



# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT AND SELF-ASSESSMENT



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## INTRODUCTION

### About the Toolkit

The Vermont Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment was designed to be an easy-to-use, practical guide for educators seeking to develop and maintain growth of school, district, Supervisory Union (SU), or Supervisory District (SD) family engagement work, including for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The Toolkit provides researched-based information, proven strategies, a Self-Assessment to reflect on your own practice, and links to additional tools that can be customized to SU, district and school needs. This Toolkit is only one of many resources available to teachers, administrators, families, and communities to continue to support the academic achievement and success of all children and families they serve.

The Toolkit was developed as part of the Vermont State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), which is intended to improve proficiency of math performance for students identified as having an emotional disturbance in grades 3, 4, and 5. As part of the SSIP, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), in partnership with Supervisory Unions (SUs) and Supervisory Districts (SDs), will support the development of highly-functioning Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Leadership Teams. The Leadership Teams will in turn support the development of a well-functioning MTSS to provide high-quality math instruction to students with diverse needs. Families play a critical role in this process as partners in their child's education. As a result of high-quality family engagement practices, families will be supported in their understanding of their child's needs and be able to work closely with the school in the development and implementation of their child's IEP.

While the SSIP is focused on improving outcomes for children with an emotional disturbance in grades 3, 4, and 5, the information, Self-Assessment, and strategies presented in this Toolkit can be used by educators partnering with families of students of all ages and all levels of need. Multiple levels of family engagement are addressed in the Toolkit, including strategies for administrators, classroom teachers, and other school personnel. Additional specific strategies are also provided for educators working with students with IEPs and families experiencing challenges.

Educators should begin their exploration of the Toolkit by reviewing the sections on how the Toolkit is organized and the Core Principles. Once familiar with the Core Principles, there is a Self-Assessment that teams or individual educators and administrators can use to evaluate their current family engagement practices. The results of that Self-Assessment can then be used to inform the development of an action plan based on the strategies presented in subsequent sections of the Toolkit.

## What Do We Mean by Family Engagement?

The Vermont Agency of Education has identified the following definition of *family engagement* in the *Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports (VTmtss) Field Guide* based on the definition developed by Henderson and Mapp (2002)<sup>1</sup>:

Families and communities engage in the following ways:

- Building trusting collaborative relationships among school staff members, families, and community members;
- Recognizing, respecting, and addressing families' needs as well as class and cultural differences; and
- Embracing a philosophy of partnership in which power and responsibilities are shared.

In the context of a school-wide systemic approach, these are useful and effective strategies for improving student outcomes by improving family/school partnerships for all students.

It is important to note that we use the term *families* rather than *parents*. We do this to ensure that our language is inclusive of all individuals who are responsible for the care and education of a child. Students may live or be cared for by parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, aunts or uncles, or have other non-traditional family structures. By using the term *families* we hope to make all caregivers feel welcome and included.



## How the Toolkit Is Organized

The Toolkit is designed to be a reference document that you can return to again and again to identify specific strategies to improve your family engagement practices and to support you in addressing challenges. The Toolkit is divided into five sections:

- 1. Core Principles:** The Toolkit begins with an overview of the Core Principles of family engagement. These Core Principles serve as the foundation for the entire document, including the Self-Assessment and the role-specific guidance found in the Toolkit. Be sure to familiarize yourself with these Core Principles before moving further into the Toolkit.
- 2. Self-Assessment:** The Self-Assessment is designed to help you reflect on your own professional practice and to identify which of the Core Principles you may want to focus on as part of your action plan development and implementation. Each of the Core Principles is addressed in the Self-Assessment.

<sup>1</sup> Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

- 3. Considerations for Family Engagement:** This section of the Toolkit highlights circumstances that may challenge family engagement and how you can address them. It also has specific information about and strategies for working with diverse families.
- 4. Role-Specific Strategies and Practices:** This section of the Toolkit provides easy-to-follow recommendations that include proven strategies for engaging families, strategies for overcoming barriers to family engagement, and specific information on how to support families of children with disabilities and families experiencing significant challenges. This section of the Toolkit is broken down into the following subsections:
  - a. Family Engagement for Administrators: A Whole-School Approach;
  - b. Family Engagement for Teachers: Building a Welcoming Classroom;
  - c. Family Engagement for IEP Team Members: Ensuring Meaningful Participation by Families; and
  - d. Family Engagement for Other School Professionals.
- 4. Action Plan Development:** This section of the Toolkit is designed to help you and your team develop a comprehensive action plan to support the implementation of effective family engagement practices at your school. Using the results of the Self-Assessment and your review of the role-specific guidance, you will outline the steps necessary for you and others in your school to develop stronger relationships with families at your school.
- 5. Ensuring Sustainability of Effective Family Engagement Practices:** Effective family engagement is a dynamic process that requires revisiting, reflecting on, and reimagining practices throughout the school year. In this section of the Toolkit you will learn about how you can evaluate your family engagement practices and ensure that they are part of a cycle of continuous improvement for your school or program.
- 6. Sharing Resources with Families:** Strong partnerships with families require effective two way communication. This section of the Toolkit highlights strategies you can use when sharing information with families about their child and the school.



## CORE PRINCIPLES

### What Is the Difference Between Family Involvement and Family Engagement?

The terms *family engagement* and *family involvement* are often used interchangeably to refer to the ways in which families interact with their child's school. However, in this Toolkit we will emphasize the importance of family engagement as a school-wide improvement strategy. For our purposes, families and communities engage in the following ways:

- Building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members;
- Recognizing, respecting, and addressing families' needs as well as class and cultural differences; and
- Embracing a philosophy of partnership in which power and responsibilities are shared.

So why focus on family engagement? Research has shown that effective family engagement produces better results for students, families, schools, and their communities.<sup>2</sup> A research synthesis on family engagement by Henderson and Mapp (2002)<sup>3</sup> found that students whose families were involved in their education, regardless of their income or background, were more likely to:

- regularly attend school;
- earn higher grades and receive higher test scores;
- pass their classes and move to the next grade;
- have better social skills, including positive behavior at school; and
- graduate from high school and attend postsecondary education.

In addition, a study by Reading, Langdon, Meyer and Sheley (2004)<sup>4</sup> of 129 high-poverty elementary schools found that schools that implemented a comprehensive set of family engagement practices were able to see improvements in statewide assessment results in as little as two years. The cumulative effects

#### Family engagement differs from family involvement in that:

1. Family engagement focuses on **doing things with families** rather than **to** families;
2. Family engagement requires that schools **listen to families** to develop a **shared understanding** of needs and opportunities;
3. Family engagement believes that families make **valuable contributions to both their child's education and to the school as a whole**; and
4. Family engagement views families as **partners** with valuable information to contribute to their child's education and the school as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Ferlazzo, L., & Hammond, L. A. (2009). *Building parent engagement in schools*. Santa Barbara, CA: Linworth.

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

<sup>4</sup> Redding, S., Langdon, J., Meyer, J., & Sheley, P. (2004). *The effects of comprehensive parent engagement on student learning outcomes*. American Educational Research Association.



of better, more frequent, family-school interactions led to increased levels of trust and respect, increased social capital for students, and a school community that is better able to support children's academic and social success.

Throughout the Toolkit and Self-Assessment you'll notice that we use the term *families* rather than *parents*. The use of *families* is intended to be more inclusive and to reflect the diverse types of caregivers you may encounter when working with students. Remember that students may be accompanied by a parent, grandparent, step-parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, or other caregiver. By using the term *families*, we can capture this diversity of experience and include all individuals responsible for a child's care.

## Related Resources

- Ferlazzo, L.(2011). **Involvement or Engagement?**. *Best of Educational Leadership*, 68, 10-14.
- Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., & Rosenberg, H. (2010). **Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform**. National Policy Forum for Family, School, & Community Engagement. *Harvard Family Research Project*.

## Legal Requirements for Family Engagement

### Family Engagement in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was most recently reauthorized by Congress in 2004, is the federal law that outlines the requirements for schools to serve the educational needs of students with disabilities. This law provides specific requirements to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and includes specific provisions for family involvement in their child's education. In fact, IDEA emphasizes the importance of families' participation in their child's education: **"Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by... strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families ... have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home."**<sup>5</sup>

IDEA details a number of rights that parents have as part of the IEP process, which can be summarized as follows<sup>6</sup>:

- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of their child.<sup>7</sup>
- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to their child.<sup>8</sup>
- Parents are entitled to be members of any group that decides whether their child is a 'child with a disability' and meets eligibility criteria for special education and related services.<sup>9</sup>
- Parents are entitled to be members of the team that develops, reviews, and revises the individualized education program (IEP) for their child.<sup>10</sup> If neither parent can attend the IEP meeting, the school must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 34 CFR §300.501(b)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/qa2/>

<sup>7</sup> 34 CFR §300.501(b)

<sup>8</sup> 34 CFR §300.501(b)

<sup>9</sup> 34 CFR §300.306(a)(1)

<sup>10</sup> 34 CFR §300.321(a)(1)

<sup>11</sup> 34 CFR §300.322(c)

- “Parents are entitled to be members of any group that makes placement decisions for their child. If neither parent can attend the meeting where placement is decided, the school must use other<sup>12</sup> methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls, or video conferencing.”<sup>13</sup>

For additional information on parental rights in the IEP process, please visit the [National Center for Parent Information and Resources](#), a national center funded by the Office of Special Education Programs that supports the Parent Training and Information Centers network and the role that Parent Training and Information Centers play in educating parents and improving outcomes for children with disabilities.

### Family Engagement in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. ESSA is the nation’s general education law. The previous reauthorization of this law was called the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There are several key provisions in the law related to parental engagement in a child’s education.

Title I of the ESSA has specific requirements for parent engagement. Title I is one of the nation’s oldest and largest federal programs supporting elementary and secondary education. Through Title I, the federal government disburses money to school districts based on the number of low-income children, ages 5 - 17, in each district as determined by census data. Each district uses its Title I money to supplement and improve regular education programs in order to help students meet state standards.

Districts receiving Title I funds must do the following according to Section 116 of the law, which addresses parent and family engagement:

- Set aside at least one percent of their Title I funds to carry out parent and family engagement activities;
- Include parents and family members of low-income students in decisions about how these family engagement funds are spent; and
- Use parent and family engagement funds for at least one of the following activities:
  - » Supporting schools in teaching engagement strategies to school staff;
  - » Supporting programs that reach families at home, in the community, and at school;
  - » Disseminating information on best practices focused on engagement, especially for increasing engagement of economically disadvantaged families;
  - » Subgranting to schools to collaborate with community-based organizations or businesses that have a track record of improving family engagement; or
  - » Engaging in any other activities that the district believes are appropriate for increasing engagement.

<sup>12</sup> 34 CFR §§300.501(c) and 300.327

<sup>13</sup> 34 CFR §§300.501(c)(3) and 300.328

Under ESSA, states are also required to support parent and family engagement activities. Each state must provide an assurance in their state plan that it will provide school districts and schools with effective parent and family engagement strategies. In addition, states must use a portion of their federal funding to establish statewide family engagement centers to support parents' effective participation in their child's education and to develop and implement, in partnership with the state, statewide policies for parental involvement. The **Vermont Family Network** serves this function in Vermont.

States must also develop and submit a state plan for their Title I funds to the US Department of Education and must meaningfully consult with parents, in addition to other stakeholders, in the development of those plans. Similarly, districts must develop and submit a plan to the state for their Title I funds. ESSA details what must be included in this plan, and districts are required to meaningfully consult parents of children in schools receiving Title I funds when developing their plans and describe the strategies they will use to meet the parent and family engagement requirements of ESSA in their plan.

Lastly, in order to receive Title I funds, districts must develop a written parent and family engagement policy that is periodically updated to reflect the changing needs of families. Schools receiving Title I funds must also distribute parent and family engagement policies agreed to by the parents. The policies must describe how Title I schools and districts involve families in planning, how the policies will be evaluated, how families are informed about the Title I status of the school or district, and how families are regularly included in activities, including advisory boards and committees. For more information, please consult the summary of the requirements for district and school parent and family engagement policies completed by the **Leadership Conference Education Fund**.<sup>14</sup>

It is important that you are aware of your school's or district's status regarding Title I, and how that may impact your evaluation of and planning for family engagement improvements. If you have questions about Title I or its requirements, please contact the AOE Consolidated Federal Programs team.

## Defining the Core Principles for Family Engagement

### How the Core Principles Were Identified

The identification and development of these principles were informed by a review of several sets of national and local evidence-based and/or evidence-informed family engagement standards.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/education/ESSA-Parent-Family-Engagement.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> The following tools informed the identification and development of the Core Principles:

1. **The PTA's National Standards for Family and School Partnerships**
2. **The Massachusetts Family, School and Community Partnership Fundamentals**
3. **Build Initiative Family Engagement Toolkit**
4. **Michigan Department of Education "Collaborating For Success" Parent Engagement Toolkit**
5. **California Department of Education Family Engagement Framework**
6. **REL Pacific Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education**
7. **Boston Public Schools Parent Engagement Toolkit for Educators**
8. **North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction Parent and Family Involvement: A Guide to Effective Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in North Carolina Schools**

## Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment



### Definition

A welcoming school environment and culture is one that builds trust and connection among students, families, educators, and other stakeholders. It is responsive to individual strengths and needs and ensures that all members of the community feel like valued contributors to students' academic achievement and healthy development.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. Families have a personal relationship with one or more school staff members and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.
- b. Families entering the school are greeted personally, have a clear sense of where to go, and find the overall environment inviting.
- c. Information about school and community programs related to child and family needs is available in common areas for families.
- d. There are opportunities for family members to participate in meaningful volunteer opportunities within the school.
- e. School activities for families are designed with the individual needs and interests of all families of the school and are unbiased towards the socioeconomic status, culture, language, or ability of the families in the school.

## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication



### Definition

Effective two-way communication relies on families and educators having a variety of ways to receive and discuss information about students' progress within and outside of the school environment. This ongoing process allows for meaningful interactions and authentic connections between schools and families that are focused on supporting student learning while meeting the unique situational, cultural, and linguistic needs of families.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. Effective Communication Strategies:
  - (a) Schools have a system in place with multiple strategies to facilitate two-way communication with families and community members on a regular basis.
  - (b) Information is disseminated with enough time for families to respond or follow up appropriately as needed.
  - (c) Communication needs to be comprehensive and take place throughout the year and in different venues.
  - (d) Communications are respectful, honest, timely, and collaborative.
- b. Communication Across Roles
  - (e) Educators, administrators, and families feel equally able to contact one another in support of a child's learning and recognize that no single means of communication will be sufficient to meet the needs of all families.
  - (f) Families, students, and community members are regularly asked for their input regarding issues and concerns.
- c. Culturally Proficient Communication
  - (g) Educators have an understanding of how the various cultures represented in their school view education and schooling practices so that they can engage in meaningful conversations with individuals of different backgrounds.
  - (h) School activities are representative of all families, and families feel safe sharing information about their child, family, culture, or experience to enhance student learning.



## Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students



### Definition

Effective family engagement requires a collaborative effort on the part of teachers, administrators, and families to support the success of students both in and out of school. Families are essential partners in understanding and meeting the needs of their child and must know how their child is progressing in school and what they can do to support their child's learning and development at home.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. Educators and families partner to identify and implement plans and practices that support jointly identified desired outcomes or goals for students.
- b. Educators ask families for information about their child, family, culture, values, norms, beliefs, and/or community to use in classroom planning.
- c. Families work with teachers, administrators, and other school staff to identify, act on, and achieve their hopes and goals for their child.
- d. Educators get to know individual families and their stories so that teachers can understand what families need to support their child's learning.
- e. Families have information, tools, and training about child development and how to create supportive learning environments outside of school that are linked to what the child is learning in the classroom.
- f. Conferences and visits are arranged by the school or as requested by families based on students' individual needs.

## Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility



### Definition

Shared power and responsibility means that families, school staff, and community members are partners in school or district planning, leadership, and decision-making. These stakeholders are involved in goal-oriented relationships to promote progress among all students and representation on committees, boards, and teams represents the diversity of the student body.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. Families are engaged in school planning, leadership, and meaningful volunteer opportunities that result in changes and improvements at the school.
- b. Opportunities are available to support the development of family capacity and family leadership and advocacy skills so that families may take a more active role in school and/or district planning.
- c. Families are provided with information on how to understand and make meaning of information provided about their child, including assessment results, so that they can participate in educational decision-making as partners.
- d. Educators and school staff provide families with objective, unbiased information so families can make informed decisions about their child's education, so educators and school staff can support families' decisions.
- e. Families, staff, students, and community members participate in developing, implementing, and evaluating critical school programs.

## Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community



### Definition

Community partnerships allow students and families to extend their learning beyond the classroom and to access needed services and resources to support students' academic and developmental progress. Effective community partnerships reflect the needs of the student body and strengthen school programs, families, and student learning through meaningful connection and collaboration. Community partnerships can exist among community health, mental health, social service, and youth organizations, as well as school partners to build peer networks, link families and students with needed services, and support successful transitions for children and their families.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. Schools identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.
- b. Schools connect students and families to community resources that strengthen and support students' learning and well-being.
- c. Families, teachers, administrators, and other school staff use school and community supports and resources to promote students' progress.
- d. Educators have knowledge of the community they serve, including the community's needs.
- e. Community partnerships exist among community health, mental health, social service, and youth organizations, as well as school partners to build peer networks, link families and students with needed services, and support successful transitions for children and their families.

## Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access



### Definition

Educators are responsible for ensuring that every child and family has the opportunities they need to be successful in the educational experience, including ensuring that children are treated equitably and have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Educators must differentiate their services and supports based on the unique needs of each child and family, including disability, culture, language, and socioeconomic status.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. "The school does take into account the historical context of where families may have strived or struggled, their current realities, and the desired future outcomes for their children."<sup>16</sup>
- b. The school provides training to staff on communicating with families who are not native English speakers and/or require translation or interpretation services.
- c. The school considers and addresses families' cultural and language needs when developing and disseminating important information to families.
- d. The school ensures that representation on advisory bodies and committees reflects the composition of the student body, including families that are living in poverty, have limited English proficiency, have disabilities, or have a student with a disability.
- e. Educators understand the unique characteristics and strengths that families bring to the school so that families can use those strengths to support improved outcomes for students.
- f. Educators understand how culture and background influence people's interactions and can impact how they are or are not engaged with the school.

<sup>16</sup> Build Initiative Family Engagement Toolkit

## Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability



### Definition

Effective family engagement is an ongoing, iterative process that requires intentional planning and evaluation. Sustainable family engagement requires the necessary personnel and fiscal resources to ensure success, the coordination of activities and initiatives across the school, and the creation of feedback loops across all stakeholders, including families, to inform the work.

### What does it look like in practice?

- a. The school has a family engagement action plan that incorporates specific steps and activities, ongoing evaluation, and data analysis to support a cycle of continuous improvement.
- b. Family engagement has been included as a part of the Continuous Improvement Plan at both the school and superintendency levels.
- c. The school emphasizes the use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create consistent and intentional impact on the school and family connections.
- d. The school ensures that there are adequate resources (both fiscal and personnel) to support meaningful and effective family engagement strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.
- e. All family engagement activities are coordinated across classrooms and supported by state, district, and school leaders. For this to occur, educators need a framework that can support and sustain family and community engagement practices.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> [Schoolcommunitynetwork.org](https://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/): Handbook on Family and Community Engagement



## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

### About the Self-Assessment

The following Self-Assessment will help you identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in your family engagement practices regardless of your current role in your school or program. The Self-Assessment is broken down by the 7 Core Principles described previously in this document. Individual Self-Assessment items are informed by the “What does it look like in practice?” elements of the Toolkit.

### Self-Assessment Instructions

This Self-Assessment is designed to be completed by teams of school personnel who have the information necessary to reflect upon the spectrum of family engagement practices within a school from the individual teacher level to whole-school initiatives. Ideally, teams should consist of administrators, teachers, related service providers, families, and school family engagement coordinators if available. Individuals may also use this Self-Assessment to reflect on their own practice.

