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Fostering Family Engagement in Middle and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Family engagement is a critical component of school success for students. However, parents of middle and high school students are often less involved in home- and school-based activities than parents of elementary students. This article describes reasons for this decrease in parental engagement and offers specific ideas for fostering parental involvement at the middle and secondary levels.

Mr Navarro is a sixth-grade teacher at Crestwood Middle School, where he has been employed for nearly two decades. Crestwood has approximately 1200 students with an ethnically diverse student population that is 53% African American, 32% Hispanic, 13% White, 1% multi-racial, and 1% Asian. Student outcomes and family engagement have decreased significantly during the years that Mr Navarro has been employed at Crestwood. Mr Navarro believes that his students have the potential for excellent post-school outcomes, but he struggles with his students' poor attendance, homework completion, and rates of academic achievement as measured by formative and summative assessments. Mr Navarro understands that family engagement is a critical component of his students' education and one that needs improvement school-wide. He knows that increased family engagement at Crestwood will undoubtedly bolster academic achievement and graduation rates; however, he and his colleagues struggle to build partnerships with their students' families and actively engage them through home- and school-based activities. Mr Navarro, his colleagues, and Crestwood administrators wonder what they can do to increase family engagement and student achievement.

For the past several decades, researchers have regarded family engagement as a vital factor in the education and academic success of school-age students (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Engagement is a shared collaborative approach that considers the multidimensional aspects of home and school (McWayne et al. 2016) and goes beyond a single

school year (Ferrara 2011). In family engagement, families are considered a vital component of the school team and bring value to the learning environment. For example, researchers have linked family engagement to increased student academic performance and motivation, decreased dropout rates, and greater post-school outcomes (Avvisati et al. 2014; Bhargava and Witherspoon 2015). Other benefits include improved rates of student homework completion, better school attendance, increased self-esteem, and improved in-school behavior (Bhargava and Witherspoon 2015; Hirano et al. 2016; Van Voorhis 2011). Educators also benefit from improved student achievement, attendance, classroom behavior, social functioning, and mental health (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Pomerantz et al. 2007). When students regularly attend, achieve at a higher rate, and have improved social and emotional health, educators can navigate through the curriculum with greater efficiency and ease. Educators also report improved job satisfaction and morale.

Parents and families also benefit from engaging in their child's education. Engaged parents understand their children's emotional and academic needs, gain confidence in their parenting skills, and recognize the needs of school personnel. Engaged families understand the curriculum and classroom expectations and are more likely to reinforce learning at home. Also, engaged

Table 1. Promoting parental engagement across three domains.

Type of parental engagement	Recommendations for promoting engagement
School-based engagement	Assess parent needs and tailor events based on those needs
	Make personal invitations (phone calls, emails, etc.) in family's preferred language
	Suggest groups of parents attend events together based on their location, knowledge of each other, and shared needs
	Combine PTO or PTA meetings with other events (i.e., fine arts performance, athletic event) to increase attendance
	Allow parents to participate from their own home through electronic means
	Capitalize upon parents' unique talents by offering a menu of engagement activities
	Encourage students to write invitations to school events to family members
	Invite parents and students to transition meetings (for students advancing to middle school and those advancing to high school) to inform them of policies and procedures at the new school
Home-based engagement	Communicate frequently and provide parental updates on student progress
	Provide parents thorough examples of how to complete homework assignments (e.g., brief demonstrations streamed through the class website or personal demonstrations, homework guides)
	Send home links to websites that provide support for families
	Provide materials and detailed examples of homework in home language
	Suggest ways for structuring the home environment to promote homework completion (i.e., designated work space, materials)
	Offer ideas and resources to promote high-quality student engagement at home (i.e., age-appropriate and high-quality literature, web resources)
Academic socialization	Ask parents open-ended questions about their goals for their child and their child's goals
	Suggest strategies for parents for discussing academic aspirations with their child
	Develop assignments that require students to investigate a possible career, develop future plans, and share those with their parents
	Provide resources for parents (e.g., on the school website, in the school library, or school parent center) that facilitate knowledge of and discussion around the student's career, postsecondary education, and independent living options
	Make time available for parents and their student to meet with school guidance counselor or vocational counselor

families assume active roles in policy making at school and in the community (Bhargava and Witherspoon 2015).

