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Strategies for Equitable ELL Family and Community Engagement

Stephanie K. Knight

GCU, stephanie.knight@my.gcu.edu

Tracy Vasquez

Grand Canyon University, Tracy.Vasquez@gcu.edu

Marjaneh Gilpatrick

Northern Arizona University, Marjaneh.Gilpatrick@gcu.edu



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Introduction and Background

Engagement. We all want it from our families in the school community, but since the pandemic, the face of what engagement may look like has changed. In some regards, families have been involved now more than ever; however, what we are looking for goes beyond involvement. Families are truly now ALL IN. How can we make this dynamic engagement we are seeking to be easier and more seamless for our families? It's no secret that students whose families reinforce and extend learning at home are more successful in school; moreover, when there exists a mutually supportive network of educators, families, and students, a climate is created to promote learning and success.

Research studies have highlighted the significance of family and community engagement in the academic achievement of students. Such engagement should be goal-oriented, focusing on the learning and achievement of students (Hughes et al., 2016). Constantino (2015) cited a study conducted by the Harvard Family Research project which concluded that when families are truly engaged in their children's schooling, there is a significant increase in the students' academic achievements and their social and emotional wellbeing. School-Family-Community partnerships have also been linked with improved school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitude toward school (Hughes, et al., 2016).

What's Next?

Families need to be engaged, not just involved, in their children's schooling. For children, especially those who are from marginalized and under-served communities, we can be more proactive in giving them the tools they need for all to succeed. It's not one-size-fits-all

anymore. With engaged parents at home, children are more likely to attend to, complete, and succeed in academic areas.

Traditionally, to engage families, we have held family night events, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and community-building social events. Now, these have all been disrupted in some way due to the pandemic. How can educators adapt their expectations of families' involvement and engagement in reaction to these environmental changes? We must be creative to connect effectively and partner with families.

Let's all agree family and community engagement is first and foremost about establishing and strengthening relationships and cross-cultural communication between educators and family as well as community members (Garcia et al., 2016).

What Are Some BEST Practices to Foster Family and Community Engagement?

Know Your Students, Their Families and the Community. In order to facilitate the relationships, educators need to examine not only their own cultural values, beliefs, and biases, but they must also be aware of the perceptions, cultural values, and experiences of families and community members in their environments. Certainly, differences exist. Regardless of the social and economic status of the students and their families, when educators work on strengthening the connections between school and students' families they are more likely to be engaged in the students' academic endeavors (Antunez, 2000; Garcia et al., 2016). Acknowledging and practicing these compassionate and empathetic attitudes will allow us to be more flexible when interacting with students and families.

Cultivate Learning Communities.

- *Introductions.* To know your students and their families, you can first introduce yourself to them. You can share about your own background and experiences. Then you can ask

students to share about themselves. Some teachers even write a letter, email, or conduct a home visit as they initiate contact with the students and their families prior to the start of the academic year. They exchange information such as the students’:

- Learning style;
 - Favorite book;
 - Favorite subject;
 - Hobbies;
 - Friends;
 - Favorite shows.
- *Funds of Knowledge*. Create funds of knowledge between the families and your classroom. You could send a survey to them and request that they share their passions and expertise with you. These could include:
 - Families cultures and traditions;
 - Special skills such as wood working, gardening, cooking, baking, musical instruments, etc.
 - *Meaningful Partnerships*. Find community resources to help educate. Local community organizations, businesses, or non-profit organizations can partner with you and your classroom students and families. For example, teachers can bring in local resources that align with curricular units to create meaningful engagement with families. If studying about WWII, educators can invite veterans from the local VA chapter to speak about their experiences to students and families. Similarly, when studying the environment, experts from the local botanical garden can be invited to share their expertise on growing sustainable home gardens and their benefits to the environment.

Develop Opportunities for Partnering With Families. In the process of establishing a trusting relationship with your students and families, you can seek their input in complementing and enhancing the learning experiences that you plan and implement. To do that, you can:

- *Redefine Meetings.* Invite families to curricular meetings, conferences, and open houses. Traditionally these have been in person. Does this exclude a whole group of parents? Can we think outside the box? You could offer video-conferencing, and empower the students to lead them. Many families have been hampered by work or having multiple commitments. By providing some flexibility, you are demonstrating mindfulness and empathy to their many responsibilities.
- *Extend Learning.* Build a toolbox for parents at home. Provide a newsletter, website with links, or videos for effective parenting and supporting students' learning. Sometimes, as teachers, we can have blind spots when it comes to families. We may assume that they know what we need them to do to extend our educational efforts into the home. We need to explain the reasoning behind what we are asking them to support. Similar to how we differentiate instruction to meet the specific needs of the students, we need to do the same with the families. So, we need to be explicit in sharing what the students are learning, and the best ways to extend learning at home to progress towards mastering the concepts.

Know the Data and Set Goals.

- *Provide Coaching.* Locate or create video or virtual support. Virtual office hours can be set up to go through educational apps. For instance, teachers have taken advantage of virtual meeting applications such as Zoom or Google Meet to connect with families and model coaching with them.
- *Open Lines of Communication.* Create a two-way communication channel so families can reach out with questions, concerns or ideas. Some teachers rely on apps such as REMIND, Edmodo, or a class website to maintain consistent communication with their families.

- *Include Families in Learning.* Invite parents to join a virtual lesson, read a children's book to students, play a musical instrument or sing for the class, share information about their job, or even lead an art project.
- *Consider Perspective.* Explore alternative locations to meet with families. Classrooms can be in various spaces! Be creative!
- *Collaborate Your Efforts.* Make sure staff is on board with supporting multicultural and multilingual families and show interest in understanding different cultures and traditions. This may necessitate a strategic plan for the entire school. For everyone to be aware and respectful of the various traditions, the teachers and administrators can work together to create a plan for learning and understanding the various cultures in their school as well as their community.

Ultimately, as educators, our goal is for our students and families to be contributing and effective members of their communities, albeit in school, at home, or within their circles of influence. Even though we experienced some challenges during the pandemic, we were able to reset and view things from a new perspective. This has been an opportunity for all of us to re-evaluate our approach to fostering family engagement and inclusive practices in our classrooms. These strategies can serve as a springboard to additional ideas and pathways to increasing families' engagement in their students' academic journeys.

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