The Self-Assessment can be completed in several different ways. The team may sit down together and rate each item by coming to consensus as a group, or individuals can complete the Self-Assessment independently and then come together as a team to compare results and reach consensus on each item. Administrators may also ask individual teachers to complete the Self-Assessment so that administrators can have a sense of family engagement practices across their school. It should be noted that, in these cases, the tool should only be used as a reflection and professional development opportunity, not as an evaluative measure. Lastly, individuals may choose to complete the Self-Assessment as an opportunity to reflect on their own professional practice.

When completing the Self-Assessment, please be sure to review the instructions and the description of the rating scale below.



## Description and Use of the Rating Scale

This document uses a four-point rating scale ranging from a 1 for “not yet in place” to a 4 for “innovative implementation of a practice.” Each number rating on the scale is defined as follows:



**Not Yet In Place:** A rating of a 1 means that individuals and/or teams are not yet utilizing this practice. Teams should assign this rating even if plans are in place to address this practice but have not yet been implemented.



**Emerging Practice:** Emerging practices are those that are new to a school or program and/or those that have not been fully implemented. Emerging practice should be used if a practice is not used consistently across a school or classrooms.



**Established Practice:** Established practice reflects practices that are being consistently implemented as intended by educators throughout the school or program.



**Innovative Implementation:** Innovative implementation indicates that an individual, school, or program is consistently going above and beyond implementing best practices for family engagement. Innovation includes practices that encourage reflection, critical thinking, and connection, and those that create equal partnership between team members and families. This rating reflects extensive work to achieve that level of practice consistently.

When completing the Self-Assessment, individuals and teams should review each element carefully and then select the number that best represents typical practice. There is a space after each Core Principle for notes where you can write down additional information about your process, your rating, or the information that led you to select a certain rating. You may also wish to use this space for notes about which elements or Core Principles you may wish to prioritize as part of your later action planning.

Lastly, please note that only ratings of 1, 2, 3, and 4 may be used. There are no half ratings, and you should only select one rating per element. When choosing each rating, consider whether the practice described is being consistently implemented.

# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Date the Self-Assessment Was Completed:

---

Name of Person(s) Completing Self-Assessment:

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## Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

*A welcoming school environment and culture is one that builds trust and connection among students, families, educators, and other stakeholders. It is responsive to individual strengths and needs and ensures that all members of the community feel like valued contributors to students' academic achievement and healthy development.*

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
A. Families have a personal relationship with one or more school staff members and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.	1	2	3	4	
B. Families entering the school are greeted personally, have a clear sense of where to go, and find the overall environment inviting.	1	2	3	4	
C. Information about school and community programs available to children and families are available in common areas for families.	1	2	3	4	

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
D. There are chances for family members to participate in meaningful volunteer opportunities within the school.	1	2	3	4	
E. School activities for families are designed with the individual needs and interests of all families of the school and are unbiased towards the socioeconomic status, culture, language, or ability of the families in the school.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 1</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle One:**



## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication

Effective two-way communication relies on families and educators having a variety of ways to receive and discuss information about students' progress within and outside of the school environment. This ongoing process allows for meaningful interactions and authentic connections between schools and families that are focused on supporting student learning while meeting the unique situational, cultural, and linguistic needs of families.

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
<b>Effective Communication Strategies</b>					
A. Schools have a system in place with multiple strategies to facilitate two-way communication with families and community members on a regular basis.	1	2	3	4	
B. Information is disseminated with enough time for families to respond or follow up appropriately as needed.	1	2	3	4	
C. Communication needs to be comprehensive and take place throughout the year and in different venues.	1	2	3	4	
D. Communications are respectful, honest, timely, and collaborative.	1	2	3	4	
<b>Communication Across Roles</b>					
E. Educators, administrators, and families feel equally able to contact one another in support of a child's learning and recognize that no single means of communication will be sufficient to meet the needs of all families.	1	2	3	4	
F. Families, students, and community members are regularly asked for their input regarding issues and concerns.	1	2	3	4	



Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
<b>Culturally Proficient Communication</b>					
<b>G.</b> Educators have an understanding of how the various cultures represented in their school view education and schooling practices so that they can engage in meaningful conversations with individuals of different backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	
<b>H.</b> School activities are representative of all families, and families feel safe sharing information about their child, family, culture, or experience to enhance student learning.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 2</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle Two:**



## Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students

*Effective family engagement requires a collaborative effort on the part of teachers, administrators, and families to support the success of students both in and out of school. Families are essential partners in understanding and meeting the needs of their child and must know how their child is progressing in school and what they can do to support their child's learning and development.*

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
<b>A.</b> Educators and families partner to identify and implement plans and practices that support jointly identified desired outcomes or goals for students.	1	2	3	4	
<b>B.</b> Educators ask families for information about their child, family, culture, values, norms, beliefs, and/or community to use in classroom planning.	1	2	3	4	
<b>C.</b> Families work with teachers, administrators, and other school staff to identify, act on, and achieve their hopes and goals for their child.	1	2	3	4	
<b>D.</b> Educators get to know individual families and their stories so that teachers can understand what families need to support their child's learning.	1	2	3	4	
<b>E.</b> Families have information, tools, and training about child development and how to create supportive learning environments outside of school that are linked to what the child is learning in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
F. Conferences and home visits are arranged by the school or as requested by families based on students individual needs.	1	2	3	4	
G. The support and assistance of family members is sought in a variety of ways.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 3</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle Three:**



## Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility

Shared power and responsibility means that families, school staff, and community members are partners in school planning, leadership, and decision-making. These stakeholders are involved in goal-oriented relationships to promote progress among all students and representation on committees, boards, and teams represents the diversity of the student body.

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
A. Families are engaged in school planning, leadership, and meaningful volunteer opportunities that result in changes and improvements at the school.	1	2	3	4	
B. Opportunities are available to support the development of family capacity and family leadership and advocacy skills so that families may take a more active role in school and/or district planning.	1	2	3	4	
C. Families are provided with information on how to understand and make meaning of information provided about their child, including assessment results, so that they can participate in educational decision-making as partners.	1	2	3	4	
D. Educators and school staff provide families with objective, unbiased information so families can make informed decisions about their child's education, so educators and school staff can support families' decisions.	1	2	3	4	
E. Families, staff, students, and community members participate in developing, implementing, and evaluating critical school programs.	1	2	3	4	



Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
F. Individual families' preferences for decision-making (for example, who is responsible for making decisions) are honored when making decisions about an individual child's educational program.	1	2	3	4	
G. Educators understand how their own culture influences their beliefs and assumptions about students, families, and community members.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 4</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle Four:**



## Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community

Community partnerships allow students and families to extend their learning beyond the classroom and to access needed services and resources to support students' academic and developmental progress. Effective community partnerships reflect the needs of the student body and strengthen school programs, families, and student learning through meaningful connection and collaboration. Community partnerships can exist among community health, mental health, social service, and youth organizations, as well as school partners to build peer networks, link families and students with needed services, and support successful transitions for children and their families.

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
A. Schools identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.	1	2	3	4	
B. Schools connect students and families to community resources that strengthen and support students' learning and well-being.	1	2	3	4	
C. Families, teachers, administrators, and other school staff use school and community supports and resources to promote students' progress.	1	2	3	4	
D. Educators have knowledge of the community they serve, including the community's needs.	1	2	3	4	
E. Community partnerships exist among community health, mental health, social service, and youth organizations, as well as school partners to build peer networks, link families and students with needed services, and support successful transitions for children and their families.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 5</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle Five:**



## Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access

*Educators are responsible for ensuring that every child and family has the opportunities they need to be successful in the educational experience, including ensuring that children are treated equitably and have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Educators must differentiate their services and supports based on the unique needs of each child and family, including disability, culture, language, and socioeconomic status.*

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
<b>A.</b> The school does take into account the historical context of where families may have strived or struggled, their current realities, and the desired future outcomes for their children. <sup>18</sup>	1	2	3	4	
<b>B.</b> The school provides training to staff on communicating with families who are not native English speakers and/or require translation or interpretation services.	1	2	3	4	
<b>C.</b> The school considers and addresses families' cultural and language needs when developing and disseminating important information to families.	1	2	3	4	
<b>D.</b> The school ensures that representation on advisory bodies and committees reflects the composition of the student body, including families that are living in poverty, have limited English proficiency, have disabilities, or have a student with a disability.	1	2	3	4	
<b>E.</b> Educators understand the unique characteristics and strengths that families bring to the school so that families can use those strengths to support improved outcomes for students.	1	2	3	4	

<sup>18</sup> Build Initiative Family Engagement Toolkit



Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
F. Educators understand how culture and background influence people's interactions and can impact how they are or are not engaged with the school.	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 6</b>					

**Notes About Core Principle Six:**



## Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability

Effective family engagement is an ongoing, iterative process that requires intentional planning and evaluation. Sustainable family engagement requires the necessary personnel and fiscal resources to ensure success, the coordination of activities and initiatives across the school, and the creation of feedback loops across all stakeholders, including families, to inform the work.

Element	Not Yet in Place	Emerging Practice	Established Practice	Innovative Implementation	Score
A. The school has a family engagement action plan that incorporates specific steps and activities, ongoing evaluation, and data analysis to support a cycle of continuous improvement.	1	2	3	4	
B. Family engagement has been included as a part of the Continuous Improvement Plan at both the school and superintendency levels.	1	2	3	4	
C. The school emphasizes the use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create consistent and intentional impact on the school and family connections.	1	2	3	4	
D. The school ensures that there are adequate resources (both fiscal and personnel) to support meaningful and effective family engagement strategies that have the power to impact student learning and achievement.	1	2	3	4	
E. All family engagement activities are coordinated across classrooms and supported by state, district, and school leaders. For this to occur, educators need a framework that can support and sustain family and community engagement practices. <sup>19</sup>	1	2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL SCORE FOR CORE PRINCIPLE 7</b>					

<sup>19</sup> [Schoolcommunitynetwork.org](http://Schoolcommunitynetwork.org): Handbook on Family and Community Engagement

**Notes About Core Principle Seven:**

## Final Self-Assessment Score

Now that you have completed the Self-Assessment for each Core Principle, copy your total score from each of the seven sections above into the corresponding boxes below. Divide your total score from each Core Principle by the maximum available points listed in the third column of the table below. For example, if you received a score of 10 on Core Principle 1 you would divide that score of 10 by the 20 maximum points available for Core Principle 1 for a final score of 50%. Use the fifth column to indicate whether or not that Core Principle may be a priority focus area for your family engagement work moving forward and the last column for any additional notes. Please note that, if you received a score of less than 70% on any Core Principle, you are encouraged to include activities directed at that Core Principle in your Action Plan. Additional space is available at the end of this document for notes and individual or team reflections about the final Self-Assessment score and next steps.

Core Principle	Total Score From Self-Assessment (Copy from above)	Maximum Available Points	Final Score (Total Score divided by Maximum Available Points, multiplied by 100)	Priority Focus Area?	Notes
Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment		20			
Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication		32			

<b>Core Principle</b>	<b>Total Score From Self-Assessment</b> (Copy from above)	<b>Maximum Available Points</b>	<b>Final Score</b> (Total Score divided by Maximum Available Points, multiplied by 100)	<b>Priority Focus Area?</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students		28			
Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility		28			
Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community		20			



<b>Core Principle</b>	<b>Total Score From Self-Assessment</b> (Copy from above)	<b>Maximum Available Points</b>	<b>Final Score</b> (Total Score divided by Maximum Available Points, multiplied by 100)	<b>Priority Focus Area?</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access		24			
Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability		24			

**Reflections on Final Assessment Score:**

**Reflections on Final Assessment Score (continued):**



## Considerations for Family Engagement

## Circumstances That Challenge Family Engagement

“All families have challenges - times of sadness and loss, concerns in the present, and worry about the future. All families also have times of joy, hope, optimism, and contentment. For most families, the positive times outweigh the negative; the family maintains its equilibrium and functions successfully. For other families, negative events, experiences, and feelings exceed the positive. Balance is never achieved, and family life unravels.”

- Hanson & Lynch, 2013

As educators, we have all worked with and supported families for whom the negative experiences of life are outweighing the positive. It adds additional responsibility to an already full plate to successfully educate children whose families are in this space, and to both reserve judgment and the urge to fix everything as we work with families. Educators also have experience working with families for whom things seem to be going well, then deteriorate due to a significant life event (e.g., loss of a parent, loss of a job, significant move to a new community). In either case, the school environment should be one in which families feel included and know that their child will receive understanding and support. The school should strive to not be an additional stressor to families who are already very stressed.

This section will dig deeper into ways that school staff create a welcoming and supportive school environment for families who are at risk; in other words, those experiencing homelessness, addiction, violence, trauma or loss, as well as families experiencing significant life events. Oftentimes we may feel disheartened when trying to support families who are in these situations, especially when the magnitude of the risk exceeds what we know as educators may be helpful, or what we can address through the resources and services offered at the school. Effectively supporting families in crisis is a community effort and requires partnership across multiple agencies to address. It also requires that school staff not make assumptions or judgments about what the family is experiencing. Instead, school staff should invest time in becoming educated on the issues currently affecting families in their school community (e.g., opioid addiction, domestic violence, child abuse, military deployment, loss of a parent) as well as the prevention, treatment, and/or service options for each situation.

After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. Included below are some quick wins and possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider based on your needs for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn't a checklist that needs to be completed

but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement and your personal, school, or district Action Plan. At the end of this section, there is a list of resources to help support you in your efforts to make effective family engagement part of your professional role. As an administrator, you may also wish to look at other sections of the Toolkit by role to get ideas of how you may support individuals you supervise and/or work with on a regular basis.

## Considerations for Partnering with Families in Crisis

**Create a school environment that is respectful, caring, and flexible.** All families need to know that, whatever life brings, the school's response to them and to their child will be supportive and understanding. While staff may not be able to address each need that presents itself, all staff can be compassionate, and perhaps empathetic, to the difficulties that families are facing. Ensuring that all staff have the skill and ability to respond in a non-judgmental, supportive way will go a long way toward helping families wind their way through their crises without worrying about whether school will be a stressful place for them.

**Strategy:** Promote the use of family-centered practices in all interactions at the school, including:

- Respecting families' values, beliefs and practices, especially when they are very different from our own;
- Being sensitive to diverse backgrounds and approaches;
- Treating the family as people first, not solely the issue or challenge they are facing;
- Being flexible to address the ever-changing needs of families, as well as their adjustment or approach to their situation; and
- Maintaining appropriate boundaries that allow families to make their own decisions and to develop their own sources of support and resources (Hanson & Lynch, 2013).
  - » **Next step:** During staff meetings and/or Peer Learning Community (PLC) discussions, offer the opportunity to discuss challenges related to using family-centered practices as well as the opportunity to discuss solutions and options.

**Ask families what kinds of connections and family resources will be helpful to them.** Don't make assumptions that all families living in poverty want holiday assistance or all families in the military need grief counseling. Most families will welcome the opportunity to share with you their individual needs, especially if there are caring, private, one-on-one conversations during which genuine concern for the family is expressed and the family's confidentiality is safeguarded.

**Strategy:** Have private conversations with individual families to see what their preferences are. Offer a private room (other than someone's office) to have these conversations. The lead can be anyone in the school who has a strong relationship with the family, or anyone with whom the family expresses comfort.

- » **Next step:** Explore both formal supports and services that may be needed, as well as informal or social supports the family has access to when considering possible assistance.
- » **Next step:** Check in with other staff to learn more about what needs families are expressing in conversations. As you notice trends or similarities across the individuals you speak with, use the information to figure out what kind of opportunities you will provide for multiple families.

- » **Next step:** Suggest first that the family contact the organizations that best meet their needs. If they would like support, ask permission to connect families with community resources and services. Never make a referral or share any information without the family's consent unless you are legally required to do so.

**Safeguard families' confidentiality at all times.** Whether the crisis is short- or long-term for the family, it is likely that they will want to keep the sphere of individuals who know about their concerns and needs for supports and services relatively small. Taking care to keep conversations confidential, and thinking through how information about community resources is shared with the school community, are both critical steps to ensuring families feel safe asking for and receiving assistance.

**Strategy:** Send information about community resources out to all families. That way no family is singled out or has to share information that they would like to keep private (Hanson & Lynch, 2013).

- » **Next step:** Invite multiple community organizations to come share information about their resources and services at a parent night or coffee hour. When more than one speaker presents, it allows families who may be interested in one topic to come listen without disclosing which of the resources they may need.
- » **Next step:** Provide child care at events to make it easier for families to choose to attend.

**Create strong partnerships with community organizations.** As is often said in the care and education of a child - "it takes a village." Similarly, no one community organization, including the school, can address all of the needs that a family may have. For this reason, intentional partnerships between the school and community organizations and services must be pursued. This goes beyond having quick access to the typical information of contacts, eligibility, and application processes. Schools must have a thorough understanding of the issues facing the families in their care, and must reach out individually to each service organization to share general information about the need and the possibilities for partnership.

**Strategy:** Create a community map of available resources, supports, and services that relate to the needs currently facing the families in your school. Make note of how far away certain services are, as well as any gaps you notice where no services or resources meet the needs you see.

- » **Next step:** Make sure all staff in your school have access to the map or list of community organizations so that they can offer information to families as needed.
- » **Next step:** Create and share expectations for staff in their approach to working with families in crisis; make sure that they know to be respectful, discreet, and dependable with their follow through.

**Strategy:** Create a community consortium of leaders from community organizations to discuss and address the family's needs in the community. Be inclusive in the invitation to participate, including state-funded agencies, as well as nonprofits and religious and civic groups. The goal is to ensure the group represents your community so that the group may address the community's needs.

- » **Next step:** Share the information about the gaps you have identified with others in your community. This can elevate the need to those in decision-making positions so that perhaps new services can be developed.



- » **Next step:** Make connections with community organizations such as food banks, churches, synagogues, mosques, and/or service organizations (e.g., Rotary Clubs, Knights of Columbus). Share the gaps and needs you have identified; often, these organizations can mobilize with material support (such as clothes or food) or are willing to work with you to figure out how to address a community need.
- » **Next step:** Arrange to share responsibility for ongoing conversation about community needs. This allows for agility and responsiveness should the needs of your community change.

As with many other aspects of family engagement, planning for and responding to the needs of the families in your school experiencing crisis is not a one-time event. School staff must look back after each school year, or ideally after each event or activity, to assess how it went and how it could change in the future. Additionally, the demographics of families and children in your school will change over time, so adjustments will need to be made in your approach to family engagement. For additional information about sustainable family engagement practices, see the Ensuring Sustainability section of the Toolkit on page 87.

## Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **National Association for Children of Alcoholics: Children of Alcoholics: A Kit for Educators:** This resource includes materials for educators and students related to working with families experiencing alcoholism.
- **USED OSEP Intervention IDEAs for Infants, Toddlers, Children, and Youth Impacted by Opioids:** This resource outlines the steps to creating a successful community map. Detailed recommendations regarding pre-mapping, mapping, implementation of a plan of action, and maintenance of mapping efforts.
- **Family Support & Well-Being Resources from the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center:** This collection of resources includes learning modules and written resources to support family well-being. While written for early childhood programs, most of the practices will work for families with children of all ages.
- **Crisis Planning Tools for Families: A Companion Guide for Providers:** This resource provides an overview of crisis planning tools for families and tips for helping individuals and families develop a safety plan.



All families are unique, and certainly now, more than ever, the families we work with represent a wide variety of family structures, cultures, ethnicities, languages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Families also differ greatly in how they organize themselves and how they go about the day-to-day activities of their family (Hanson & Lynch, 2013). When educators consider not only the cultural and linguistic diversity of families that is often discussed but also the structural diversity of families (e.g., single-parent families, grandparents raising children, military families, same-sex parents, teenage parents, multigenerational families, blended families, parents with disabilities), it becomes very clear that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to family engagement will not work.

As educators, it is our responsibility to develop effective partnerships with each family and to acknowledge that each partnership will look different from the next. All of the principles within this Toolkit provide guidance about how to approach the development of relationships with individual families. Because we continue to wrestle with being responsive to and respectful of the range of diversity we see in our schools and classrooms, this section will discuss unique considerations for partnering with families with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity. It will also include considerations for how to ensure that families of all structures feel represented and included in the school community.