Although benefits to family engagement are evident across age and grade bands, they are perhaps even more important during adolescence when dropout rates begin to increase and student school performance begins to decrease (Wang and Eccles 2012). Noel et al. (2016) reported that about 94% of parents of children in kindergarten through 2nd grade helped their children with home-based activities such as assisting and checking homework, 93% attended parent–teacher organization (PTO) or parent teacher association (PTA) meetings, 92% attended parent–teacher conferences, and 79% attended school or class events. In contrast, only 58% of parents of middle-level children helped with home-based activities, 87% attended PTO or PTA events, 71% attended parent–teacher conferences, and 70% attended school or class events. Family engagement in middle and secondary level students is vital in student achievement and success. In light of the decreasing numbers of families who engage

in school activities and instruction in middle and secondary schools, this article presents strategies that teachers and school administrators can use to enhance family engagement at the middle school and secondary school levels.

Parental engagement

Reynolds et al. (2015) found differing perspectives of engagement between teachers and families. Teachers felt that parents were not interested or engaged in student learning and that any involvement was due solely to their efforts to encourage parental engagement. However, families reported that they wanted to be involved, but that teachers called home only when there was an issue or concern. This disconnection in perception often determines whether families become a vital partner in the school community. Consequently, one goal for school staff could be to increase the number of positive calls and correspondences given to parents over a specified time.

Parent engagement in education comes in many different forms. Middle or high school professionals sometimes only involve parents in limited and traditional ways, such as through weekly or monthly newsletters and field trips (Lawson 2003). However, to provide an inclusive approach for engaging families, educators should offer a variety of engagement activities. Researchers often distinguish between school-based and home-based types of engagement (Sheldon and Epstein 2005; Hill and Tyson 2009). School-based engagement activities include attending parent–teacher conferences, assisting with classroom activities o0r parties, and attending PTO or PTA meetings. Home-based engagement activities include assisting with homework, discussing school matters, and supporting grade level skills (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Academic socialization describes opportunities when parents share their thoughts about education and their goals for their children.

Bhargava and Witherspoon (2015) discovered that academic socialization actually increases as students' age. These authors expressed that "parents may reduce their involvement in strategies that may infringe upon adolescents' autonomy (e.g., assisting with homework, volunteering at school) but increase their involvement in strategies that allow them to scaffold independence in youth and promote youth's decision making ability (e.g., communicating the value of education"; p. 1702). Nevertheless, decreases in parental engagement in school and home-based activities negatively affect the academic success and trajectory for middle and high school students. Because all three components are important at the middle and high school levels, Table 1 includes ideas for middle and high school personnel for supporting parental engagement in these three domains.

When implementing strategies to promote parental engagement, such as those suggested in Table 1, it is important to keep in mind that communication with parents is critical.

Addressing barriers to family engagement

Addressing logistical issues

Many parents frequently cite language, culture, and economic circumstances as barriers to their

school engagement (Altschul 2011). Work schedules (e.g., shift work) or a need to work multiple jobs may further confound engagement, resulting in difficulty with tasks such as assisting with homework that requires parent engagement and meeting with teachers. Consequently, educators may wonder how to address such barriers to create a more inclusive approach for family engagement. As an initial step, Padak and Rasinski (2010) emphasized that, "for families to become active participants in the life of the school, they must first feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what their children are doing in school" (294). Families who feel welcome in school exhibit higher rates of engagement. Additionally, we offer the following ideas for middle and high school personnel for facilitating a welcoming atmosphere and school community:

- Contact families before an issue arises to convey a positive and trusting partnership
- Provide families with contact information for school staff (e.g., teachers, principal, secretary, guidance counselor, coach, school nurse)
- Send home classroom and school calendars
- Greet families on the phone and as they enter the building in a welcoming and respectful tone
- Provide a parent resource library
- Encourage families to share their thoughts on specified topics through parent groups
- Determine how families want to communicate (e.g., mailings, internet, phone calls, home visits)
- Reach out to new families
- Provide contact information for school and community resources
- Use various preferred communication tools with families (i.e., newsletter, email, blog, social media, text messages, paper handouts, phone, visit) and remember that not all families have access to technology
- Hold open houses and other forums, so parents can interact with school and community personnel

Addressing language and cultural diversity barriers

School communities are becoming more heterogeneous due to the increasing numbers of

Table 2. Logical issues and possible solutions.

