Family Engagement with Students at the Center

Research-based Strategies for Educators

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

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Introduction

Adolescence is a time of remarkable learning and development marked by a young person's growing desire for independence and responsibility.[1][8] While some may believe that adolescents in middle- and high-school would want their families to become less engaged in their lives and education, this is not supported by research. Research studies have shown that many adolescents believe family engagement is helpful and valuable to their education.[5][7][11][23][28][30] However, adolescents often perceive family engagement differently than their family. Adolescents perceive and experience family engagement in a way that is more closely associated with student outcomes than their family's perceptions.[3][7][16][22][25] Moreover, many adolescents are willing and eager to have their voices heard and play an active role in school-family interactions.[5][23] Engaging middle- and high-school students in school-family partnerships will show students that the adults around them care about them and treat them as autonomous, responsible, and proactive actors in their own academic journeys.[5]

Dr. Joyce Epstein, a leading scholar on school-family-community partnerships, highlights that "students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school".[9] School-family-community partnerships should "locate students at the center" and "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes".[9] Towards these goals, this research brief serves as a launching pad as school leaders explore strategies for supporting students to become proactive drivers for family engagement and also their own learning and development. Based on a comprehensive review of research on student voice, adolescent development, and family engagement, we offer **four specific, research-informed recommendations for middle and high schools**:

1. Gather students' ideas about and feedback on the school's existing family engagement practices.
2. Empower students to become collaborators and decision-makers in designing and improving the school's family engagement practices.
3. Provide opportunities for students to play an active role in family engagement practices as inviters, interpreters, guides, performers, and more.
4. Prepare students and teachers for the reimagined student role in family engagement practices by providing them with guidance and opportunities to practice new skills.

Each of the four recommendations is backed by a wealth of research. For each strategy, we provide a broad overview accompanied by a discussion of the rationale and evidence behind the recommendation. We then describe concrete steps you can take to incorporate these strategies into your school's family engagement practices and programs.

Strategy #1
Gather students' ideas about and feedback on the school's existing family engagement practices.

How adolescents perceive and experience family engagement has a significant influence on their academic and social-emotional outcomes.[22][27] Parents and adolescents often perceive the levels of family engagement differently, and adolescents' perceptions of family engagement tend to be better predictors of student outcomes than parental reports.[3][7][16][22][25] Research found that adolescents who thought their parents were very supportive of their independence and only moderately involved in their education reported the highest level of motivation and self-reported well-being.[15] Students who perceived high levels of both support for their independence and involvement from parents actually reported comparatively low levels of motivation and well-being.[15] Therefore, family engagement is not "the more the better"; instead, how adolescents think and feel about their parents' engagement strongly influences the impacts and effectiveness of such engagement.[22]

Many adolescents want their schools to consider them as "active and willing partners in school-family-community connections" whose opinions and concerns were heard and addressed.[5] Adolescents are likely to feel that their voices are not being heard by the adults, and many adolescents want to be more involved in the decision-making and problem-solving processes for their own education.[5] When evaluating family engagement practices and programs, schools should gauge student perceptions as an important source of feedback. Most importantly, administrators and teachers should reflect on and make changes based on adolescents' recommendations, with adolescents actively engaged in the design, implementation, and evaluation processes.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS:

- Survey or interview students at least once every school year about students' opinions on the ways in which the school and their families have been collaborating and communicating.
- Organize events to create a direct and informal setting where administrators hear students' thoughts on how the school and their families can become more effective partners to support their education.
- Use IEP meetings, student-parent-teacher conferences, or early-in-the-year writing assignments as opportunities to ask for students' more individualized ideas about how their families and teachers can best support their education. Include feedback from students who are representative of the races, cultures, grade levels, and other groups who attend the school.

Strategy #2

Empower students to become collaborators and decision-makers in designing and improving the school's family engagement practices.

To better meet adolescents' needs for independence and responsibility, schools should create opportunities for adolescents to become key decision-makers and problem-solvers in family engagement practices.[9] Research has suggested that incorporating student voice in school processes is associated with positive school and student outcomes, including[13][20]:

- students' improved engagement in school;
- higher attendance rates;
- less chronic absenteeism;
- higher acceptance of and/or compliance with school rules;
- higher grade point averages (GPAs);
- better school climate;
- decreased bullying and racism;
- more democratic school processes;
- improved life skills;
- higher self-esteem;
- improved student-adult relationships;
- a higher sense of agency;
- a higher sense of belonging;
- a higher sense of academic competence.

Therefore, schools should adopt creative and appropriate strategies to maximize the benefits of effectively including student voice. Students should be not only a source of feedback, as discussed in previous sections, but also collaborators with adults in the school's planning, decision-making, and problem-solving processes. Given the importance of students' feelings about family engagement, schools should create opportunities for students to become active, respected, and equal collaborators and decision-makers in school processes related to family engagement.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS:

- Engage at least two students in the school's decision-making team around family engagement (e.g., the school-family partnership action team).[9]
- Organize student panels to share with administrators, teachers, families, and community partners their opinions on the relationship and interactions between the school and family.[9]

- Encourage students to form and join student councils and organize their own discussions of changes in family engagement to include input from as many students as possible.[14]
- Implement student ideas in recognizable ways in the school's policies, programs, and practices. Highlight the contributions of students to the decision-making of the school so that students see how their voices are heard.