After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. Included below are some possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider based on your school’s needs, for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn’t a checklist that needs to be completed but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement and your personal, school, or district Action Plan. There is also a list of resources at the end of this section to help you support effective family engagement as part of your professional role. You may also wish to look at other sections of the Toolkit by role to get ideas of how you may support individuals you supervise and/or work with on a regular basis.

### Considerations for Partnering with Diverse Families

**Recognize that, for some families and in some cultures, family presence or involvement in school is not expected or even desired.** For some families, negative experiences with school in the past may keep them from coming to school, or the need to work multiple jobs to make

ends meet may keep them from physically stepping foot into the school building. As a school, it is important to realize that one size does *not* fit all when it comes to family engagement, and that it is our responsibility to find ways of reaching and engaging families in ways that are meaningful for them.

**Strategy:** Offer a continuum of options for family engagement in your school so that physical presence is not the only way families may be engaged.

- » **Next step:** With your school, identify other ways you can measure the success of family engagement, other than the number of people that show up to volunteer in classrooms or come to big events at your school. Ideas may include having individual contact with each family, providing support or resources, or receiving information about the child from the classroom teacher.
- » **Next step:** Get to know individual families and ask them what makes the most sense to them for their level of engagement. Be accepting and non-judgmental about the ways in which families opt to engage. If needed, talk with colleagues to reframe any negative thinking you are having about the family.

**Creating a welcoming school environment** requires understanding your school's population and needs. Each year, school staff should take time to review information (such as demographic data and/or family surveys) and to talk about experiences in the previous year, particularly as they relate to creating an environment in which every family feels included.

**Strategy:** If you don't have one already, create and administer a family survey that seeks to understand each family's experience in your school. Include questions that ask how well the school does at welcoming and including each family.

- » **Next step:** Invite the PTA or pull together another group of families that represent your school's population. Ask them to review the survey results and to offer suggestions for improvement.
- » **Next step:** Tap into the expertise of programs within your school's community that serve families. Ask them for resources, information, and ideas for making your school a welcoming part of your community for all families.

**Strategy:** Check your individual attitudes, beliefs, and values when working with families. Remember that it takes time to develop relationships with individual families. Each relationship goes through phases of getting to know one another, understanding the needs and priorities of both the families and the school staff, and eventually moving into partnership (Hanson & Lynch, 2013). Being mindful of our own attitudes, beliefs, and values is an important piece of the healthy development of relationships.

- » **Next step:** When issues arise, use staff meeting time or Peer Learning Community (PLC) time to share what you are noticing and get input and feedback from others.

**Creating communication that is culturally proficient** takes work and practice, and requires the input of those that receive the communication. It may mean making some mistakes, but ideally the mistakes are ones that lead to greater understanding and better communication the next time. Culturally proficient communication doesn't just mean providing information in multiple languages or making interpreters and translators available. It means:

- Being sensitive to and supportive of the multiple experiences that families are having, including being new to the country, your town, or school;
- Learning about and acknowledging how decisions are made in each family, but ultimately recognizing the family as the decision-makers for their child;
- Recognizing the family (and the child) as people, not problems to be fixed or a package of issues to be dealt with or solved (Hanson & Lynch, 2013); and
- Treating each person with dignity and respect as a foundation for all communication.

**Strategy:** Use families’ native language in spoken and written communication from the school. Perhaps a family or two with more experience with the school would be willing to translate documents for families, or to record the weekly school message in their language.

- » **Next step:** Make sure signs and postings around your school reflect the languages spoken by the families in your school.
- » **Next step:** Keep a list of individuals (families or professional translators) who may be available to answer questions or have conversations when needed, and make this list available to the staff at the school to use to plan for classroom activities or to prepare for parent/teacher conferences, for example.

**Strategy:** Establish an advisory group of diverse families that can advise your school on the best ways to communicate with families and provide feedback on communications that have already gone out.

- » **Next step:** Many suggestions have been made in this document to bring together groups of families to advise or plan. Carefully consider the groups you currently engage and look for opportunities to either engage groups for more than one purpose, or to expand the group to ensure representation more reflective of your school population.
- » **Next step:** Consider how forms and other communications speak to families that are not “traditionally” structured. For example, do forms always list “mother/father” rather than Family Member 1 and Family Member 2? How do families with two mothers respond to forms? Grandparents? Consider asking for feedback on how forms or communications can be more inclusive of all the family structures that are in your school.

**Honoring the knowledge that comes from culture and diversity** adds to your school environment and ensures that all families feel included in the school community. Children and families from various cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds all bring knowledge, understanding, and perspectives of the world that enhance everyone’s understanding of what it means to be a global citizen and prepare each person be more globally-minded. Part of the process of honoring this diversity comes in simple acts, such as interpreting bilingualism as a strength rather than an issue to be remedied. Other opportunities exist to honor how families know and understand the world by asking them to share their culture or background through activities such as music, cooking, or celebrations.

**Strategy:** Carefully consider opportunities for families to share what they know and how they understand the world. While celebrations are fun and easy, they are only one part of a family’s experience. Ask families what they would like to share, and find ways to incorporate their ideas into full-school events or into classrooms, as they are comfortable.



- » **Next step:** Set expectations for classroom teachers to gather information about families' culture, language, and background, and support them in using this information in their planning and teaching. Make sure that each teacher is being sensitive to both the family's level of comfort with sharing and the appropriate venue for sharing (e.g., classroom, family night).

**Strategy:** Revisit family events and activities in your school and make sure that they are reflective of the families in your school. Consider how, or if, "typical" American culture is emphasized over inclusiveness and diversity. Additionally, consider how activities promote the overall improvement of the school and/or district, making sure to consider different cultural perspectives, different family structures, and the overall approach that your school and/or district is trying to take toward improving family engagement.

- » **Next step:** Change family activities such as Mother's Day teas, making Father's Day cards, or making family trees to be inclusive of different family structures. There's no need to eliminate each of these, but gather input from families about how to observe some of these events or complete activities without excluding children.

As with many other aspects of family engagement, planning for and responding to the diversity of the families in your school is not a one-time event. School staff must look back after each school year, or ideally after each event or activity, to assess how it went and how it could change in the future. Additionally, the demographics of families and children in your school will change over time, so adjustments will need to be made in your approach to family engagement. For additional information about sustainable family engagement practices, see the Ensuring Sustainability section of the Toolkit on page 87.

## Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?:** This resource shares relevant research on how to improve family engagement in schools. Research supporting families' interest in the academic performance of their children, as well as practical ways that teachers and families can engage parents and families, are discussed.
- **The Newcomer's Toolkit: Establishing Partnerships with Families:** This resource helps educators and practitioners create strong and meaningful partnerships with families. This chapter specifically advises on ways to create partnerships with multicultural families and provides valuable resources.
- **National Association for Multicultural Education: How Many More 'Til We Rise Up?:** This resource is a link to the National Association for Multicultural Education, a foundation built on bringing together individuals who are passionate about multicultural education.
- **Partnering with families and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School:** This resource details the effectiveness of a program called Caring Across Communities, which works to support immigrant and refugee children and families.
- **Parent Involvement in School: Engaging Immigrant Families:** This resource offers a snapshot of how to effectively engage immigrant families and children in the classroom successfully. The resource discusses potential barriers to active parent involvement as well as effective engagement strategies for building relationships.

- **Promoting ELL Parental Involvement: Challenges in Contested Times:** This resource analyzes characteristics of an English Language Learner (ELL) student and family. Additionally, barriers to family engagement and characteristics of differing parent/family involvement styles are examined.
- **American Translators Association:** This resource is a link to the American Translators Association. Membership in the American Translators Association is an invaluable asset to translators and interpreters working in the industry.
- **Translation — Getting It Right: A Guide to Buying Translations:** This resource is a guide to help individuals without a strong background in linguistics make educated decisions concerning buying translation technology.
- **Interpreting — Getting It Right: A Guide to Buying Interpreting Services:** This resource is a guide to help individuals without a strong background in linguistics make educated decisions concerning buying interpreting technology.
- **How to Show Respect for All Families:** This resource provides a list of suggestions for how multiculturally inclusive methods can be implemented in the school system. This resource also includes activities that can help create inclusive and inviting spaces for all the families within a given school.
- **Volunteer Opportunities for Non-English Speaking Families:** This resource lists a number of ways that parents and families whose first language is not English can actively participate in enhancing the school community.
- **Partnering with Families Living in Rural Areas:** This tool provides a list of action steps and resources to aid educators in successfully engaging with children and families from rural areas.
- **Edutopia: How Can High-Poverty Schools Engage Families and the Community:** This resource details how high-poverty schools can involve students' families through home visits and by joining the community's safety net to provide social and medical services for those in need.



As a school or district administrator you play a critical role in ensuring that an effective, high-quality family engagement plan is in place. In addition to ensuring that your program meets all of the legal requirements for family engagement activities, you are able to drive the vision for family engagement within your school or district in partnership with other educators. After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. You may wish to reflect on some of the challenges you currently face with family engagement, such as traditional family involvement policies, a lack of cultural awareness within a school, or differing degrees of comfort with or awareness of effective family engagement practices among staff.

Included below are some quick wins and possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider for your school or district based on your needs for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn't a checklist that needs to be completed but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement and your personal, school, or district Action Plan. There is a list of resources at the end of this section to help support your efforts to support effective family engagement in your professional role.

As an administrator, you may also wish to review the roles described in other sections of the Toolkit for ideas on supporting individuals you supervise and/or work with on a regular basis. It is also recommended that you review the sections on working with families in crisis and diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, to further support an effective whole-school family engagement approach. You may also wish to talk to teachers and other school personnel to identify strategies that you can incorporate into your work, or opportunities for you to support more effective family engagement practices in your school or district.





## Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

As an administrator, you can shape the school environment and culture so that families feel welcome and connected to their child's education. The strategies below are examples of how you can systematically ensure that all families feel like valued contributors to their student's academic achievement and healthy development.

**Strategy:** Make sure that each family member visiting the school receives a personal greeting and that there are clear signs and/or staff directing them where to go.

- » **Next Step:** Create a welcome packet for families visiting your school that includes helpful information such as a school calendar, school contact information, and a community services directory. You might consider asking local businesses to include coupons in the packet.
- » **Next Step:** Assign 1-2 people in your office to be the greeters of new families - those that move into your school and/or have a kindergartner. These people will be responsible for sharing the welcome packet and going through it with individual families. This can be done in a group meeting or through individual appointments before school starts. Depending on the needs of your community, you may want to consider having greeters who speak more than one language.

**Strategy:** Hold an open house prior to the start of the school year, in addition to your fall open house, to help families and students become familiar with the layout of the school, their child's teacher, and other families.

- » **Next Step:** Involve all school staff in the open house. Have tables set up in different parts of the school manned by staff from the cafeteria, after school programs, special education team, custodial staff, and nursing and transportation teams (and others you can think of) to answer families' questions.

**Strategy:** Provide teachers with training, information and/or guidance on how to support family volunteers in their classrooms. These trainings may include guidelines for recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers, as well as recognizing them for their service.

- » **Next Step:** Develop and disseminate a survey to families about their volunteer interests, talents, and availability. Use the results of the survey to match potential volunteers with needs in the school.
- » **Next Step:** Provide training for families on a specific skill that they will use as classroom volunteers.



### Quick win

Send personalized invitations to families encouraging them to visit the school.



## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication

As a leader in your school community, you can model effective two-way communication and set the expectations for others. As a reminder, family engagement requires a partnership between educators and families. It is just as important to gather and use information from families as it is to share information with families. Strong two-way communication ensures that all individuals involved in a child's education have the information they need to support children's growth and development, as well as to support the school as a whole.

### Effective Communication

**Strategy:** Establish guidelines for regular communications between school and home that include things such as calls, emails, weekly newsletters, etc.

- » **Next Step:** Consider how social media may be used. Look at examples from other schools and districts, then meet with school staff to develop a cohesive social media approach, including assigning who will monitor, post and manage the school's social media presence.
- » **Next Step:** Develop a system (for example, a survey, focus groups) to collect data on teacher-family interactions. How often do families hear from the school? How do families share information with the school and/or their teachers? What methods of communication are used? What are the topics of these interactions? Flip the questions around and also gather information on how often the school hears from families, how they hear from families and about what topics. This information may be used to develop clearer expectations about how staff are to reach out, and how families prefer to be reached.



#### Quick win

Work with school staff to ensure that families receive a prompt response to emails and phone calls.



#### Quick win

In a staff meeting, have staff share their methods for gathering information from families, and how they use this information in their classrooms throughout the school year.

### Communication Across Roles

**Strategy:** Create a system of communication that will ensure that all information about family engagement policies, procedures, and expectations are available to all school staff and families. Consider using different ways to get this information out to others, and different ways to access the information (for example, on a website, in paper copies, etc.).

- » **Next Step:** Ask families and educators to provide feedback on the ways in which information is communicated. What is working well? What needs to be updated or changed? What information do families find it difficult to access?

**Strategy:** Create an anonymous comment box — on-site or virtual — so families can share feedback, concerns, and recommendations.

- » **Next Step:** Consider hosting town hall forums or small group meetings (for example, within a PTA meeting once a year) with families to solicit their feedback and suggestions.



#### Quick win

Clearly post all of your family engagement policies, procedures, and events on your school or district website.

## Culturally Proficient Communication

**Strategy:** Provide educators with professional development on how various cultures view education and schooling practices, including how to effectively engage with individuals who may have different backgrounds or experiences.

- » **Next Step:** Invite family members from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to present to or meet with teachers and talk about their experiences with education and how they can feel most welcome in the school or classroom.



### Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students

Families play a critical role in ensuring their child's success in and out of the classroom. As an administrator, you can ensure that families have the information necessary to understand how their child is progressing, what is being done to support their learning in the classroom, and how time out of school can be used to support their child's learning.

**Strategy:** As an administrator, you can support family engagement by making sure that families can attend school-sponsored family engagement activities. Consider providing transportation and child care to make it easier for families to attend events at the school.

- » **Next Step:** School-sponsored family engagement activities don't have to take place at the school. Partner with organizations throughout your community to offer activities at locations where families already engage in other activities, such as community centers, libraries, or recreation centers.

**Strategy:** Consider alternative options for family participation in meetings or events. For example, you could live stream events or record conference calls, then post them to the school website.

- » **Next Step:** Reach out to families to solicit their feedback on the best ways for them to participate in the school community.

**Strategy:** Develop print or web resources that explain the standards and expectations children are expected to meet in your school. Include information on standardized assessments and how to interpret the results of those assessments.

- » **Next Step:** Offer family workshops or trainings on the expectations and standards by grade level. Ask experienced family members to be a part of the development and delivery of the workshops or trainings.



#### Quick win

Encourage your staff to develop a statement that articulates what you value in family participation. Make sure that it is visible to families and referenced during family events and staff meetings or trainings.



## Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility

As an administrator, you play a key role in ensuring that families are included in school or district planning, leadership, and development. Families can provide critical input and insights into decision-making processes and can serve as champions for your school or district. Your role as an administrator includes building capacity in families (along with educators),<sup>20</sup> through things like training and other professional activities for those that do not yet have leadership skills or understand the role that they may play. The strategies below are examples of how you can help families have shared power and responsibility in your school or district.

**Strategy:** Establish family/community advisory committees to advise your school and district, and engage the committee(s) in problem solving activities, the drafting of policies, and decision making for the school and/or district.

- » **Next Step:** Encourage additional family participation by promoting public comment and input at advisory committee meetings and encouraging families to serve as chairs or co-chairs of advisory committees.

**Strategy:** Provide professional development opportunities for educators that address the role of families as participants in the school, including school governance and decision-making, and effective family engagement practices that allow them to serve as equal partners in school or district planning.

- » **Next Step:** Use these professional development activities as an opportunity to make specific plans for family engagement in school and district planning, including improvement planning.
- » **Next Step:** Provide joint trainings and team building activities for educators and family leaders. Use these activities as a jumping off point for joint planning, or for addressing school or district issues together as a team.

**Strategy:** Provide families with training or other professional development so they can successfully participate in school and district-wide decision-making and planning.

- » **Next Step:** Involve families in the development of the training and/or adopt a train-the-trainer model in which experienced families train new families.



### Quick win

Post a full meeting schedule on your school's website of all family or community meetings. Include the location, time, and agenda, as well as an open invitation to anyone interested in participating.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/pf/documents/famengageframeenglish.pdf>



## Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community

Community members and organizations within your community can serve as important contributors to the success of students in your school or district. As a leader, you have the ability to forge connections that will support the success of students in and out of the classroom. By identifying and integrating community-based resources and services into school and district programs,<sup>21</sup> you can ensure that the needs of students and families are being met and that your students come to school able and ready to learn. The strategies below represent opportunities to build those connections.

**Strategy:** Consider what organizations in your community provide services that may support the students and families in your program. Reach out to these programs to learn about available services, and to share the needs of the students and families you serve. This can help you identify potential partnerships and opportunities. Compile the information and share it with teachers and staff through a list, presentation, or other type of training, and encourage them to share it with families of their students.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with a community-based organization to develop and implement joint family engagement activities and programs including service-learning projects, mentoring, internships, and experiential learning opportunities.

**Strategy:** Partner with local community colleges and universities to provide families with relevant trainings, information, and resources.

- » **Next Step:** Invite families to share what they have learned during PTA, family, or staff meetings. You may consider sharing their insights more broadly, if they speak to a current school or district need.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/pf/documents/famengageframeenglish.pdf>



## Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access

As an administrator, it is critical that you ensure that all students and families are treated equitably and have access to high-quality learning opportunities. This means making sure that your school or district embraces the unique characteristics and strengths of all families and that families are able to participate in their child's education regardless of their background or current challenges. The strategies provided in this section will give you ideas for all families; additional strategies for ensuring equity and access can be found in the sections on working with families in crisis and working with diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity.

**Strategy:** Get to know the demographics of your school or district (e.g., ethnicities/cultures, spoken languages, socioeconomic backgrounds) by looking at data and talking with your staff. Talk with your staff about their understanding of both strengths and challenges across your community.

- » **Next Step:** Get to know individual families in your school of different backgrounds and find out what they need to be able to be connected to the school. Ask about things like translation/interpretation, transportation, timing, and their preferred role in their child's education. Share this information with staff and encourage them to use it in their planning.

**Strategy:** Ensure that all families can access school activities by offering translators and/or interpreters to welcome and assist families. For less common languages, you may wish to reach out to local colleges or universities to see if someone in their language program or an international student can help identify a translator.

- » **Next Step:** As families become more familiar with your school and programs, ask for family volunteers to act as the interpreters or translators for family events.

**Strategy:** Create a family resource section in your office and/or library. Provide information in books, handouts, or other print materials, and make computers available for families to use to look for online resources.

- » **Next Step:** Open the school computer lab or library to families in the mornings and/or evenings so they can access classroom websites, blogs, and other resources related to their child's learning.
- » **Next Step:** Have staff on-site to support the development of computer literacy by families.



### Quick win

Develop a shared vision as a school or district that articulates the ways in which you value the diversity and uniqueness of each child or family you serve.





## Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability

Effective family engagement is an ongoing, iterative practice within your school and/or district. You need to continually revisit and revise your practices to reflect changes in your school population and what is known about effective family engagement practice. You can revisit the Self-Assessment and Action Plan to identify further areas for growth. For additional information on this Core Principle, please review the section of the Toolkit on Ensuring Sustainability. The practices suggested in this section will help you with your action planning and will align well with the development of a long-term plan to ensure you come back to these practices over time.

**Strategy:** The Action Plan you develop as part of your work with this Toolkit should be incorporated into your continuous improvement plan at your school or district (such as school improvement plans). Consider how your proposed family engagement activities relate to other initiatives and priorities in the plan and how they can build off one another.

- » **Next Step:** Solicit input and recommendations from families on the family engagement and continuous improvement plans. How can families be involved in the development and implementation of these plans? How can you ensure that the plans reflect the needs of all families?

