understand the school system and helping school personnel to better understand the language, culture and historical background of students and families.
• Interventions: helping to gather information from families during initial stages of interventions and helping to plan and/or carry out short-term interventions.
• Referral and evaluation planning: help to set up meetings and otherwise facilitate communication between families and schools; ensure that families understand special education and their due process rights.
• Evaluation: assist with observations or family interviews.
• IEP planning and implementation: help set up meetings; attend IEP meetings and help to make sure families understand their child’s IEP.

It should be noted that cultural liaisons are school employees and cannot give advice to families or serve as neutral advocates. Families are recommended to contact advocacy organizations such as PACER, ARC, Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health, or the Disability Law Center, if they need assistance from an advocate.

As specialists in cultural diversity and racial equity, cultural liaisons can be valuable members of special education teams and can assist with implementation of many of the strategies that are recommended in these guidelines. It is important that liaisons receive professional development related to special education, however, and that all staff members understand their roles.

**Cultural liaison responsibilities.** A review of position descriptions for cultural liaisons emphasize attainment of a Bachelor's degree in either education or a behavioral science (psychology, social work, counseling) or a related field, and some experience providing outreach services to diverse populations through public relations work, training, and/or supervised experience.

Cultural liaisons are expected to have knowledge of diversity and cultural issues and knowledge of community resources so that they can provide families with information about resources to support the family. A successful cultural liaison has strong interpersonal communication and organizational skills.

Specific responsibilities of cultural liaisons are set by the position description created by the school district. Examples of elements that are associated with a cultural liaison position include:

1. Facilitate meetings between students, parents and school staff from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to facilitate communication and assist in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts.
2. Meet individually with students to gather information about needs or concerns.
3. Provide direct assistance to students experiencing a variety of academic, social and/or emotional concerns; work with students of color and monitor their academic progress, behavioral adjustment and attendance.
4. Serve as a role model and mentor for students; encourage good attendance and promote and support achievement.
5. Serve on school committees representing caregivers and/or students of color; represent the views of diverse families; explain the goals and objectives of the school in culturally sensitive language.
6. Assist families in overcoming barriers to attendance at parent - teacher conferences; help identify barriers and suggest methods to overcome barriers; attend conferences to assist parents to communicate with school staff when necessary.
7. Support educators in interactions with culturally diverse students and their families.
8. Consult with administrators to develop strategies to include families in the implementation of school behavior and social skills programs.
9. Consult with administrators and/or the district volunteer coordinator to recruit, train, and schedule tutors and volunteers from diverse communities that mirror the school's student population.
10. Consult with parents and seek their suggestions on methods to make the school an inviting place; assess environment for respect for diversity and inclusivity.
11. Develop resources on after school and community based programs to meet the academic, cultural and social needs of the school's diverse student body. Work with the administrators to develop team-building and leadership opportunities for students of color and facilitate leadership development opportunities for culturally diverse families.
12. Refer students and/or their families to appropriate social service agencies or community groups.

Support for families can also be found in Minnesota statute on parental involvement.

124D.895 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS

Subdivision 1. Program goals. The department, in consultation with the state curriculum advisory committee, must develop guidelines and model plans for parental involvement programs that will:

(1) engage the interests and talents of parents or guardians in recognizing and meeting the emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of their school-age children;
(2) promote healthy self-concepts among parents or guardians and other family members;
(3) offer parents or guardians a chance to share and learn about educational skills, techniques, and ideas;
(4) provide creative learning experiences for parents or guardians and their school-age children, including involvement from parents or guardians of color;
(5) encourage parents to actively participate in their district's curriculum advisory committee under section 120B.11 in order to assist the school board in improving children's education programs; and
(6) encourage parents to help in promoting school desegregation/integration.

Subd. 2. Plan contents. Model plans for a parental involvement program must include at least the following:

(1) program goals;
(2) means for achieving program goals;
(3) methods for informing parents or guardians, in a timely way, about the program;
(4) strategies for ensuring the full participation of parents or guardians, including those parents or guardians who lack literacy skills or whose native language is not English, including involvement from parents or guardians of color;
(5) procedures for coordinating the program with kindergarten through grade 12 curriculum, with parental involvement programs currently available in the community, with the process under sections 120B.10 to 120B.11, and with other education facilities located in the community;
(6) strategies for training teachers and other school staff to work effectively with parents and guardians;
(7) procedures for parents or guardians and educators to evaluate and report progress toward program goals; and
(8) a mechanism for convening a local community advisory committee composed primarily of parents or guardians to advise a district on implementing a parental involvement program.
**Subd. 3. Plan activities. Activities contained in the model plans must include:**

1. educational opportunities for families that enhance children's learning development;
2. educational programs for parents or guardians on families' educational responsibilities and resources;
3. the hiring, training, and use of parental involvement liaison workers to coordinate family involvement activities and to foster communication among families, educators, and students;
4. curriculum materials and assistance in implementing home and community-based learning activities that reinforce and extend classroom instruction and student motivation;
5. technical assistance, including training to design and carry out family involvement programs;
6. parent resource centers;
7. parent training programs and reasonable and necessary expenditures associated with parents' attendance at training sessions;
8. reports to parents on children's progress;
9. use of parents as classroom volunteers, or as volunteers in before and after school programs for school-age children, tutors, and aides;
10. soliciting parents' suggestions in planning, developing, and implementing school programs;
11. educational programs and opportunities for parents or guardians that are multicultural, gender fair, and disability sensitive;
12. involvement in a district's curriculum advisory committee or a school building team under section 120B.11; and
13. opportunities for parent involvement in developing, implementing, or evaluating school and district desegregation/integration plans.
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