Logistical issue	Possible solutions
Family relationships	Make positive personal phone calls home to learn about family and share information
	Send regular updates on student progress and class happenings
	Be available during the week for parent drop-ins (i.e., school, electronically)
	Create a parent survey to understand their wants, needs, and availability. Update the survey at least twice during the school year
	Create a class website to share information and encourage communication between parent and teacher (i.e., blog)
	Use a home-school communication system
	Invite parents to share their knowledge with their student (i.e., what motivates a child, what works at home)
Language	Determine the preferred home language of family members
	Invite translators to every school event
	Have child invite parents to the event with a letter, email, text, etc.
	Ensure all communication and school signage represent languages spoken by families
Schedule	Determine best times for meeting per family
	Offer alternative times for events, including weekends
	Offer alternative forms of engagement (in person, Skype, teleconference, video chat, etc.)
	Respect special days associated with family culture
Transportation	Offer free transportation to the school site
	Make some pre-scheduled and mutually agreed upon home visits
	Hold events at a convenient neutral site (i.e., library, YMCA, community building)
	Provide homework help at neutral sites in the neighborhood with copies of textbooks at such locations
	Offer free transit/public transportation passes or taxi vouchers
Childcare	Offer free childcare during school events
	Encourage and invite extended family members
	Connect with and use local childcare agencies (i.e., YMCA, home- or center-based childcare center)
	Connect with and use services of local high school or college student organizations (e.g., Future Teachers of America)
Incentive for Attending	Provide a stipend for a course or professional development at a local community college or university (e.g., computer course, math course)
	Provide gift cards for food/gas
	Offer passes to local children's museum
	Provide bag of books or school supplies
	Enter parent name into a raffle for prize drawing
	Provide a small meal during the event/activity

students who are English language learners (Araujo 2009). Establishing family–school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families can be challenging, especially when considering the multitude of home languages a teacher might encounter. School professionals can use supports such as Google Translate, but these should be used with caution as sometimes translations are translated verbatim from English to other languages and are not always accurate. Providing human translators is usually the best option, particularly for specialized meetings such as parent–teacher conferences and special education meetings. Often university communities have professors from a wide range of countries who can assist with translation. Teachers might also consider communicating through text message apps which translate messages written in English to a variety of home languages (i.e., http://talkingpts.org/, https://www.remind.com/) when sharing important school information.

Family engagement increases with a family's access to "cultural capital" which refers to the abilities and experiences families have to support their child's education (Lee and Bowen 2006). According to Lee and Bowen, "cultural capital is the advantage gained by middle-class, educated European American parents from knowing, preferring, and experiencing a lifestyle congruent with the culture that is dominant in most American schools" (198). CLD families may not have these same kinds of educational experiences and successes compared to culturally dominant families. Some CLD families work several jobs and might not have access to transportation or child care. Therefore, these families might not be as involved in school-based culture and activities such as parent nights and PTO or PTA organizations or in home-based activities that extend learning beyond the school day (Lee and Bowen 2006; McNeal 1999). Specifically, these families might engage less because they do not understand educational terms, feel uninformed when

speaking with teachers, are unavailable during the typical school-scheduled activities times, or had poor educational experiences as a student and choose to disengage from their child's education (McNeal 1999). Some of these issues are especially unique at the middle or high school. For example, middle and high schools are organized differently than elementary schools, tend to be larger, and often have a specific chain of command to follow for reporting absences, requesting information, and paying student fees. Similarly, student earned credits now count toward graduation. Explicitly sharing these topics with all parents begins to develop important "cultural capital" which helps parents understand school expectations.