**Strategy:** Page 80 of this Toolkit outlines how you and other school personnel can create an Action Plan to implement high-quality, effective family engagement activities. As an administrator, you make the decisions about how fiscal and personnel resources are allocated appropriately to achieve that plan. In your decision-making, consider what funding is available for family engagement activities and programs, and which of your staff will be involved and in what ways.

- » **Next Step:** Consider hiring a part- or full-time family engagement staff person (such as a coordinator) who is responsible for overseeing and coordinating all family engagement policies, procedures, and activities.

**Strategy:** As a school or district leader, it is critical that you understand what is and is not working regarding family engagement in your program. This includes the ability to collect and interpret data about family engagement programs currently in place and any need for additional programs or supports. As part of your action planning, decide how and when you will collect data about the effectiveness of family engagement activities, and then use that data to inform your team about how to improve what's happening.



### Quick win

Reserve time during your first staff meeting to revisit your plan, if only to remind the team what the school has committed to doing. If possible, make time to update the plan for the upcoming year.



### Quick win

Make sure that your Parent-Teacher Organization has a clear purpose and understands the school's needs prior to the beginning of each school year. Clearly articulate the expectation for teacher/staff participation in the group, and facilitate connections between the parents and staff as needed.



- » **Next Step:** Include family members in your evaluation planning, data collection, and decision-making process. Have them take a look at the data and share their own experiences, and use this information to inform your planning for your school or district.

**Strategy:** Engage your special education department, as well as 504 and EST teams (at the school or district level), to review the family engagement survey data collected as part of your annual special education reporting requirements. Take a look at trends, and identify areas of improvement together.

- » **Next Step:** Share this data with families whose children have IEPs, and solicit their input on your proposed solutions. Be sure to provide them with plenty of time to ask questions about the data.

## Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **Connecting Your K-12 Communities: An Imperative for District, School and Student Success:** This resource defines the positive impact connecting K-12 communities can have on district, school, and student success. It also presents five key strategies for educational administrators and practitioners.
- **Principals: Engaging All Families in Student Learning:** This resource is a self-paced guide for principals to use to gain a deeper understanding of what can be done to increase equity and access for families in the formative assessment process.
- **Shared Decision-Making for District Leaders: Building Peer-to-Peer Family Networks:** This resource can be used by district leaders to support the implementation of the family engagement strategies, including family cafes, study circles, and academic family-teacher teams. It includes an exemplar of a six-week study circle that can be used in classroom or team settings to address family engagement issues in the formative assessment process.
- **Shared Decision-Making for District Leaders: Working with Families on Advisory Bodies:** This tool is designed for district leaders who want to develop and implement a strategy for creating a family advisory team for the school district. It outlines three steps, including Outreach and Recruitment, Training and Technical Assistance, and Work of the Committee.
- **Principals - Building Powerful Partnerships Between Families and Teachers for Use with Families - PowerPoint Presentation:** This PowerPoint is tailored to principals who want to facilitate the growth of shared decision-making partnerships between families and teachers within their school. The resource emphasizes that families provide unique and useful information that can help their students succeed.
- **District Leaders - District-Wide Strategies:** This resource is aimed at district leaders who would like to improve two-way communication between the schools and families within their districts. It provides guiding questions that can help leaders examine strengths and opportunities for improvement within their current communication policies.
- **District Leaders - Supporting Two-Way Communication:** This tool provides recommendations to district leaders on how to foster two-way communication between families and district leaders. Ideas include town hall meetings, listening tours, back-to-school nights, annual/ periodic family engagement events, phone calls, anonymous surveys, and coffee talks.

- **Principals - Creating a Culture of Two-Way Communication:** This resource provides principals an opportunity to reflect upon their school’s current two-way communication strategies. It includes several guiding questions and a self-assessment.
- **Principals - Learning About Families:** This tool outlines opportunities for principals to engage with and learn about families within their school system. Recommendations include school events, focus groups, family surveys, community visits, and home visits.
- **Principals - Assessment of Teacher’s Professional Learning Needs:** This resource can be used by principals to assess teachers’ professional learning needs related to family engagement in the formative assessment process. It can be used as a self-assessment tool, supervision tool, or both.
- **Teaching the Teachers: Preparing Educators to Engage Families for Student Achievement:** This issue brief outlines why family engagement is important and how educators can develop the skills and competencies necessary for working with families. It provides a series of case studies that explore the techniques school systems have used, the policies they have developed, and the outcomes they have achieved.



As a teacher, you play a critical role in ensuring that families are included as partners in their child’s education. You will often be the face of the school and the person who communicates most with families about their child’s education. You have a unique opportunity to build powerful partnerships with families. These partnerships can enable families to contribute to their child’s education and the overall success of the school.

After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. Included below are some quick wins and possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider based on your needs for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn’t a checklist that needs to be completed but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement in your classroom and your personal, school, or district Action Plan.

There is a list of resources at the end of this section to help you support effective family engagement in your professional role. To develop a holistic view of strategies you could use, review the sections on working with families in crisis and diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity to further support an effective whole-school family engagement approach. If you work with or are a special educator or participate in IEP team meetings, it is also recommended that you review the section on family engagement for IEP team members.



## Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

As a teacher it is important that you build trust and connection among the families of the students you serve. Creating a welcoming environment makes for a positive first introduction to your classroom and builds a foundation on which you can partner with families in their child's education.

**Strategy:** For many families, the only time they hear from schools is when something is wrong. Make it a practice to reach out to families when there is not an issue to be worked on. Consider different ways to make personal contacts with families to share *positive news* about their child, including emails, phone calls, and personal letters home.

- » **Next Step:** Schedule time with families (either at home or out in the community) to learn more and to understand and support out-of-school learning. Use this as an opportunity to find out what the families think about their child's strengths and specific needs, and how the family would like to be involved in the school and in your classroom.

**Strategy:** Ensure that your classroom presents a welcoming and friendly environment. Ideas include having friendly signs in all major languages spoken by the families of your students, having the work of students celebrated through postings on bulletin boards or the walls, and warmly greeting family members when they arrive.

- » **Next Step:** Consider sharing additional information about yourself with families and your students through a "getting to know you" board that includes information about your life outside of the classroom, such as where you grew up, where you went to school, and your hobbies.<sup>22</sup>
- » **Next Step:** Most teachers ask families to fill out forms about their child and their family at the beginning of the school year. In addition to making these available in all the languages of your students' families, include a sheet where you share a bit about yourself, why you became a teacher, and your hopes for your students and families for the coming year.



### Quick win

Send personalized thank you notes to families that bring you supplies, volunteer, or attend a school-sponsored event. It can be a quick email, note in the child's agenda, or a Post-it Note in the child's weekly folder.



## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication

Effective two-way (from school to home and home to school) communication between teachers and families is critical to students' progress within *and* outside of the classroom. As families' primary point of contact about their child's education, you will need to set the stage for two-way sharing of information between school and home.

### Effective Communication

**Strategy:** Solicit feedback from individual families regarding how and when they would like to receive communications about their child. Do they prefer written or verbal feedback?

<sup>22</sup> *Beyond the Bake Sale* (2007). Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V. & Davies, D.

Are mornings or evenings better? Do they like electronic communication or voice? Who in the family is the best person to contact?

- » **Next Step:** Establish different ways for families to communicate with you and for you to communicate with them as needed. These may include direct phone numbers for calling or texting, email addresses, and/or weekly “office hours” for families to call or meet with you.

**Strategy:** Provide families with printed information on homework policies and how they can monitor and support student work at home.

- » **Next Step:** Send weekly folders of student work and important information from the school home with each child. Encourage families to review the materials and return them to you. You could add a comment sheet that stays in the folder so you can exchange simple ideas and information through the folder. You could also consider scheduling a meeting or call to discuss families’ feedback on the materials.
- » **Next Step:** Hold a student-led family conference where students have the opportunity to discuss their work, assess its quality, and share it with their family.

**Strategy:** Make sure that families receive positive information about their child. Send families unsolicited positive comments about their child either via email, text, or phone call. Phone calls are preferable as they have the ability to further build relationships and improve the connection between home and school.

- » **Next Step:** Track what you share with the families of your students. Are you reaching out to all of the families in your classroom to share positive information? Have you been able to reach every family?

### Communication Across Roles

**Strategy:** Families appreciate consistent messaging. As a school, work with one another to establish a common understanding and a procedure for coordinating communication about students. Make sure that what is developed is ongoing, timely, and accessible to families.

- » **Next Step:** Ask families what they think about how well-coordinated school communication is. What is working well? Where is communication not coordinated? What needs to be updated? What is the most important information to make sure is coordinated across roles in the school?

### Culturally Proficient Communication

**Strategy:** Talk to your administrator about the different language needs of the families of the students in your classroom. Plan together how can you make sure that the families receive important information about their child and the school. For example, do materials you send home need to be translated?



#### Quick win

Let families know the best ways to reach you and the best times. For example, you might suggest that families email you, and that you’ll check email 2x a day, once before school and once during your planning time at 2 p.m.



#### Quick win

At the beginning of the year, ask families to complete an “About our Family” page for a classroom book. Include ideas for pictures, family traditions, family stories, or other unique indicators of a family’s culture to be shared on each page.



- » **Next Step:** Make a personal commitment to learning about the culture of the families of your students either through professional development, research, or asking families directly. What are their preferences for the types and frequency of communication they receive? What are the cultural norms for who in their family receives information, and who makes decisions? How do they prefer to share information with the school? Individualize your approaches to communication by incorporating these preferences into your communication strategies.

**Strategy:** Welcome feedback or input from families on a regular basis. Include things like a virtual or actual suggestion box in your classroom.

- » **Next Step:** In some cultures it may be seen as disrespectful to disagree with educators. Work with families in your classroom to set clear expectations about how you would like them involved in their child’s education, and emphasize that you appreciate and welcome their input and feedback, even if it may be different than your own. Provide examples of the types of feedback and information you would like to receive from families.



### Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students

Families play a critical role in supporting the success of their child in and out of school and can offer opportunities to extend classroom learning at home. As a teacher you can partner with families to help them understand their child’s needs and what they can do to meet those needs. At the beginning of each school year, share information with families about what the children will be learning throughout the year, and provide families with an opportunity to ask questions. In your position you are uniquely positioned to share strategies, resources, and information with families about what their child is learning.

**Strategy:** As a teacher you can develop families’ knowledge and skills in how to support and extend their child’s learning outside of school. Provide families with age-appropriate resources and materials on how children learn, developing study skills or information in various academic subjects covered in your classroom or school program (e.g., magnet program, IB program).

- » **Next Step:** Incorporate age-appropriate information on study skills or ways to boost individual learning into your open houses and family conferences.
- » **Next Step:** Organize a classroom “Discovery Night” where families, students, and teachers can come learn about something new in an exciting and interactive way. Some ideas include Math Night or STEM explorations. These can also be great school-wide events.
- » **Next Step:** Share announcements about community events that tie to what you are learning in school through emails and newsletters.



#### Quick win

At the beginning of the school year, share information with families about what the children will be learning throughout the year, and provide families with regular updates on what their child is learning. Be sure to provide families the opportunity to ask questions and follow up with you for additional resources.

**Strategy:** Share information about what you are covering in your classroom either through a document (such as a weekly newsletter) you send home or an online board that you update regularly. Encourage families to visit the board and ask their child questions about what they are learning in school. This is very important since many strategies now in use (for example, for math) are very different than how families learned the concepts!

- » **Next Step:** Create and send home a toolkit that provides families with activities and resources they can use to extend classroom learning into their time with their child outside of school. Focus on activities that can be easily incorporated into families' daily activities and routines, since these are more likely to be used than those that require families to "do one more thing." Consider including links to websites and community resources for further ideas and connections.
- » **Next Step:** During meetings and conferences with families, ask them to share with you the ways in which they would like to support their child's learning. Tailor your suggestions to what you hear and what you have learned about the family so far.

**Strategy:** Families want to help their child be successful in school. Make yourself available so families can ask questions and share what they understand about how their child learns, including specific ways that they already successfully support their child's learning. Encourage families to reach out to you when they have questions about what their child is learning or to share what can best help their child. Consider multiple methods of communication including meetings, phone, email, notes, or text messages so that families can use the method that works best for them.

- » **Next Step:** Create an information sheet so families can share their preferences for communication, best times of day to be reached, and questions about their child's learning or development.



#### Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility

Families can provide valuable resources, information, support, and insight into classroom and school planning if there are opportunities for them to participate in meaningful ways. As a teacher you can play an important role in ensuring that families are engaged in decision-making regarding their own child's education and topics that impact the broader classroom and school as a whole.

**Strategy:** Invite families to come talk to your students to show or share their specialized knowledge or skills.

- » **Next Step:** Plan regular times during the school year for families to share experiences, family culture, and/or specific knowledge. At the beginning of the year, ask families to let you know (for example, through a sign up sheet) what they are interested in sharing with the class.
- » **Next Step:** Use the information you gather to plan visits both when it is convenient for families and when the content they have to share pairs well with the curriculum.

**Strategy:** Not all families may be able to volunteer for activities in your classroom during the school day. Make sure you provide ways for families to volunteer on their own time without having to come to the school, such as organizing and preparing materials that require cutting, collating, or stapling.



- » **Next Step:** Reach out to families to ask what skills they would like to contribute to their child’s classroom or school. Consider how you might incorporate those skills into upcoming activities or lessons.

**Strategy:** Connections between families are as important as the connection between the school and families. Ask families in your class to distribute and share school-related information in their own communities or to help you identify better ways to get information out across the community.

- » **Next Step:** Identify or ask for a few families in your classroom to act as “room families.” Partner with these families to develop ways to better share information about what is happening in your classroom, as well as ways to get feedback and information for your classroom. Create a plan and implement it together, touching base regularly to see how it is going and the impact it is having on communication.



### Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community

Effective partnerships with the community can ensure that your students and their families have access to needed resources and supports in their lives outside of school, and that children are available for learning when they come to school. In addition, creating connections with existing programs and resources in your community can help you to expand upon the curriculum and help your students learn through meaningful connection in the community.

**Strategy:** Provide families with a list of community resources and activities that link to what the children are learning in your class, such as summer programs, community events, and free activities.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with a community organization to develop or support an existing community-based activity for your students that links with what they are learning in your class.
- » **Next Step:** Provide a monthly written update of all upcoming community events for children and families, and indicate how each is connected to what children are learning in your class.

**Strategy:** Develop a partnership with a local library to support literacy at home. Work with a librarian to identify books that support what you are covering in class, and share a list of these books with families.

- » **Next Step:** Organize a meeting with families at the local library. Work with the librarian to help them get library cards and become more familiar with the library through a tour. Point out the sections of the library that are most appropriate for their child and which books align with what you are teaching in your classroom.

**Strategy:** Become familiar with the services and supports that are provided by agencies that serve children in your classroom. Examples might include child mental health services, private speech, PT or OT, or medical services for a specific condition.



#### Quick win

Share relevant school information with families through community agencies such as your local public television program, radio station, community center, library, gym, or social service agency. Consider anywhere families might go to get information, such as the bulletin board at the local grocery store. For families of children with disabilities, also consider sharing information with relevant organizations such as the state Parent Training and Information Center (PTI).

- » **Next Step:** With the permission from the family, partner with families and service providers that support the child and plan how you will work with one another and share progress and strategies throughout the school year.



### Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access

As a teacher you play a critical role in ensuring that all students have the opportunity to have a successful educational experience. It is important to consider how you are differentiating your teaching to meet the needs of each and every child in your classroom, as well as how cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic diversity may impact a child's experience in your classroom. In addition, remember that individuals may differ considerably in their ability to understand and access information about their child. You will need to consider a number of options and variations in the types of materials, methods, and means for sharing and getting information from families to ensure that every family has access to information and the opportunity to share about their child. *(For additional information on supporting families experiencing crisis and working with diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, please review those specific sections of the Toolkit, which can be found on page 32 and 36).*

**Strategy:** Connect families' culture to what students are learning in your classroom by creating lessons that utilize families' country of origin; include reading materials about cultures in the school, and/or showing films about cultures represented in the school and asking students to address them in writing assignments.

- » **Next Step:** Invite families to your classroom to present on their unique culture, background, and/or family traditions.
- » **Next Step:** Organize an international day in your classroom (or at the school), and encourage families from different cultures to attend to share information about their culture with other families, teachers, and students.



### Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability

The family engagement practices you incorporate into your classroom will support broader school- and district-wide family engagement practices, including those identified in the school and district continuous improvement plans. As a family's primary point of contact, you have the ability to make connections between families and the larger school community, and to solicit feedback from families on how policies and practices can be refined to support further and more meaningful engagement from them.

**Strategy:** Sustainable family engagement practices require an ongoing partnership with families. Work with school administration to identify families that may be interested in leadership development, and plan together how to ask each family about their interest and willingness to be a family leader within the school.

- » **Next Step:** Provide training to families in leadership, problem-solving, communication, conflict-resolution, and decision-making skills.

- » **Next Step:** Have educators participate in the trainings with families so that they can develop a shared understanding of next steps.

**Strategy:** Empower families to speak with school administrators about what they would like to see in their school. This could include things they love and want to make sure continue or areas of potential improvement in the school. Additionally, when a family member expresses or describes a positive experience or outcome as a result of their engagement with you, encourage them to share that information with the administration and other families.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with families in your classroom to share with the family-teacher group or other school-family organization the power of effective family-school partnerships and the impact they can have on student learning.

## Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **Conversation to Share Data with Families:** This resource is designed for teachers who would like to discuss formative assessment with families. It provides guiding questions that teachers may use to discuss assessment data, set goals, and create plans for achieving those goals.
- **Formative Assessment Talking Points and Frequently Asked Questions:** Building upon the preceding resource, this tool provides questions and discussion topics teachers may want to use when speaking with families about formative assessment. Questions include defining what formative assessment is, why it is important for student success, and how families can partner in this ongoing process.
- **Teachers - All About Me Books:** This resource is geared toward teachers who would like to improve two-way communication with families. It outlines an “All About Me” book activity, which teachers can use to more holistically understand and learn important information about the students they teach.
- **Teachers - Communication and Language:** This resource is a two-way communication self-reflection for teachers. It provides questions and example responses on topics such as authentic communication, building trust and respect, and reciprocal relationships.
- **Teachers - Home Visits:** This tool can be used to by teachers who would like to build trusting relationships with families during home visits. It provides a home visit planning document that outlines tasks teachers should accomplish prior to, during, and after the home visit.
- **Teachers - Reflection Guide:** This resource is designed to help teachers reflect in community on their implementation of the resources in Two-Way Communication, Shared Decision-Making and Equity and Access. Teachers can use this resource to sustain their efforts to engage families in the formative assessment process.
- **Parent/Family Contact Preference Sheet:** This resource is an example of a preferred contact form. It asks questions such as phone number, email address, and the best time of day to contact him/her.

- **Parent Teacher Home Visit Project:** This tool links to an organization whose mission is to increase the amount of parent teacher home visits (PTHV). The website provides information on the PTHV model, evidence of benefits, and training opportunities for teachers.
- **Family Communication Tools from A to Z Teacher Stuff:** This resource is a list of recommended actions teachers should take to encourage transparent family communication at the beginning of the school year. Teachers provide anecdotal suggestions of best practices.
- **Tips for Entering the Community:** This document is an excerpt from *Doing Multicultural Education for Achievement and Equity* (Grant & Sleeter, 2007), and provides tips for teachers prior to, during, and after a home or community visit.
- **Parent Teacher Conference Tip Sheets: For Principals, Teachers, and Families:** This resource is a series of three tip sheets specific to principals, teachers, and families on how to maximize outcomes of family teacher conferences. All three describe ways to be prepared, open, and honest with participating parties.



### The Legal Requirements for IEP Team Membership

While family engagement plays a critical role in the success of all students, it is especially important for students with disabilities. It is so important that language requiring family engagement is included in the federal law regarding the education of students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA, which was most recently reauthorized by Congress in 2004, details requirements to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and includes specific provisions for family involvement in their child’s education and the development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For additional information on the legal requirements for family engagement, please see the Legal Requirements for Family Engagement section of the Toolkit on page 5.