Strategy #3

Engage students as active and equal participants in the school's family engagement practices.

Besides contributing to the school's family engagement efforts by providing feedback and engaging in decision-making processes, each adolescent can and should play critical roles in the unique partnership between their own family and school. All three parties, namely students, schools, and families, can benefit from adolescents becoming active partners in family engagement and contributing to school-family partnerships in various capacities.[19] For example, the field of special education has come a long way in terms of engaging students as drivers of their own learning and development in home-school partnerships. According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (and as later reauthorized), students with disabilities are mandated to participate in IEP meetings when appropriate.[2] The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 Amendments required that IEP meetings where transition services are to be discussed must involve students aged 14 years and older.[2] Research has revealed benefits for students to actively engage in their own IEP meetings, including:

- a better understanding of the IEP processes and their purposes;[17]
- higher motivation and greater ability to pursue and achieve goals;[4]
- more positive feelings about the IEP processes;[18]
- improved engagement and leadership in their own IEP meetings;[18]
- improved self-determination skills;[24]
- improved academic achievement;[2]
- better post-school outcomes.[24]

When designing family engagement practices, including parent-teacher conferences and other forms of home-school interactions, schools can learn from the well-established special education research and practices around student voice. Learning from the research and practices in special education can help elevate the roles of all students in family engagement.

Moreover, adolescents spend a significant amount of time at both home and school, making them well-positioned to participate in and support the two-way collaboration and interactions between their family and school.[19] Adolescents are "in a unique position to teach schools how to become more 'family-like' and to help their families become more 'school-like'" by helping their school and family better understand the values, beliefs, norms, and cultures of each other and become more effective partners in supporting their education.[19] This could be particularly important and helpful for families in communities that have been historically marginalized and minoritized. Students may help bridge differences in values and beliefs families hold that may be culturally incongruent with the white, Eurocentric, and middle-class value system prominent in many schools.[19] Invitations from students are also more likely to appeal to families' wishes to be responsive to their children and to support their children in succeeding in school.[12]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS:

- Invite students to participate in parent-teacher conferences and lead conversations on their own learning progress and needs.[9][26]
- Organize student-centered events to show students' skills and talents and attract families to the school.[19]
- Invite and prepare students to help with designing, naming, and promoting school family engagement events in ways that are appropriate and appealing to their families' values, cultures, beliefs, and routines.[19]
- Invite and prepare students to act as translators or interpreters during **informal** interactions between the school and families. *Note: this should not replace the use of professional education interpreters during formal conferences and events.*
- Invite and prepare students to help their families better understand school policies and processes.
- Interview and survey students about their families' and communities' cultures, histories, and life experiences, and use such information to enhance family engagement practices and design culturally relevant curriculum, instruction, and school events that draw upon families' funds of knowledge.[10][21]

Strategy #4

Prepare students and teachers for the reimagined student role in family engagement practices by providing them with guidance and opportunities to practice new skills.

Incorporating student voice requires individual and collective capacity-building among both adolescents and school staff.[19] Adolescents need to be equipped with necessary skills, such as communication, goal setting, self-monitoring, setting high expectations, problem solving, and collaboration skills, to become effective and responsible partners with adults in school procedures related to family engagement.[6 19 29] Therefore, schools should be intentional about teaching and scaffolding adolescents to practice partnership skills so that both the adolescents and the adults can benefit from the formers' increased responsibility and contribution to the partnership.[14] Moreover, school staff can participate in professional development to develop skills that help them increase their knowledge of certain student populations and best practices. Professional development can be designed to improve school staff awareness of the importance and benefits of elevating student voice and viewing students as collaborators in many settings in the school, including family engagement.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS:

- Collaborate with student leadership organizations that have personnel who are knowledgeable of student voice to provide professional development for both students and school staff.
- Share students' feedback on family engagement with school staff during professional development as lessons learned and successes. Use these as future topics of professional development.
- Set a school-wide expectation for the inclusion of student voice in school decision-making and an expectation for teachers to encourage student-parent interactions about their learning.
- Use professional development time to create small multidisciplinary school professional groups to brainstorm ways to elevate student voice in family engagement practices.

Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

Strategy	Glows What can we celebrate about our current work?	Grows What are our next steps?
1. Understand your students' perceptions of and feedback on your school's existing family engagement practices.		
2. Empower students to become collaborators and decision-makers in designing and improving your school's family engagement practices.		
3. Provide opportunities for students to play an active role at family engagement events as inviters, interpreters, guides, performers, and others.		
4. Prepare students and teachers for the reimagined student role in family engagement practices by providing them with guidance and/or professional development.		

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