These obstacles can be further exacerbated by low social or economic status and diversity (Murray et al. 2014). A family–school advocate (volunteer or paid position) can problem solve with families to engage them in school and home-based activities. In addition, ideas noted in Table 2 address some logistical issues and provide additional suggestions for promoting parental engagement.

Specific ideas

In addition to the general ideas described earlier, school personnel can also consider specific ways to increase family attendance and engagement. This section will describe student-led conferences, student-led Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, and community resource involvement.

Student led conferences

Student-led conferences shift much of the responsibility for facilitating a parent–teacher meeting from teacher to student. One purpose of student-led conferences is for students to assume more ownership of their learning and goals (Benson and Barnett 2005). This is especially appropriate as adolescents benefit from assessing their strengths, developing goals, and taking ownership of their learning (Steinberg 2016). Students often lead the conference by welcoming and introducing meeting participants, describing their quarterly, semester, or annual goals; detailing progress

toward their goals, and sharing portfolio artifacts. To prepare for the event, students need class time (during homeroom or in selected courses) to practice and receive feedback on their presentation, develop goals, and assemble purposeful portfolio items. Electronic (or three-ring binder) portfolios can include test scores, written compositions, selected artifacts from various courses, teacher comments, and student reflections. Students can share academic, social, emotional, extracurricular, and physical fitness goals and progress toward those goals.

Researchers have discovered that student-led conferences significantly increase family participation and attendance (Benson and Barnett 2005; Conderman, Ikan, and Hatcher 2000). However, some parents still desire time just with the teacher. Therefore, for some parents, student-led conferences do not replace traditional parent–teacher conferences.

Students with disabilities

A slight variation of student-led conferences that involve students with disabilities, their family members, and members of their support team is student-led IEP or transition meetings. To the extent possible and appropriate, in these meetings, students share their goals and progress within certain pre-targeted skill areas. For example, during an IEP meeting, students share their strengths and needs in identified goal areas (i.e., reading, behavior, or writing) and help craft their goal in those areas. In preparation for the meeting, students practice answering questions such as (1) What are my strengths? (2) What areas do I need help? (3) How do I learn best? (4) How can my teachers help me? (5) How can my parents help me? Similarly, in transition-meetings, students share their future goals in areas such as employment, housing, continuing education, leisure and recreation, and community involvement. In some cases, students share their transition goals through a PowerPoint presentation that they have developed with the support of their teacher, paraprofessional, or student teacher.

Researchers and practitioners have discovered that student-led IEP and transition meetings increase parental engagement, promote self-

determination and self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities, and promote positive perceptions of students with disabilities by team members (Hawbaker 2007). Researchers have recommended that teachers provide a structured approach for students by providing a template, practice frequently with students, and have students write invitations to their family members and other team guests.

Involving community partners

Middle or high school personnel can also encourage family engagement by hosting workshops on topics such as educational options after high school, financing college, preparing for college, and local employment options (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Alternatively, they can invite representatives from various agencies or educational institutions to display tables during traditional school events. For example, before or after athletic, fine arts, or other school-scheduled events, family members can meet with representatives from local colleges or universities, community agencies, or local businesses to learn about services, employment possibilities, and requirements for higher education. Providing tables with literature and representatives from these sources encourage family attendance, saves family time, and connects families with immediate information.

Concluding thoughts

Family engagement at all educational levels is essential; however, engagement decreases in the middle and secondary levels. Therefore, middle and secondary school personnel need to be creative when developing ways to engage parents. First, all school personnel need to be purposeful in making school a welcoming place for all families. They can also strategically address logistical challenges associated with transportation, scheduling, and childcare by collaborating with community and school-based organizations and agencies. Making school a place where parents and family members find helpful resources often motivates them to engage more frequently. Making parental engagement a priority in middle and high schools takes a big commitment.

However, the effort can result in strong family–school partnerships that help develop successful students.

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