The IEP team consists of a number of individuals who partner to determine eligibility for special education services and develop, and implement an IEP that helps each child with a disability be involved in, and make progress in the general education curriculum. According to IDEA §300.321, the IEP team should include:

- the family of the child;
- no less than one regular education teacher;
- no less than one special education teacher;
- a representative of the public agency who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities; is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency;
- an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results;
- other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate (invited at the discretion of the parent and/or family or the agency); and
- the child with a disability (when appropriate).

It is important to note that, while the regulations use the term “families,” IDEA defines *parent* as anyone who is legally responsible for the care and well-being of a child. This can be a guardian, grandparent, stepparent, surrogate parent, foster parent, or natural or adoptive parent at 34 CFR §300.30. As described in the introduction to this Toolkit, we use the term *families* throughout the Toolkit. By referring to *families*, we are ensuring that all individuals who



are responsible for the care and education of a child are represented in our language. Students may live or be cared for by parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, aunts or uncles, or have other non-traditional family structures. By using the term *families*, we can ensure that all caregivers feel welcome and included.

### Why Are Families a Crucial Member of the IEP Team?

Family participation in the IEP team is critically important. The IEP team is tasked with making educational decisions for students and addresses issues such as eligibility for special education services, evaluation, educational program development, and placement. There are a number of reasons to ensure effective family engagement in the IEP process:

- Families have a **unique perspective** on their child and can provide critical input regarding their child's strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and history.
- Children spend most of their time outside of school. Families will spend a significant amount of time working, playing, and learning with their child and are able to bridge connections to learning environments outside of school. They can be **critical partners for reinforcing strategies** and learning taking place in the classroom.
- Families are also likely **strong advocates** for their child and can serve as champions for strategies, approaches, and environments that support their child's success.
- Lastly, families are **valuable sources of information** regarding effective transitions as they are the consistent presence throughout a child's lifespan. Whether it is a transition from one grade to another, one school to another, or out of school and into a postsecondary program or assisted living program, families can provide the connection and continuity needed for a successful transition.

It is important to remember that families are equal members of the IEP team and have a right to participate in all of their child's IEP meetings. While families make important contributions to their child's IEP team and the team's meetings as described above, families may not always feel that they are a full participant in their child's IEP team. They may feel overwhelmed by the IEP team process, or feel as though they are less knowledgeable than the education professionals around the table. It is important to remind families that, while they might not be experts in child development, education or the IEP process, they are the experts in their child. As educators, it is our responsibility to create an environment in which families feel comfortable participating in any way that is meaningful to them, and to ask questions when they don't understand different parts of the process. Educators must also understand how family engagement in the IEP process may look different across years. Newer families may need more support and time to feel fully engaged during their first IEP meetings. It's up to the IEP team to remain flexible and understanding.

### Using the Key Strategies for Family Engagement for IEP Team Members

After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. You should begin by reviewing the section on family engagement strategies that most closely aligns with your current role (administrator, teacher, or other school personnel/related services provider). After you have familiarized yourself with how the seven Core Principles of family engagement relate to your role, review the information and strategies below for working with families of children with disabilities. It is important to remember that families of children with disabilities share many of the same concerns, hopes, and dreams for their child. It is also important to note that

a child with a disability may impact an entire family. Families of children with disabilities may also be supporting other children without disabilities. While their involvement may look slightly different than that of other families, the strategies described previously in this Toolkit also apply to these families.

Included below are some quick wins and possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider based on your school's needs for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment that can be used to specifically engage families in their child's IEP process and ongoing work with special educators and service providers. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn't a checklist that needs to be completed but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement for families of children with disabilities and your personal, school, or district Action Plan. There is a list of resources at the end of this section to help support your efforts to engage families of children with disabilities in your professional role. It is also recommended that you review the sections on working with families in crisis and diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity to further support an effective whole-school family engagement approach.



### Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

Participating in an IEP team meeting can often be an intimidating process for families. Aside from meeting many new people and hearing new terms, they also have to take in new information about their child and the special education process each time there is an IEP meeting for their child. Additionally, IEP team meetings involve a number of educational professionals with specific expertise and can be scheduled at times and locations that don't always work for families. Creating a welcoming environment for families during the IEP process ensures that they begin the IEP process understanding how their expertise on their child is valued in the process, and with a spirit of trust and collaboration that will and ensure that they can contribute to the process in ways they find to be productive and meaningful.

**Strategy:** During your initial conversations with families, work on developing a positive rapport prior to the first IEP team meeting. Consider questions that help you learn more about their preferences and needs prior to and during the meeting, such as times and places that work best for the family to hold the meeting.

- » **Next Step:** If it is more convenient for the family, host the meeting in a location outside of school or at a time that aligns with other commitments they have to attend at the school. Examples might include community centers or the family's home. When scheduling around other school events or commitments, make sure you leave plenty of time for the meeting so it will not be rushed, and that the environment provides enough privacy to conduct the meeting.

**Strategy:** Families are required to receive written notification about the IEP meeting in advance. Include the names of school staff and their roles (e.g., speech therapist, school



#### Quick win

Meet families outside of the IEP team meeting room and walk into the room together. This is much less intimidating than walking in to a room full of "experts" alone.



psychologist) in this notification so that families understand who the participants will be and why they are attending the meeting.

- » **Next Step:** Be sure to review the messaging associated with the invitation, Is it clear that you are inviting families to actively participate in and contribute to the meeting and not just to attend to listen and receive information? This may not be in the form itself, it may be in the note or email that accompanies the form when it is sent to families, or said to the families when the form is handed to them.
- » **Next Step:** Create opportunities for families to meet the members of their IEP team outside of the IEP team meeting, preferably in advance of the meeting.

**Strategy:** Begin the IEP meeting with introductions of each person around the table, including the job title of each person and a brief explanation of the role they will play in the meeting. Provide families with a written list of participants for reference during the meeting.

- » **Next Step:** Have each member of the IEP team share a positive observation about the child as part of their introduction.

**Strategy:** Throughout the IEP meeting, acknowledge the expertise families bring about their child to the meeting, and what they already do to support learning at home. Also acknowledge the strengths, perspectives, and skills they bring to the school and their children's education.

- » **Next Step:** Identify a portion of the meeting for each person, including the family, to share the expertise they bring to the meeting. If families have a hard time articulating what they bring, recall information from meetings, or calls you've had, to give an example of their expertise. Emphasize that they are the experts on their own child and that the collective expertise of the entire group is needed to develop an effective IEP.
- » **Next Step:** Special education staff do well when they frame the evaluation results as part of the developmental process and are able to note progress. If possible, best practice is to share the student evaluation results, including recommendations, with the family ahead of time. This enables the family to be able to process the results and develop their questions in advance of the IEP team meeting. When possible, have a separate meeting to discuss evaluation results and eligibility. When a family hears a new diagnosis or about missed milestones, they may focus on those "failures" and find it difficult focus on the next steps of developing goals and objectives. For many families, the grief cycle may begin once again. Create time and space for the family to process information, scheduling the IEP meeting to develop goals and objectives as a different meeting.
- » **Next Step:** Invite the family to share their information first; this begins the trusted partnership and may help set the tone of the meeting. Consider having a short list of questions such as:
  - What are the best parts of your child's day?



#### Quick win

Hand out an agenda of the IEP process ahead of the meeting and let the family know they will be asked to share information about their child so they have time to prepare. If evaluation results are shared ahead of the meeting, ask team professionals to contact the family to review them prior to the meeting.



#### Quick win

Discuss the common goals of the IEP team (including the professionals and the families) to support the child's learning and development. This can help to build a trusting relationship among all IEP team members and create a shared sense of understanding and purpose.

- What parts of the day are really difficult?
- What are your child’s favorite toys, games, shows, or activities?
- When do you see your child really motivated to try something new?
- What does your child do when something is really hard?
- What would you most like to see your child be able to do?

**Strategy:** Hold orientation day(s) before the first day of school to allow new families and students to learn about where things are in the school and in their classroom, and to meet the members of their IEP team, including the special education teachers, related service staff, and administrators.

- » **Next Step:** Ask current families in the school whose children also have IEPs to help facilitate these days by meeting with new families and sharing their insights and experiences with the school with families whose children are just starting at the school.



## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication

In order for families to meaningfully contribute as an equal member of the IEP team they must be able to effectively communicate their knowledge, hopes, and concerns to the team. It is also necessary for the IEP team to set up structures and processes for information to flow in both directions (from school to home and home to school) beyond the offer to “call us anytime you have questions.” As a member of the team you can utilize the strategies below to ensure this takes place.

### Effective Communication

**Strategy:** IEP team meetings can sometimes be challenging - there are many different perspectives and new terms and procedures to follow. Check in with families regularly to make sure that they understand what they are hearing and have all their questions answered. Use active listening and empathetic responses (e.g., “We know that this is a lot of information to take in”) and allow for silence and processing time during meetings. Pay attention to nonverbal cues as well. Lack of eye contact or body postures that indicate shut down should be attended to, perhaps by asking, “It seems like this may be overwhelming; should we take a short break?”

- » **Next Step:** Seek out and attend professional development about effective communication strategies. It doesn’t have to be specific to working with families or on IEP teams. Many workshops have good information about working with different kinds of people in different situations. Share what you have learned with other members of the IEP team, either in a staff meeting or through a Peer Learning Community (PLC).
- » **Next Step:** Plan as a team how you will give each other feedback about the quality of communication during IEP meetings. Agree to be honest and kind, but hold each other accountable to creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and listening with families. Pay



#### Quick win

Ask families what their preferences are for communication, including method (such as email, notes, texts) and frequency (for example, weekly or every few days). Share this with the rest of the IEP team and plan for consistent and individualized communication with each family.

special attention to how much time you spend talking compared to how much time you spend listening. Always share this feedback outside of the meeting in a safe space, and allow for discussion and difference of opinion.

**Strategy:** A lot of information is presented at IEP team meetings, some of which may be familiar to you and some which may be new. Be sure to ask questions if a team member says something you don't understand. If someone says something you don't agree with, be sure to ask for more details so that you can try to identify the common ground. This will serve as a model for families and others in the meeting, and will encourage them to ask questions as well.

- » **Next Step:** As a team, establish a culture of accountability and honest with one another. Outside of the IEP meeting, agree that it is okay to question and to push back on one another in a respectful and professional way, even during an IEP meeting. Agree that you will *all* be responsible for ensuring that families are heard and have all their questions answered. This will help make sure that the meeting itself feels collaborative and supportive to everyone.

### Communication Across Roles

**Strategy:** Families have a wealth of information about their child that can inform the development and implementation of the IEP. Be sure to set aside time in the meeting to allow families to share this information with the rest of the team.

- » **Next Step:** Before each IEP meeting, provide families an opportunity to prepare for the meeting through a list of questions about their child. These can include such questions as: How would you describe your child? What are your child's strengths? Challenges? What are your dreams for your child's future? How do you reinforce what your child is learning in school at home and in other places you and your child visit? What other information should we know about your child? Make sure that team members read the information prior the meeting (if provided in writing), and make sure that there is time in the meeting to review the information in the same way other assessment and evaluation information is reviewed.
- » **Next Step:** Identify one team member whose responsibility it is to check in with families before the meeting and to help them prepare. This can include going through the questions, sharing information about the steps in developing an IEP, or simply asking about their priorities for their child and the meeting. It is also an important time to answer any questions the family has about the process or what to expect.

**Strategy:** In addition to communicating with families regularly through print, consider alternative means of communication such as web-based forums that encourage interaction between teachers and families. This could be as simple as email, or it could be setting up classroom websites that share information about current activities and ideas for things to do at home.

- » **Next Step:** Use a notebook or an email string to encourage back and forth discussion between families and members of the IEP team. Be sure to safeguard confidentiality by following applicable confidentiality rules in any method you decide to use (e.g., FERPA, HIPAA).

### Culturally Proficient Communication

**Strategy:** Use family-friendly language in the IEP team meeting and in the IEP document. Be sure to clearly define any technical terms and avoid using jargon, acronyms, or abbreviations.

- » **Next Step:** Create a glossary of common terms used in special education and share it with families in advance of the IEP team meeting, or at the meeting for them to reference. Take time in the meeting to address any confusion or clarification needed about the terms.
- » **Next Step:** Have this document translated into the primary languages used by the families you have in your school.

**Strategy:** Provide any written documents and/or forms that will be used in the meeting ahead of time, with enough time for families to process the information.

- » **Next Step:** Have staff who completed the assessments reach out to family members after they have received documents or forms to provide any necessary clarification and answer any questions before the IEP team meeting.
- » **Next Step:** Ensure all forms or documents are available in the primary languages spoken by the families that attend your school.

**Strategy:** In order for families to meaningfully participate in the IEP team and the development and implementation of their child's IEP, you must use interpreters and/or translators for families. A trained interpreter or translator will be able to articulate the nuances of the terminology used in special education in both languages.

- » **Next Step:** Take time to meet with interpreters and translators to make sure they understand the terms and can accurately translate them.
- » **Next Step:** Make sure that the interpreters and translators understand the IEP process and can support families' understanding of each of the steps in the process.

**Strategy:** Meeting norms can help ensure everyone understands the purpose and goals of a meeting and will help set expectations for how every person can engage in the meeting. As a school-based IEP or special education team, develop a set of IEP Meeting Norms. Share these at the beginning of each meeting, taking time to go through them and asking for agreement to adhere to them during the meeting.

- » **Next Step:** Ask families of children with disabilities to participate in the development of meeting norms. You may consider asking families of children of different ages, as well as newer and more experienced teachers to participate.
- » **Next Step:** Ask students with disabilities to participate in the development of the meeting norms along with their families.

**Strategy:** In some families and in some cultures, it may be seen as disrespectful to disagree with educators and administrators. Help every family you work with understand that you appreciate and welcome their input and feedback, even if it may be different than your own. These can include explaining how you would like families to be involved in the meeting, and letting families know they can speak at any time during the meeting (not just when the professionals are finished).

- » **Next Step:** Ask individual families who have various cultural backgrounds to help you and your IEP team better understand their culture. Be culturally curious by asking honest questions so that you can be more effective working with each family and in providing services to their child. Be sure to incorporate what you learn about the family's culture and preferences into all future interactions with the family.

- » **Next Step:** Ask more experienced families to be mentors or ambassadors to newer families with the same or similar cultural backgrounds during the IEP process. They can help newer families understand the IEP process and also educate the IEP team about specific family preferences or cultural influences.



### Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students

Families of students with disabilities play a critical role in supporting the successful implementation of an IEP and the student's overall success in and out of school. The professionals on the IEP team must help families understand and contribute to the goals and objectives of the IEP and to the ways in which their child's instruction will be tailored to their needs. Partnership with families on the development and implementation of an IEP is critical to making sure all of a student's needs are met.

**Strategy:** Include families throughout the entire IEP development process. This includes being a part of the assessment, deciding what the goals should be, and helping design how each goal will be measured.

- » **Next Step:** Families are the expert on their own child. Ask families to tell you what they have done at home to help their child be successful, and what they struggle with. Ask about their daily activities and routines, and what their child enjoys and doesn't, and use this information to decide how to best address a goal at school.

**Strategy:** Make sure to share information about how the child is doing in school on a regular basis with the family. This can be as simple as a short note or email, or even a phone call home. Be sure to share successes as well as things that you are still working on.

- » **Next Step:** Ask the family to tell you the ways in which they like to receive information and the best times to reach them. Schedule time to reach out weekly using their preferences to share updates, and to ask about progress at home or any new strategies or ideas the family has.

**Strategy:** Many websites have activities families can do with one another that are both fun and educational. Spend some time reviewing websites and making a list to have available for families online or in a document.

- » **Next Step:** Check your local newspaper, library, or family magazine for activities that are happening in your community. Create a monthly calendar for families with information on each of the events, including location, cost, and activities available. Add information onto the calendar about how each event can support children's progress toward their IEP goals.



#### Quick win

Develop informational handouts about how families can support their child and contribute to the IEP team meeting.



#### Quick win

Partner and refer parents to the Vermont Family Network where they offer information on the IEP process in 10 languages: 800-800-4005.



#### Quick win

Keep a log of the communications you have with a family so that it is all in one place and you can reference what you shared with families to develop progress reports and share information with the child's other providers as needed.





## Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility

Shared power and responsibility is critically important during the development and implementation of the IEP. Families must have the information and supports necessary to understand the evaluation results and progress updates included in their child's IEP so that they can meaningfully participate in the IEP team and their child's overall education. Families of children with disabilities should also be included in planning, leadership, and decision-making for the school and district as a whole, as they can present a unique perspective.

**Strategy:** Ensure the IEP reflects the family's/student's hopes, perspectives, culture, and insights by asking the family for their input in advance of the meeting and during the meeting.

- » **Next Step:** For older students, provide them with the support and information necessary to facilitate their own IEP meetings. Student-led IEP team meetings can build students' capacity and help them to better understand their unique strengths and needs. There are many curricula available designed specifically for this purpose.
- » **Next Step:** Have professional staff teach strategies for leading a meeting with the student. The student may want to consider using a video, PowerPoint, or agenda to help provide structure the meeting. Encourage the student to lead the discussion on their interests, preferences, hope for the future, strengths and weakness, and how best to teach them so they can learn. This information can inform the development of the student's goals and objectives in their IEP and the strategies used to achieve those goals. There are many curricula available that have materials already developed for this purpose.



### Quick win

Provide the family with resources to help develop their child's self-determination skills so that they can be a productive member of the IEP team when appropriate.

**Strategy:** Decision-making in IEP team meetings is a shared process. Ensure that families are full partners in the decision-making process by incorporating their input into the development of IEP goals and objectives and the decision about supports and services.

- » **Next Step:** When developing goals, identify where connections between the school and the family can support student learning and the student's ability to meet their IEP goals, including learning opportunities outside of school that can be supported by the family.
- » **Next Step:** Talk with families to learn more about their daily routines and activities, and tailor any suggestions sent home to fit well within these routines and activities.

**Strategy:** Support the development of a special education family advisory council at your school to foster connections between families and to create a stakeholder group for initiatives that involve special education.

- » **Next Step:** Invite representatives from the advisory council to participate in school-wide or district-wide activities such as the PTA, school committee, or other decision-making groups.
- » **Next Step:** Offer training and supports to students and their families to become more active participants in the IEP team meeting, either through the school or through the special education family advisory council.
- » **Next Step:** Build capacity by identifying family members that may be interested in leadership of the council, and then providing training and mentorship so that they may facilitate or co-facilitate either council meetings or leadership development for other families.





## Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community

Community partnerships help to extend learning beyond the classroom. For families of children with disabilities, community partnerships can be particularly important as they allow for connections between services provided in the school and additional resources, services, and supports in the broader community. Through meaningful connection and collaboration, IEP teams can ensure that students and their families are able to integrate community resources to support a student's further growth and development. In addition, connections to community become particularly important as students begin transition planning for their life once they complete school. These connections can support the development of post-secondary skills necessary for the student to live, work, use transportation, and participate in their community as an adult including independent living, post-secondary education, and/or employment.

It is important that, before efforts are made to develop connections with community partnerships that could support families of children with IEPs, IEP teams **ask** families what they want and need. A small focus group, or individual conversations with families, can yield important information about which community partnerships should be prioritized. It should never be presumed that educators know what families need.

**Strategy:** Consider opportunities to extend learning in out-of-school environments by connecting with community organizations where your students can practice what they know, learn new skills, and meet new people. Ideas may include retail, banks, farms, local merchants, or first responders.

- » **Next Step:** Work with families to identify places their children might enjoy visiting to extend their learning outside of the classroom. Or, explore connections that families have out in the community; perhaps individuals that work at various organizations can be the connection between your class and a fun trip into the community. Explore these partnerships with families.
- » **Next Step:** Map out some ideas of community locations and activities based on the IEP goals of the students that you serve. Check out the local newspaper, family magazine, and/or community bulletin board for ideas. Once you have the list of ideas, share them with the entire IEP team, including the general education teachers, related service providers, and families. Use this list of ideas to generate a yearlong plan of outside opportunities to extend learning.

**Strategy:** Identify organizations in your community that provide supports and services that may be helpful to families of students with disabilities, such as community health programs and social services. Develop a list of these resources to share with families.

- » **Next Step:** Identify someone within your team to keep this list up to date each year, so that the list will always be current.
- » **Next Step:** Consider seasonal lists of resources, including community organizations that provide support over the holidays or provide food or other resources during the summer months.
- » **Next Step:** Invite the organizations on your list to present at your school or participate in planned school activities such as an open house. Encourage them to share information about the resources they can offer and how they align with the supports the school provides.



### Quick win

Share this list with families at meetings, or in a packet that goes out at the beginning of the school year.



## Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access

IDEA aims to ensure fairness in the identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities. Each student with an IEP is entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) that allows students to access the general curriculum. However, it is important for members of the IEP team to be aware of current challenges to equity and access to special education services. For example, the U.S. Department of Education has acknowledged that significant disparities exist between students of color and their white classmates. Students of color are more likely to be identified as having a disability and to face harsher discipline than their white classmates.<sup>23</sup> As a member of the IEP team, it is important that you consider not only how your own culture, beliefs, and expectations impact the education of students with disabilities but also how each child's family's culture, beliefs, and expectations may impact their interactions with you and their child's education. You will need to consider how you differentiate your services and supports for families of children with disabilities to meet their unique needs. In addition, you will need to remember that individuals may differ considerably in their ability to understand and access information about their child. You will need to consider a number of options and variations in the types of materials, methods, and means for providing information to families to ensure that they have equitable access. For additional information on supporting families experiencing crisis and working with diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, please review those specific sections of the Toolkit which can be found on page 32 and page 36.

**Strategy:** Review your school and district continuous improvement plans through the lens of equity and access for families of students with disabilities. Do you use language that can easily be understood by all families? Do you have information about how your school or district supports and includes families from different backgrounds and who speak different languages?

- » **Next Step:** Review your continuous improvement plan through the lens of special education. How are you continuing to ensure that students with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education? What considerations are in place for how to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities throughout the life of the school?

**Strategy:** Approach all conversations with families with cultural curiosity. Ask questions prior to and during meetings with families and/or to gauge your cultural awareness. For example, "Have I learned the correct last name and pronunciation of the parent's name?," or "Am I open to the fact that the families' economic / social reality may make it impossible for them to participate in school life in the traditional ways?"<sup>24</sup>

- » **Next Step:** Invite families to present to teachers and administrators about their unique culture, including how they understand and address disability. What makes their culture unique? How do they prefer to engage with the school and their child's teachers? What should IEP teams know about their culture?

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-takes-action-deliver-equity-students-disabilities>

<sup>24</sup> McGinty, I., and Mendoza-Reis, N. (1998). *Towards equity: A guide for teaching and learning in a multicultural society: Classroom applications*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

- » **Next step:** As a special education department, have regular conversations at staff meetings or in PLC meetings about your ability to effectively work with families and children from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Honestly explore which situations are successful and which continue to be challenging. Ask yourselves, “Are we serving some families or children better than others? If so, what can we do to improve our services for all children?”



### Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability

Families of children with disabilities have a unique relationship with their child’s school and will be closely involved in the design and implementation of their child’s education as members of the IEP team. As a member of that team, you can ensure that the relationship between the school and the family remains a productive, positive one. You can also help to ensure that there is an alignment between family engagement activities for all families and those for families of children with disabilities while also making sure that broader family engagement activities are inclusive and accessible for families of children with disabilities. For additional information about sustainable family engagement practices, see the Ensuring Sustainability section of the Toolkit on page 87.

**Strategy:** As a special education team, periodically review processes and procedures to ensure that effective family engagement remains at the forefront.

- » **Next Step:** Administer a family survey and use the results to help make decisions about improvements to the special education process, including family engagement.
- » **Next Step:** Review special education family engagement strategies at the same time as the family engagement policies and procedures that apply to the whole school. Make sure that there is good alignment in the schoolwide approach.

### Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **Educator Reflection: Parent Interviews:** This tool is a checklist designed to aid educators in establishing good communication with families and parents during meetings. It also aids educators in reflecting on conversations that have occurred and how they can be improved in the future.
- **Special Education Acronyms List:** This resource is a reference list of commonly used acronyms and terms in special education.
- **Opening Doors: Transition Resources for Students with Disabilities Planning for Life After High School:** This handbook aids students, families, and parents in preparing for life after high school. The resource outlines the planning steps necessary for pursuing military careers or post secondary education. Additional information aids students in becoming confident and autonomous agents that are able to self-advocate.
- **Transition Toolkit for Youth with Disabilities:** This resource is a toolkit for parents and families to prepare for the transition that will occur following high school. The tool includes information on potential avenues of employment, planning to participate in postsecondary education, as well as access to regionally specific resources.

- **Vermont Family Network:** This website is the parent training website in Vermont for parents and families of children with disabilities. The site provides support, resources, and communication to aid parents in successfully navigating issues and events that may emerge concerning development, education, and health.
- **A Parent’s Guide to Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** This guide provides an introduction to the Universal Design for Learning framework for parents. The resource also includes interviews and commentary from experts in the field.
- **Measuring and Reporting Progress on the IEP for Families:** This resources provides detailed information concerning the process of measuring and reporting student progress to parents. The link includes the specific verbiage from IDEA concerning reporting progress as well as prompts for conversations with teachers and the IEP team.
- **Developing Measurable Annual IEP Goals for Families:** The resource guides families through the process of creating annual goals for a child’s IEP. The tool details how to make a goal attainable and measurable. Detailed examples are also provided to help scaffold parents and IEP teams through the initial process.
- National Agencies and Organizations for Families of Students With Disabilities
  - » **www.disability.gov:** This resource outlines programs, rights, and resources for individuals with disabilities. Areas addressed include education, employment, technology, transportation, housing, and health.
  - » **National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities:** This resource refers parents, families, educators, and professionals to an information and referral center which specializes in information pertaining to individuals with disabilities between the ages of birth and 22.
  - » **Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers:** This resource provides the contact information of the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers. This Alliance works to provide Parent Centers, Parent Training and Information Centers (PTICs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) with up-to-date technical assistance services and trainings.
  - » **National Council on Disability:** This resource connects readers to the independent federal agency responsible for educating leading federal officials on the intricacies of programs, policies, and practices that impact individuals with disabilities.
  - » **Sibling Support Project:** This organization, founded in 1990, is the first national program dedicated to the life-long and ever-changing concerns of millions of brothers and sisters of people with special health, developmental, and mental health concerns.
- National Agencies and Organizations for Educators of Students with Disabilities
  - » **Council for Exceptional Children:** This resource is a professional association of teachers who work with children with disabilities. They assist teachers by providing resources concerning advocacy, standards, and professional development.



All school personnel play an important role in ensuring that families are connected to and involved with their child’s education. Whether you work in the office, are a guidance counselor, school nurse, security guard, paraprofessional, service provider, bus driver, cafeteria worker, or crossing guard, you can make sure that your school is a positive and welcoming place for families. You can also provide valuable information to, and receive information from, families of the children in your school that supports their learning.

After completing the Self-Assessment, review which Core Principles you would like to incorporate as part of your personal, school, or district Action Plan. Included below are some quick wins, and possible strategies, with more advanced next steps you may want to consider based on your needs for each of the Core Principles addressed in the Self-Assessment. You may recognize some of these strategies from your current approach to family engagement, while other strategies may be new to you. Remember, this isn’t a checklist that needs to be completed but a collection of ideas that you may want to pull from as you develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement and your personal, school, or district Action Plan.

There is a list of resources at the end of this section to help you in your efforts to support effective family engagement in your professional role. It is also recommended that you review the sections on working with families in crisis and diverse families, including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity to further support an effective whole-school family engagement approach. You may also wish to talk to teachers and administrators you regularly work with to identify strategies that you can incorporate into your work, or opportunities for you to partner for more effective family engagement practices.





## Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

Every individual working in a school has the opportunity to contribute to the creation of a welcoming environment. Successful family engagement is dependent on families feeling comfortable and connected with the school and its staff. In your role, you can contribute to this trust and connection by ensuring that all families feel like valued members of the school community.

**Strategy:** Provide opportunities for families to learn about the school and become familiar with staff in non-threatening ways by hosting informal tours, get-togethers, or information sessions.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with families that have been in your school for at least a year to meet and greet new families. Newer families may feel more comfortable participating if the activity is led by other families.

**Strategy:** While you may not be able to learn every family member's name who comes to the school, make an effort to introduce yourself to new people you encounter in the school. Ask them if they need assistance or directions. When possible, greet family members by name when you see them at school.

- » **Next Step:** During open houses, host a table or an information session for families regarding your role and how it supports the whole school and student learning. Encourage families to ask questions.



### Quick win

Greet families warmly and by name if possible when they enter the school. Ask them if you can be of assistance or help them find their way.



## Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication

It is important to consider how to create authentic connections between families and the school that encourage the meaningful exchange of information. Successful family engagement also relies on effective communication between you and your colleagues to create a strong and supportive school environment, and to support student learning.

### Effective Communication

**Strategy:** Ask families about their needs and interests regarding your area of expertise. For example, if you are a school nurse, how would families like to be involved in school health activities? Develop resources and/or training opportunities for families that respond to these needs and interests.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with families to develop these resources and/or trainings as a team and offer them to families in your school community.

**Strategy:** Provide alternative ways for families to access information and communicate with you in addition to face-to-face meetings and activities on school grounds.



### Quick win

Make sure all communication to families is available in different formats, both electronically (websites, blogs, social media, email) and in print.



- » **Next Step:** Talk as a team about when to use electronic means of communication (e.g., email, websites) and when and how to use print or other ways of getting information out. Include families in this discussion so they can share their preferences and help you understand what works best for them.
- » **Next Step:** Create a blog or online discussion board that relates to your work and includes important information for families. Be sure to solicit feedback from families on what information is most important for them and include that in your blog or discussion.

**Strategy:** Avoid using professional jargon in your communications with families. If there are terms that you need to use, be sure to include explanations of the terms in family-friendly language, and create opportunities for families to ask questions as needed.

- » **Next Step:** Review reports and/or documents with families to ensure that they understand the content. Talk to families you have worked with to learn where common misunderstandings or miscommunications have taken place, and revise your materials (and practice) based on this feedback.

### Communication Across Roles

**Strategy:** Families are always pleased to hear about their child's positive experiences at school. When you see a student succeeding, either reach out to the families directly or partner with the child's classroom teacher to share the information with the student's family.

- » **Next Step:** Make note of positive things you notice about children's behavior. It can be their kindness toward another student, their perseverance in a difficult situation, or their helpfulness. The next time you see the family, make sure to tell them what you have noticed. Or, take a few minutes to send a quick email or note home.

**Strategy:** Work with school administration to plan and schedule an opportunity to connect with other educators and staff in your school. Discuss how you can collaboratively support family engagement across all your roles and share information that would be valuable to families.

- » **Next Step:** Expand the discussion to include a plan for all staff to approach positive interaction with all families, and to make sure each family hears positive things about their child throughout the year.
- » **Next Step:** Include families in this discussion. Ask for their opinions about how families in the school would like to receive information about their child. You may also ask families to help you identify any barriers to reaching all families, and to problem solve how to reach every family.

### Culturally Proficient Communication

**Strategy:** Ensure that any communication you develop for families is available in languages spoken by the families in your school community.

- » **Next Step:** You may also want to check the reading level; there are several, free online tools that can help you assess the reading level of your written resources.



### Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students

Each individual within a school has an important role to play in supporting the success of students and in partnering with families to ensure that they have the information necessary to continue their child's learning and development outside of the school building. By providing families with information and tools that they can use to make connections between what a child is learning in school and the activities they do outside of school, you can support the success of all students.

**Strategy:** Create family resources that include information on issues of particular concern to families and that relate to your expertise. For example, if you are a school nurse, include brochures about the importance of vaccinations and where families may get their child vaccinated in the community. Make sure that the information is in an easy to locate place, such as the office or media center.

- » **Next Step:** Ask families what information may be helpful to them, and use their opinions to help you create new materials for all families in your school. You may also ask them to review what you develop and ask for their input about information to highlight or find gaps in information.

**Strategy:** Many websites have activities families can do with one another that are both fun and educational. Spend some time reviewing websites and making a list to have available for families online, or in a document.

- » **Next Step:** Check your local newspaper, library, or family magazine for activities that are happening in your community. Create a monthly calendar for families with information on each of the events, including location, cost, and activities available.



#### Quick win

Offer meeting times during open houses for families of students with disabilities to meet with administrators and related services personnel in addition to their child's special education and/or classroom teacher.



### Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility

Families are important stakeholders in planning, leadership, and decision-making at the school and can provide meaningful contributions to these activities. School personnel play a key role in ensuring that families represent the diversity of the student population and share power and responsibility with educators and school administrators.

**Strategy:** Engage families in decisions about school-wide policies such as transportation, health, nutrition, and safety by soliciting their input on any proposed changes through surveys, interviews, emails, or family-teacher organization meetings.

- » **Next Step:** Invite families to participate in the decision-making process by serving on committees that are evaluating and/or changing school policy.

**Strategy:** Solicit feedback from families about how they would like to be involved in your work at the school through a postcard survey that asks about interests, talents, and available times for volunteering.

- » **Next Step:** Become a member of the school family-teacher organization, and attend meetings and events. Use this time as an opportunity to identify ways that school staff can build and support families within their various roles.

**Strategy:** Connect families in your school with one another when they are experiencing similar situations (such as new families, moving to the area, etc.).

- » **Next Step:** Create a family mentoring program so families can mentor other families whose children are going through different changes, such as moving to the area, having a first-time kindergartner, or having a student transition to college.



### Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community

Community organizations and resources can play an important role in ensuring the success of the students and families you serve. As a member of your school and local community, you can help make these meaningful connections that will link families with needed services and provide opportunities for students and families to use community supports and services to promote student's learning.

**Strategy:** Identify and partner with community organizations related to your role in the school. For example, bus drivers may wish to partner with a transportation safety organization, school nurses may wish to partner with a community health center, and so on. Share resources and information about and from your community partner with the families in the school.

- » **Next Step:** Include these community partners in school events where they have the opportunity to connect with families.

**Strategy:** Help families of children with disabilities and those experiencing significant challenges identify and connect with resources in the community to facilitate appropriate services. This could include sharing information about relevant resources, directing families to an organization in your community, or, with a family's permission, making an official referral.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with community organizations to provide information about their services for families either at school events, or let families know when there will be events at the community organization.

**Strategy:** Build connections with your students and their families by attending events that students are participating in the community, such as art shows, music performances, fairs, and athletic events.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with a community organization to either volunteer to support their activities or have them offer similar activities in your school.



## Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access

Each individual within a school is responsible for ensuring that students and their families have the opportunities they need to be successful in the educational experience. You may be uniquely positioned to have a whole-school perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by families. You may also be able to help your colleagues understand the unique contributions that families can make to the the whole school and to the classroom. *(For additional information on supporting families experiencing crisis and working with diverse families Including those with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, please review those specific sections of the Toolkit which can be found on page 32 and 36.)*

**Strategy:** Families have differing needs, interests, and availability to participate in family engagement activities and their child’s education. When planning activities for families, take into consideration the educational level, language, culture, and home situation of the families in your school.

- » **Next Step:** Ask families to share their opinions about family activities at your school through face-to-face conversations, emails, phone calls, or surveys. Consider asking: What has worked well? What was challenging? What would they like to see more of? What could be let go of (if changes are desired)? You can also partner with the PTA or other family organization to have these conversations at meetings, or to reach additional families to get their thoughts.

**Strategy:** Develop programs to support the school involvement of English language learners’ families. Identify activities that they can contribute to without having to fully master English, such as helping with other families who speak the same language, working with translators and interpreters, or organizing and preparing materials.

- » **Next Step:** Work with other educators to develop a learning community for English language learners that allows them to practice their English with one another and a native English speaking school staff member. Cover common terms and phrases that family members will need to understand to be involved in their child’s education.



## Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability

Sustainable family engagement practices are those which are continually refined to meet the needs of families within your school community. Your contributions to effective family engagement are part of a larger plan for family engagement included in your school or district Continuous Improvement Plan. You will also need to partner with classroom teachers and other colleagues to maximize the impact of family engagement practices for students. For additional information about sustainable family engagement practices, see the Ensuring Sustainability section of the Toolkit on page 87. You may also wish to review the Action Planning section of the toolkit for additional information about how to develop a personal or school-wide action plan for family engagement.

**Strategy:** Schedule meetings, activities, and events at times that match families’ varying schedules. If possible, offer events at multiple times or over a wide span of time in a day, and avoid scheduling that conflicts with other major community events or major religious holidays.

- » **Next Step:** Consider hosting school meetings, activities, and events at locations other than the school that are convenient for families, such as community centers or the public library.

**Strategy:** Families may not always be able to attend events and activities in person or at the times they are offered. Consider capturing the event or the information in a way that can be accessed later, including a podcast, recording, webinar, or video. Post it in a place that is easily accessible and in multiple formats and or languages to meet the needs of your school community.

- » **Next Step:** Partner with families and other educators to identify what additional information would be helpful to have readily available in these formats. Consider creating a video tour of the school, introductions to school policies, or a recording that describes how families can become more involved in their child's learning.

## Resource List for You to Dig Deeper

- **Do's and Don'ts of Effective Communication with Parents:** This resource provides a list of recommendations on what to do and not do when communicating with families. Some examples of good practices include finding a translator if the family's primary language is not one that you fluently speak, acknowledging the power dynamic between teachers and families in different cultures, and using terms that everyone understands.
- **Parent Engagement: Strategies for Involving Parents in School Health:** This booklet provides ways for school administrators to engage families in school health. It outlines examples on how school staff can connect with families, how schools can collaborate with communities, and the importance of shared decision-making.
- **The Professional Bus Driver Series: Dealing and Communicating with Parents:** This tool is specifically geared towards school bus drivers and how they can effectively communicate with families. It provides example scenarios that highlight best practices.
- **Counseling Today: Parents Are a Part of School Too:** This article describes the partnership that can occur between families and school counselors. It outlines ways that school counselors can engage families.





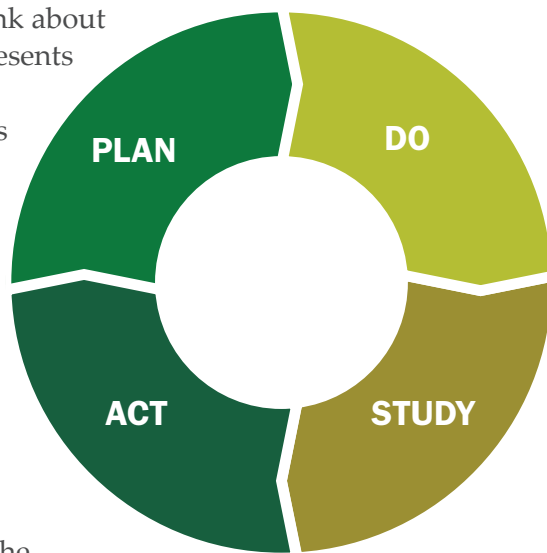
## Action Planning for Family Engagement

Now that you and your colleagues have completed the Self-Assessment and reviewed the sample strategies provided based on your role, it is time to begin planning how you will improve your family engagement activities. Ideally, the action planning process should represent a whole-school perspective and include administrators, teachers, family members, and other school staff. This section of the Toolkit will provide you an overview of the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle as a framework for action planning, and will provide tools to help you develop your own school wide action plan. Information will also be provided for individuals seeking to improve their own practice independently with the goal of incorporating this independent work into a larger, school-wide plan, either now or in the future.

### Four Steps for Action Planning: The Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle

The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle is a way to think about how you approach any improvement activity. It represents a cycle of continuous improvement where you are always looking to refine and improve your practice as you try it out and figure out what works, and what doesn't. The PDSA cycle consists of four steps:

- **Plan:** In the **Plan** phase you are assessing current your practices and processes, identifying barriers or challenges, using data whenever possible, and making a plan to move forward. In the Plan phase you are also determining the outcomes you want to see and how you will measure them.
- **Do:** In the **Do** phase, you implement whatever strategies or plans you have identified to address the challenges, practices, or processes you seek to change.
- **Study:** In the **Study** phase, you evaluate the activities you conducted in the Do phase. What worked well? What didn't work? Did the changes you make result in the outcomes you hoped to see?





- **Act:** In the **Act** phase, you make changes and updates to your plan to improve implementation based on the information and data you collected. The activities in this stage become the new standard for how you or your school conducts family engagement activities moving forward. These are also the basis of the next iteration of your planning in the Plan phase.

As you can see, while there are four steps in the PDSA cycle, it is never ending as you begin to plan again once you have completed the Act phase. The Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle can guide your work to improve family engagement practices for many years to come.

## Using this Toolkit in the Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle

In this section of the Toolkit, we'll go through each of the steps of the PDSA cycle and give you very specific activities that you can use to plan your improvements to your family engagement work. Tools and resources related to each section have been developed to guide you through this process. All of the tools and resources are available in the appendices of the Toolkit.

### Plan

As a first step, you will evaluate current your family engagement practices. The self-assessment included in this Toolkit can be completed individually or as a group to gain an understanding of areas of strength and areas of improvement in family engagement practices at your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District.

- A “Sample Process Agenda for Completing the Self-Assessment” is offered as a resource in the appendices of this toolkit. The sample process agenda offers suggested activities, participants and standard meeting goals to give you an idea of what a meeting devoted to completing and discussing the family engagement self-assessment might look like. Key considerations as you prepare for the self-assessment meeting are also offered on the process agenda. You will need about 2-3 hours to discuss current family engagement practices, complete the self-assessment, and to review the results of the self-assessment. You can do this work in a single meeting or break it up into pieces across two or more meetings. The sample agenda can be customized to meet the needs and interests of your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District.

The self-assessment will provide feedback from educators on family engagement practices; however gathering feedback from other stakeholders, especially families is important. Focus groups, surveys, interviews and document reviews are common ways to gather input from families on family engagement practices at your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District. Once you review your self-assessment results, you will need to consider how you will collect information to ensure that how you have completed the self-assessment reflects not only the perspectives and opinions of those in the room, but families and other key stakeholders as well.

- The “Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices” resource in the appendices offers suggestions for what to consider when soliciting feedback from stakeholders. This resource outlines tips and best practices on what information to collect, whom to solicit feedback from, and how to solicit feedback. This resource can be referenced to inform how you engage families and other stakeholders in providing feedback on family engagement practices to ensure multiple perspectives on your program and its needs are considered.

- If you choose to solicit feedback from families through focus groups or surveys, question banks are provided in the toolkit appendices from which you may select questions. When soliciting feedback from families through focus groups, participants should include a diverse range of families that accurately reflects a sample of families served. The “Focus Group Question Bank” resource in the appendices offers a list of questions as well as follow-up prompts that can be used to facilitate a focus group with families. You may choose to use these questions or create additional open-ended questions that reflect your program’s unique needs and challenges. Just be sure to encourage more explanation than a “yes” or “no” response to questions. You can also use the focus group question bank to identify questions for family interviews.
- While focus groups solicit feedback from a small sample of the families in your program, family surveys allow an opportunity for all families to provide feedback on family engagement practices. The “Family Survey Question Bank” resource in the appendices offers a list of statements organized by the Family Engagement Core Principles for families to respond to. It is recommended that you ask families to respond on a numeric scale (e.g. 1-5) for most questions. Using this format for survey questions makes it easier to compile survey responses and identify trends in the data collected. You may choose to develop other multiple choice questions or open ended questions to better understand particular challenges or opportunities facing your program.

Next, you will identify targeted areas for improvement based on data collected from the self-assessment, family focus groups, surveys and interviews, as well as any other data collection tools your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District have in place.

- A sample “Process Agenda for Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement” resource is available in the appendices to provide an overview of what an action planning meeting might look like in practice once data has been collected and reviewed. The sample process agenda offers suggested activities, participants, and standard meeting goals.
- The first activity in action planning and stakeholder engagement is to identify the priority areas of focus for your family engagement work based on the self-assessment responses and any other data collected. The “Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet” resource in the appendices provides prompts to assist you with identifying up to four priority areas for improvement in your family engagement work. While brainstorming priority areas, you should consider unique considerations for different subgroups, resources needed to support priorities identified, current resources or initiatives to leverage and any challenges you anticipate.

## Do

Once targeted areas for improvement are identified you will enter the Do phase by identifying steps to achieve the outcomes you want to see. The “Sample Process Agenda for Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement” introduces two additional activities once you have wrapped up brainstorming priority areas.

- The first activity in the Do phase is to finalize the priority areas identified in your brainstorming session and begin to list short-, medium-, and long-term steps you will need to take to achieve your goals. The “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Plan

Template” in the appendices provides prompts and questions to walk you through the stages of the planning process. Using this resource you can develop a detailed action plan including information on stakeholder engagement. This tool is intended to be a living document throughout your family engagement work. You will be asked to revisit it as part of your stakeholder engagement activities and ongoing reflections on your progress to date.

## Study & Act

Evaluating your ability to achieve your activities and outcomes is critical to understanding the impact of your family engagement work. Improvements to your family engagement practices should be approached using an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement. This means that you’re never really “finished” with this work, but rather are looking consistently at your practices and making changes over time.

- As a team or individually, reflect on your goals for your family engagement practices by the priority areas you selected, and determine whether or not those goals were met. If they have not yet been met, use information on your performance towards your goals to determine how you will refine your goals based on input from all your stakeholders. The “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template” provides prompts and questions to help you and your team think through ways to develop and implement an evaluation plan.

## Tools to Use

The following resources have been created to support your school in effective and strategic action planning efforts to ensure all stakeholders are engaged in developing and implementing a plan for improving family engagement activities.

### Sample Process Agenda for Completing the Self-Assessment

**What is it?** This resource is designed for administrators or team leaders to provide a possible structure for completing the Self-Assessment and reviewing the responses as a family engagement team. The tool includes proposed meeting activities, the activities’ purpose, individuals to involve, and necessary resources for each activity.

**How do I use this resource?** This document should be shared with the school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District leadership team and/or the meeting facilitator and used as a template for structuring a self-assessment data collection and data analysis meeting. This agenda can be customized to meet the unique needs of your program. However, it is recommended that you consider how you will address each component of the process agenda. You may choose to break this process into multiple meetings to ensure enough time is available to complete each activity.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be shared as the participant agenda. However, a participant agenda can be created by simplifying this template document to include standard meeting goals, the list of activities, and proposed times for each activity.

### Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices

**What is it?** This resource is designed for all school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District staff to use as a reference guide when considering what information to collect on family engagement, who to solicit feedback from, and how to gather feedback.

The tool provides best practices and recommendations on when and how to implement data collection methods such as conducting surveys, interviews and focus groups.

**How do I use this resource?** This document can be referenced to help establish data collection methods for necessary stakeholder feedback throughout your family engagement work. Once your team completes and reviews your Self-Assessment results, the tips and best practices offered in this resource can be used to decide who to solicit additional input from on your family engagement practices and when to engage them.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be used to identify one data collection method to apply to all stakeholder groups you would like to receive feedback from. You may need to customize your data collection method based on the stakeholder group. When reviewing the summary table of data collection tool options, consider both the benefits and potential challenges when making a selection of the tool to use and consider how the process will enhance the overall quality of information collected from multiple stakeholders.

### Family Focus Group Question Bank

**What is it?** This resource offers a list of possible questions to ask during a focus group session to explore possible challenges and strengths within your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District. This resource also provides probing questions that can be used to encourage family focus group participants to share more information on the “why” and “how”.

**How do I use this resource?** This resource can be used together with the Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices to ensure you are structuring your focus group session to collect the most helpful information from families. You can use relevant questions from the question bank to collect general information on family engagement, or to reword the sample questions to reference school-specific family engagement practices or events. This question bank can also be used to inform focus group questions for other stakeholder groups such community partners. However, when using the question stems be sure to adapt the language to address the appropriate stakeholder group.

**How should I not use this resource?** All questions listed on the question bank may not be relevant to your program or may not address the components of family engagement that require additional stakeholder input. Only select questions from the question bank that are most relevant and customize or develop additional questions to ask stakeholders to ensure you receive useful information.

### Family Survey Question Bank

**What is it?** This document is intended to provide a list of potential questions to include on survey to families to collect information on current family engagement practices including existing challenges and strengths in your program. The sample survey items listed in the question bank are structured as statements that respondents can rank using a Likert scale.

**How do I use this resource?** Use this resource together with the Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices to ensure you are structuring your survey to collect the most helpful information from families. Questions are categorized by the family engagement core principles listed in this Toolkit. To select questions for

your survey, prioritize questions from core principle areas you would like to collect more information on based on your Self-Assessment results.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be used as the family survey you share with families. All questions listed on the question bank may not be relevant to your program or may not address the components of family engagement that require additional stakeholder input. Select questions from the question bank that are most relevant and customize or develop additional questions to ask stakeholders to ensure you receive useful information.

### Sample Process Agenda for Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement

**What is it?** This resource is designed for administrators to provide an idea of how to approach structuring a meeting devoted to family engagement action planning and stakeholder engagement. This tool proposes meeting objectives and detailed meeting activities, including the duration for activities, meeting participants, and materials or handouts needed.

**How do I use this resource?** This document can be shared with the school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District leadership team and/ or the meeting facilitator and used as a template for structuring an action planning and stakeholder engagement planning meeting. This agenda can be customized to meet the unique needs of your program however it is recommended the core components of this agenda be included in your process. Also, it is recommended to break the action planning process into multiple meetings to ensure enough time is available to complete each activity.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be shared as the participant agenda. However a participant agenda can be created by simplifying this template document to include standard meeting goals, the list of activities and proposed times for each activity.

### Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet

**What is it?** This resource is intended to be used as a worksheet to determine priority areas for your family engagement work, which can be completed by an individual or group of people. This worksheet provides guiding questions to help you reflect on and finalize family engagement priority areas to focus on for the current or upcoming school year.

**How do I use this resource?** You will need to reference your completed Self-Assessment responses and any additional stakeholder feedback (ie. responses from focus groups, surveys, interviews, etc.) to complete this worksheet. This document can be used as a guided reflection activity for consensus building and group decision making when setting family engagement priority areas.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be completed without first collecting and reflecting on stakeholder engagement feedback from multiple perspectives.

### Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Plan Template

**What is it?** This document provides a template for family engagement action planning by guiding your family engagement team through short-, medium- and long-term action planning. It will also help to identify stakeholders to involve throughout the process.



**How do I use this resource?** This resource can be completed by the family engagement team at your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District once the Self-Assessment, any other data collection activities and the Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet are complete. This resource can be used for initial planning and may also be revisited regularly to reflect on continuously improve family engagement practices.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be completed in isolation by one individual. Include other members on your family engagement team in the action planning process.

### **Additional resources for you to dig deeper in designing your processes to improve family engagement**

- **Shared Decision-Making for Teachers: Conversation to Share Data with Families:** This resource serves as a template for teachers to use when structuring conversations with families to share information on their child's progress and plan collaboratively with families to set goals for their child's development
- **Shared Decision-Making for Families: A Template for Conversations Between Families and Teachers:** This resource serves as a template for families to use when preparing for conversations with their child's teachers to gather information on their child's progress and plan collaboratively with teachers to set goals for their child's development.
- **Human-Centered Design: An Innovative Tool for Professional Learning in Family Engagement:** This resource provides an innovative and unique approach professionals can take to develop processes, services and resources that engage and support families by uplifting and valuing families' perspectives.
- **Assessing and Creating the Mindset for Family Engagement:** This resource outlines steps for educators to collect data on family engagement practices, develop action plans and implement family engagement strategies at the school level and classroom level.





## Ensuring Sustainability of Family Engagement Practices

As addressed in the seventh Core Principle, Ensuring Sustainability, ensuring effective family engagement is an ongoing, iterative process that requires sustained attention, personnel and fiscal resources.

In a recent study, Fehrer (2014) identified several contributors to successful family engagement:

- A focus by educators and families on family engagement activities that support children’s learning and development;
- An emphasis on participation, communication, collaboration, and empowerment for families by family engagement activity organizers;
- An alignment between the activities provided to families and what families believe they need to support their child’s learning;
- Providers’ ability to use specific strategies, pedagogies, and approaches to meaningfully engage families in their children’s learning; and
- Families’ involvement in a number of practices to support their child’s success in school.

It is important to consider each of these elements as you think about the long-term management and growth of your family engagement activities. As part of your cycle of continuous improvement for family engagement practices, and throughout the process of planning and implementing your improvements, you and your team should be reflecting on how to keep practices at the classroom, program, school, and/or district levels going over time.

There are several things to consider as you reflect:

- **Staffing:** What staff positions are critical to maintaining your efforts? Will you need to add more positions in the future? How can you minimize (and/or mitigate) staff turnover? What will you do in the case of staff turnover?
- **Changes in student population:** Have the demographics of your program, school, or district recently changed (e.g., preferred language, cultural norms/traditions, socioeconomic status, and special needs)? Do you anticipate any further changes? When changes in student population occur, how can you adapt your family engagement strategies to ensure that they meet the needs of the changing population?
- **Ongoing stakeholder engagement:** What steps can you take to maintain your stakeholder engagement efforts? How can core stakeholders (e.g., families, community members) stay engaged with your program, school, and/district beyond the initial improvements you make?

<sup>25</sup> Fehrer, K. (2014). *Systemic, integrated, and sustainable family engagement across the early age spectrum in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties*. Stanford, CA: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities.

- **Programming:** What steps can you take to ensure that any new or revised programming can be sustained? Are there specific resources or practices that will need continued support? What other initiatives can you leverage to ensure this programming is aligned with other activities and remains in place?
- **Funding:** How much funding will be needed to sustain this work? Will you need additional funding to scale your efforts, similar funding to sustain your work, or less funding now that rollout has occurred? Where will this funding come from?
- **Ongoing data collection:** What data will you collect to track your progress? How will this data help you sustain and adjust your efforts in the future? When will you look at and review your data?
- **Evaluation:** Do you have an overall evaluation plan to ensure your efforts are working? What does this look like, and what resources will you need? When will you review the evaluation plan to make sure it still meets your needs?

The “Sample Process Agenda: Sustainability Planning” can help you facilitate a meeting to answer these questions. In addition, a number of specific strategies, including several from this Toolkit, can help you sustain your family engagement efforts. For example, you can use the self-assessment (and other tools) to regularly reflect on your family engagement practice. You can also engage families in the development and implementation of the action plan. This action plan can explain how the school community will collaborate to support family engagement. It may also be helpful to establish a family engagement support network of educators, community partners, and families. This network can identify strategies, ideas, and supports to strengthen family engagement activities across environments. Finally, you can use peer-to-peer networks (e.g., family-to-family, educator-to-educator) to share information and maintain close relationships.

## Tools to Use

### Sample Process Agenda for Sustainability Planning

**What is it?** This resource is designed to give school administrators an idea of what a meeting devoted to sustainability planning might look like in practice. The tool includes proposed meeting activities, the activities purpose, individuals to involve and necessary resources for each activity.

**How do I use this resource?** This document should be shared with the school leadership team and/ or the meeting facilitator and used as a base template for structuring a sustainability meeting. This agenda can be customized to meet the unique needs of your school. However, it is recommended that the base components of this agenda be included in your process. You may choose to complete this process over the course of multiple meetings to ensure there is sufficient time for each activity.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be shared as the participant agenda. However, you can create a participant agenda by simplifying this document so that it only includes standard meeting goals, proposed activities, and the estimated duration of each activity.



## Sharing Information with Families for Meaningful Partnerships

### Why Share Information with Families?

A critical component to effective family engagement is freely and consistently sharing information with the families in your school, with the intention of providing the information that families need in order to fully participate in multiple aspects of your school. Equally important is creating an atmosphere of welcoming input, feedback and information from families so that they feel free to share their ideas and suggestions with teachers and administrators. This is a complex process that is grounded in a school-wide agreement that *partnership* with each and every family in the school is a crucial part of every child's academic success.

When school staff truly believe in the possibility of partnership with families, the sharing of information changes in tone from the school *telling* families what they need to know, to *sharing* information that ensures everyone has the same basis of knowledge from which to plan and act together. Creating communications for the families of children shifts from just making sure that parents know what the school knows, to making sure that several channels of communication are open to families to share their input with their child's teachers and the school administration, as they deem appropriate. Communicating that families are welcome to share information and suggestions via meetings and discussions, email, phone, written notes, and/or social media is the first step, but it must also include a positive attitude towards and commitment to hearing what families have to say. It's a perspective shift for many who are accustomed to communication with families being one-way, unless something is wrong, in which case the presumption is that it will automatically become a two-way conversation.

Rather than waiting for something to be wrong or need intervention, best practices in family engagement suggests that school staff should start off with collaborative, strengths based communication from the start. This section of the Toolkit is meant to help school staff think through how to share information with families with the intent of open sharing and partnership.

Is your school open to partnership? Consider the following:

- Are families invited to be a part of planning school events as well as overall school initiatives?
- Is your school open and accessible to all families?
- Are families given the opportunity to meet with each other and develop relationships outside of the PTA?
- Are staff ready and able to work with families from various backgrounds and cultures?
- Does staff value the input they get from families, or is family input seen as a "problem"?



## Types of Information to Share with Families

Most schools default to providing families with information only about school events, important dates, or requests for signatures on documents when sharing information with families. Suggestions throughout this toolkit urge you and your staff to consider alternatives and additions to this common form of communication, and to broaden your perspective of what may and should be communicated with family members. Some suggestions include:

- **Get to know each other:** At the beginning of the year, teachers and administrators can share information about their background, interests and teaching philosophy at the same time they are asking for information about children and families.
- **Progress - both daily and longer term progress on academic courses, or on IEP goals:** What are the ways in which your staff let families know on a regular basis how their child is doing? Do the communications include positive feedback, suggestions and/or requests for help and input to support the child's learning? Is communication going out at frequent intervals (not just with report cards and/or conferences)?
- **Curriculum updates, including invitations to contribute:** Teachers have multiple opportunities to share what children will be learning throughout the year; some opt for weekly newsletters while others may do more quarterly or other types of updates. Each one offers the teacher the opportunity to ask families to share what they may know or be able to illustrate related to the content - this could be playing music from a particular country that is part of the Social Studies curriculum, or having a scientist come during a unit on chemistry or the properties of matter.
- **Opportunities for participation in school planning:** Administrators can think through a school year and think about times that they will be bringing together groups to support decision-making, and then publicize these to families to ask for their help. Descriptions of each opportunity and what role families will have should be clearly written, as well as the expected decisions that will be needed and the time commitment.

## Getting Feedback from Families

### Considerations

At different points, school administrators and teachers should ask families for feedback on the information that comes from the school. Areas to consider asking families about include:

- **Tone:** Does the communication reflect the school's philosophy on family engagement? Does it suggest that school and families are in partnership with one another?
- **Clarity:** Does the communication have all of the key information in it? Is it written in a family friendly way? Is it understandable?
- **Language:** Does the communication use regular language rather than educational jargon? If there are education terms, are they explained in family-friendly language? Are communications available in the languages spoken by families in the school? Are they accurately translated?
- **Response:** Do communications invite responses from families, either to the child's teachers or to administrators? Is it clear that feedback and input is welcome?

### Methods of Feedback

Feedback may be gathered through multiple methods. Very often, the default is to use family surveys, since they are easy to put together and to analyze. However, you may want to consider the following options, depending on the type of information and feedback you are seeking. Options include (but are not limited to):

- **Surveys:** surveys are best when reaching out to large groups of families or when the need to gather many different types of feedback;
- **Focus groups:** these are best when the input of a small, representative group is needed to respond to a complex or multi-faceted issue;

- **Interviews:** interviews may be used when detailed, potentially personal information is needed from a representative group of families; and
- **Meetings of existing family groups (e.g., the PTA):** when possible, asking for input from an existing family group such as the PTA may give teachers and administrators the opportunity to seek regular, scheduled feedback on smaller issues or decisions.

## Tools to Use

The following resources have been created to support your school in making effective decisions about how and when to share information with families, and to ensure that your communications reflect your intent of partnership with all families.

### Partnering with Your Child’s School: What Families Need to Know, Share, and Ask

**What is it?** This resource is designed for families to know what their role can be in developing a partnership with their child’s teachers. The tool includes ways that families can prepare for conversations with teachers, and offers questions that families may want to ask to learn more about the child’s school, classroom and/or teachers.

**How do I use this resource?** This document should be shared with families at the beginning of the year, in connection with information from your school about your philosophy of family engagement and your desire to be in true partnership with families. It may also be shared when conferences are about to happen, with communication that conferences are an opportunity for a conversation, and the questions contained within are some suggestions (though not required).

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be presented as a list of questions the family has to ask in any conversation, or as a definitive list of questions that will not be strayed from. It is also important to provide context about how to use this document, so simply sending it to families with no additional communication is not recommended.

### Resources for Vermont Families

**What is it?** This document provides a short listing of state-level programs and agencies that support children and their families, as well as the services offered.

**How do I use this resource?** This document may be sent out, either at the beginning of the year, or at other times when community resources are highlighted, to let families know what is available in order to support their child’s growth and learning, and their own abilities as a parent. It should be shared with all families, not just those who may have circumstances that may require some of the services listed. Communication might also include how your school partners with these organizations to support all the families in your school, so they understand the connection between the programs.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be given to families with the instructions to call a certain agency, or with the intent to let families know you’ve already made a referral.

### Preparing For and Participating in Your Child’s IEP Team Meeting

**What is it?** This document supports a family’s ability to plan ahead for their child’s IEP meeting by helping them gather information about their child, their current services, and the current IEP to be able to participate as a full team member in the development of the IEP. For families newer to the process, the guide also includes terms that are commonly used so that families may understand the professional jargon of special education.

**How do I use this resource?** This resource may be shared, preferably with verbal guidance and the offer of support, to families well in advance of the development or annual review of their child’s IEP.

**How should I not use this resource?** This document should not be given to families with instructions to fill it out and bring it to the meeting. It should also not be given to families without an explanation of what it is and how it connects to the scheduled meeting.

## Additional Resources

The following resources were mentioned in previous sections of the Toolkit as resources that may be helpful to share with families in certain situations. They are compiled here for ease of access when considering this particular aspect of family engagement.

- **Families' Guides to Student Success:** The families' Guides to Student Success were developed by teachers, families and education experts in response to the **Common Core State Standards** that more than 45 states have adopted. Created for grades K-8 and high school English, language arts/literacy and mathematics, the guides provide clear, consistent expectations for what students should be learning at each grade in order to be prepared for college and career.
- **US Department of Education Reading Resources for families:** A series of resources for families to help them help their child become a better reader.
- **US Department of Education Resources for Families in Spanish:** A collection of all Department resources for families that have been translated into Spanish.
- **Shared Decision Making for Families: A Template for Conversations Between Families and Teachers:** This resource can be used by families prior to meeting with their child's teacher to document their child's educational progress and can help the teacher and the family member identify shared goals.





## Resources that Informed the Development of the Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment

- **Education World: Activities to Promote Parent Involvement**
- **California Department of Education Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts**
- **California Safe and Supportive Schools What Works Brief on Family Engagement**
- Hanson, M. J., Lynch, E. W., & Poulsen, M. K. (2013). *Understanding families: Supportive approaches to diversity, disability, and risk*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
- Henderson, A. T. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton.
- **Massachusetts Family, School, and Community Partnership Fundamentals (the Fundamentals)**
- **North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction Parent and Family Involvement: A Guide to Effective Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in North Carolina Schools**
- **Ohio Department of Education Sample Best Practices for Parent Involvement in Schools**
- **Tips and Strategies for Increasing Parent and Family Involvement in Virginia Schools**

## Appendices: Resources to Support Your Use of the Toolkit

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## Materials

- Agenda (optional)
- Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen (optional)
- Pens/pencils
- Copies of the “Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment”
- Copies of the “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template”

Proposed Length	Activity	Purpose	Individuals Involved	Process	Handouts/ Materials
10 minutes	Introductions	Get to know those who are participating in the self-assessment.	All	Provide name, role, and school/district. (You may also choose to do a more in-depth icebreaker.)	None
5 minutes	Overview of Agenda	Offer a preview of the day’s activities and answer any questions.	Facilitator	Provide an overview of the day’s agenda and answer any questions.	Agenda
5-15 minutes	Goals	Align goals and expectations for the meeting.	Facilitator	Determine shared goals for the day.	Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen to take notes
30-45 minutes	Family Engagement in Your School/ District/ SU: In-depth review of current family engagement practices, challenges, and opportunities.	Provide context for self-assessment and action plan of next steps.	All (e.g., principal, special education director, family engagement coordinator, special education staff representative(s), teacher representative(s), and/or school social worker).	See sample questions below.	Family Engagement Toolkit
45 minutes	Complete Self-Assessment	Gain an understanding of areas of strength and improvement in family engagement practices in your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District.	All	Two options: 1. Complete the self-assessment <b>as a group</b> . Reach consensus about the ratings for each item. 2. Complete the self-assessment <b>individually</b> . Then come together as a team to compare results and reach consensus on the ratings for each item.	

Proposed Length	Activity	Purpose	Individuals Involved	Process	Handouts/ Materials
30-45 minutes	Review Completed Self-Assessment	Use the results of the self-assessment to inform action planning.	All	Review the results of the self-assessment report for strengths and areas of need. Ask for reactions, questions, and discussion. Determine areas of priority and identify priority areas and possible activities/ actions.	Completed Self-Assessment Results Summary
45 minutes	Determining Additional Data Collection Needs	Determine what additional information you will need to analyze to understand family engagement practices.	All	See sample questions below.	Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen to take notes
5-10 minutes	Wrap Up and Next Steps	Clean up space and wrap up the day.	Facilitator/All	Clean up any materials that were used throughout the day. Review next steps and adjourn the meeting.	N/A

### Sample Questions for “Family Engagement in Your School/District/SU”

1. What are we most proud of with regards to family engagement? What are our biggest challenges?
2. What is our philosophy when it comes to family engagement our schools and classrooms? How is that reflected in our work with families?
3. What is our philosophy when it comes to family engagement in the IEP process? How is that reflected in the IEP process and our work with families?
4. What are we hoping to achieve from this work?
5. Is it difficult to connect with some families? If so, in what ways? Do these families have commonalities?
6. How do we solicit information from families? In what ways are teachers asking families for information? How do we get information to inform overall school planning from families? When and how do IEP teams get information from families?
7. What are our current gaps in resources and services, and how are those gaps impacting students and families?

8. To what extent are families' previous educational experiences/beliefs impacting their involvement and engagement (e.g., schools are experts; separation between school and home; school only reaches out when there is a problem)?
9. How do we approach planning family engagement activities from year to year? Do we have a family engagement plan?

### Sample Questions for “Determining Additional Data Collection Needs”

1. How do you currently gather information from families about their experiences with the school?
  - a. Does that process address each of the core principles in the Toolkit?
  - b. How recently was this information collected?
  - c. Do your processes for soliciting feedback reach all families including those of students with disabilities and those who are difficult to engage?
2. After completing the self-assessment, what additional information will be helpful in better understanding your current partnerships with families?
3. Who are the key groups of stakeholders who could inform your work on family engagement? Consider both educator groups (e.g., leadership teams) and family groups (e.g., PTA, special education parent groups).
4. How will you ensure that the results of the self-assessment reflect families' experiences with the school from their perspective, as well as the perspectives of those who completed the self-assessment?

Based on your responses to these questions, consider reviewing the following resources included in the Toolkit:

- [Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices](#);
- [Family Focus Group Question Bank](#); and
- [Family Survey Question Bank](#).





## Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices

### Purpose of This Tool

This tool includes tips and best practices for gathering information from stakeholders in a variety of ways, including focus groups, surveys, interviews, and document review. The table below includes recommendations for when and how to use each data collection tool, as well as the benefits and potential challenges of each method.

### What Information to Collect

Begin by deciding what information you need to collect. What additional information do you need in order to identify your priorities for your family engagement work? How can you better understand families' perspectives on your current family engagement practices? How can you solicit feedback on what is working and not working as you proceed through your work on family engagement?

Consider these key factors when you ask for feedback on current family engagement practices:

- What is the **purpose** for collecting the information?
- What **current information** exists that you can review, and what **new information** are you looking to learn?
- How will you ensure that **all perspectives are included** in the feedback you receive?

### From Whom to Solicit Feedback

Gather input from various stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, students, families, and community partners. Consider individuals or groups that have been your strong supporters, as well as those that have been your critics. This will ensure you hear multiple perspectives on your program and its needs.

### How to Solicit Feedback

There are several ways to gather stakeholder input. The most common methods include surveys, focus groups, interviews, and document review. When choosing a method (or methods), consider the amount and type of information you need to collect, either anecdotal (like stories and perspectives), or quantitative (numbers).

Below are several different types of data collection methods, including best-practice tips for each. At the end of this tool you will find a table summarizing each approach, including the benefits and challenges of each.

Note that you may need to use different data collection methods for different stakeholder groups. For example, families may feel more comfortable providing feedback anonymously through a survey than speaking directly with a program administrator.

## Focus Groups: Best Practices

A focus group brings together a small number of individuals for an in-depth discussion on a specific topic. While more time-intensive than some other formats, it allows you to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' perspectives and the opportunity to ask follow-up questions of participants.

### Asking Good Questions

Prepare a structured or semi-structured script that you can use throughout the focus group. This script should include how you will introduce the purpose of the group, questions you want to ask (including questions about who is in the room), and possible follow-up questions.

- Ask questions in a logical order.
- Use informal, simple language.
- Begin with easy, one-dimensional questions to focus participants' attention. Then follow up with more probing questions to flesh out responses (e.g., "Can you say more about that?" "Can you give an example?" "Does anyone else have thoughts on that?").
- Main questions should be open-ended (e.g., "Why?" "How?" "To what extent?")
- End with one or two wrap-up questions so participants can voice any comments, concerns, or opinions that were not addressed in previous questions.
- Summarize the main discussion points for participants to ensure you understand them correctly.

### Facilitation Pointers

- Strive to include no more than 6-10 participants in each group.
- Explain the purpose of the focus group.
- Provide details about the level of confidentiality.
- Keep the conversation dynamic and engaging. (For in-person sessions, consider using flip charts, sticky notes, and/or hands-on activities.)
- Be friendly but professional.
- Be aware of your body language.
- Be an active listener.
- Stay neutral in order to be respectful of all participants' opinions.
- Silence is okay. It gives people time to think before sharing their thoughts.
- Be conscious of time. Keep discussion topics and question responses moving.
- Be aware of participant fatigue. Don't overload the participants with too many "wordy" questions.

- Try to limit sessions to 60-90 minutes. If needed, take a break during the middle of the session for personal reflection.
- Reassure the group that each individual opinion is essential to a successful and fruitful discussion.
- Shift attention (and potentially eye contact) away from individuals who dominate conversation. Encourage quieter participants to answer by asking them directly or by generally asking participants who have not responded to provide their input.
- Encourage close friends to separate.
- Draft a transcript of the conversation (or group notes) and scan responses for patterns or themes. If possible, compile and share findings with participants.

*Note: See the “[Family Focus Group Question Bank](#)” in the Toolkit for suggested questions.*

## Surveys: Best Practices

Surveys allow you to collect a lot of information from a variety of stakeholders in a short amount of time. Although they take time and effort to develop, they can be sent to a broad audience and reused to track progress over time. Thus, it is important to ensure your survey is well-designed from the start.

Note that the Vermont School Climate Survey will soon be rolling out state-wide, and will be given to students and school employees. The [EDSCLS](#), a popular and free national survey about school climate, does have a parent version that is available to use. Consider the value of giving parents an EDSCLS survey versus creating your own school’s survey.

The recommendations below are designed to support your work if you choose to develop your own survey of families.

### Drafting the Survey

- Determine what you need to know. What is the purpose of the survey? What do you hope to learn? How will the data you collect influence your decisions?
- Consider your target audience. Who will be taking the survey? How will that affect your choice of language, examples, and definitions?
- Break your topic into manageable parts. Then draft questions for each section.
- Use clear, specific, and unbiased language. Use formal but simple language. (You may want to pilot a draft survey to ensure the language makes sense.)
- Consider whether to use quantitative (e.g., multiple-choice, 1-7 scale) or qualitative (e.g., short-answer, open response) questions or some combination of the two. Note that quantitative data will be easier to compare and aggregate, while qualitative data will provide more detailed insights into participants’ responses.
- Ensure that questions are asked in a logical order. Start with questions that are easy to answer and keep related questions together. Ask sensitive questions last.
- Use page breaks to group related questions together.
- Include headings that help respondents understand why you’re asking them each set of questions.

## General Advice

- Provide an estimate of how long it will take to complete the survey.
- For online surveys, use a progress bar so respondents can see how they are doing.
- Try to send your survey to a representative sample of your stakeholder groups. Note whether respondents and non-respondents have different characteristics that should be acknowledged. (For example, would non-responders perceive your program's family engagement efforts differently than responders?)
- If possible, share your survey in multiple ways (e.g., email, hard copy, online newsletters) to yield a diverse cross-section of respondents.
- Note trends in responses and whether responses vary by subgroup (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, role).
- Consider using visualizations of your results (e.g., graphs, tables, word clouds) to share with others.
- Offer small incentives (e.g., raffle tickets) to encourage survey participation.

*Note: See the "Family Survey Question Bank" in the Toolkit for suggested questions.*

## Interviews: Best Practices

Interviews provide you with the opportunity to meet individually with key stakeholders and to ask specific questions to gain a deep understanding of their perspective. Although interviews are one of the most time-intensive information gathering activities, interviews with those who have unique perspectives or represent large numbers of individuals can be a powerful data source.

### Asking Good Questions

- Determine what you need to know. What is the purpose of the interview? What do you hope to learn? How will the data you collect influence your decisions?
- Prepare a structured or semi-structured questioning script so you know what you are going to ask in advance.
- Ask questions in a logical order. Start with questions that are easy to answer and keep related questions together. Ask sensitive questions last.
- Use informal, simple language.
- Begin with easy, one-dimensional questions, then follow up with more probing questions to flesh out responses (e.g., "Can you say more about that?" "Can you give an example?").
- Summarize the interviewee's responses to ensure you understand them correctly.

### Tips for Interviewers

- Find a quiet, private space where the interviewee will feel comfortable.
- Thank interviewees for their time and provide an overview the interview's purpose and goals.
- Ensure that interviewees know that they are not required to answer every question.
- Explain how you will conduct the interview, including the anticipated length of the interview.
- Take notes to help you remember the interviewee's key points.
- Leave time at the end for questions.

## Document Review: Best Practices

In addition to asking others to provide new information through data collection activities such as focus groups, surveys, and interviews, you can learn about your current practices by reviewing existing documents. These can be used to better understand current practices, identify where there might be challenges, and where opportunities for improvement may exist.

- Identify which documents to review.
  - » What information currently exists about family engagement in your school, district, Supervisory Union, or Supervisory District?
  - » Are there relevant flyers, handouts, or emails from past activities?
  - » What materials are posted around the school?
  - » Have you reviewed relevant reference/guidance documents (e.g., school handbook, school website)?
- Look for key markers of effective family engagement in each document.
  - » Do documents use family-friendly language?
  - » Are they available in families' native languages?
  - » Are they written in straightforward language (i.e., without jargon)?
  - » Are they accessible to persons with disabilities?
  - » Do they use language that reflects different types of family structures?
  - » Do they go beyond one-way communication and actively solicit input from families?
  - » Are they readily available to families in different formats?
- Solicit feedback from others.
  - » Consider discussing documents with key stakeholders during focus groups, interviews, and/or surveys.
  - » Ask stakeholders about the extent to which the documents include key markers of effective family engagement (e.g., family-friendly language, translated text, jargon-free language, accessible format, inclusive language, two-way communication).

## Summary Table

Data Collection Tool	Ideal For	Benefits	Potential Challenges
Focus Group	Collecting information from a specific group of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can create a deeper conversation</li> <li>• Allows you to engage more than one stakeholder at a time</li> <li>• Can provide flexibility in the moment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More difficult to organize</li> <li>• Requires strong facilitation skills</li> <li>• Time-intensive to aggregate and evaluate feedback</li> </ul>
Survey	Collecting information from a large group of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be anonymous</li> <li>• Easier to aggregate data</li> <li>• Can be administered multiple times</li> <li>• Can be shared electronically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper-based surveys are more work-intensive</li> <li>• May require significant work to set up</li> <li>• Does not always allow for clarification of responses</li> </ul>
Interview	Collecting information from specific individuals and key stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can ask in-depth questions, including follow up questions</li> <li>• Can target specific individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time-intensive to conduct interviews, review information, and consolidate feedback</li> <li>• Requires advanced scheduling</li> </ul>
Document Review	Reviewing existing resources, current policies, and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be done independently</li> <li>• Can assess information that is used to inform practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be difficult to evaluate out of context</li> <li>• Requires accurate record keeping and organization</li> </ul>





## Family Focus Group Question Bank

### Purpose of This Resource

This document provides a list of possible questions to ask during a focus group exploring current family engagement practices, challenges, and opportunities. The “**Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices**” resource in the Toolkit includes information about how to conduct an effective focus group and should be used along with this document, to inform the development of focus groups.

Below is a list of general questions and possible follow-up prompts to encourage additional feedback or clarify response. You can use this list to develop a script of questions you would like to ask. Select as many of the general questions and follow-up prompts provided to include in the family focus group discussion but remember to try and keep the focus group to no more than 60 or 90 minutes. This may mean that you have to skip some questions you have identified in advance.

Remember to ask follow-up questions if you aren’t sure if you understand a response or would like additional information. Here are some general questions you may wish to ask:

- Can you share more details on that thought?
- If you feel comfortable, please say more about that.
- What would that look like in practice?
- Do others have reactions they would like to share? (Or, What reactions do others have to what was said?)

### Sample Focus Group Questions

- How does the school create a welcoming environment for families? Is there anything you think could be improved?
  - » **Prompts:** Are there any new families in the group? What was it like being new? What went well or was challenging?
- Do you volunteer at the school when they ask for family volunteers? Why or why not?
- Do you attend the family events at school? Why or why not?
  - » **Prompts:** Are they interesting to you and your child? Are you asked what will be interesting to you?

- Do you feel empowered or comfortable sharing feedback on school events and initiatives? What are some ways the school invites feedback? When are you more likely to provide feedback or input on school events and initiatives?
- Do you feel that there is an equal balance between the information you are given and the information you are asked to share with the school?
  - » **Prompts:** Are you asked to share information about your child and family on a regular basis? Are you ever asked to give input into school planning or improvements?
- How frequently do you hear from your child's teacher and what types of information do they share with you?
  - » **Prompts:** What kinds of information about your child's learning do you get? Do you feel like your teacher knows your child's learning needs well? How does your child's teacher make sure that you know things about your child's learning and their classroom?
- How is the school connected to your community? In what ways could the school build stronger community connections?
  - » **Prompts:** What types of community resources or information would you like to be connected with?
- Is anyone present a member of an IEP team? If so, can you tell us about your experience as part of the IEP team?
  - » **Prompts:** Do you feel like an equal partner? Why or why not?
- You've mentioned several things your school does with and for families during our conversation today. As you reflect on our discussion and your experience, what do you think your school does well?
- What one thing would you like your school to do differently with families?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with school leadership?



## Family Survey Question Bank

### Purpose of This Resource

This document provides a list of possible questions to include in a family survey exploring current family engagement practices, challenges, and opportunities. The **“Gathering Feedback from Stakeholders on Family Engagement: Tips and Best Practices”** resource in the Toolkit includes information about how to conduct an effective survey and should be used along with this document, to inform the development of the survey. Rather than developing your own survey you may also use an existing survey such as the [EDSCLS](#).

Below is a list of possible survey questions that are organized by the family engagement core principles. The family engagement self-assessment results for your school may inform which core principles you address when surveying families and help you determine which statements are most appropriate to include in the family survey.

You can use these examples to develop a list of questions you would like to ask. Remember that you survey respondents to complete the survey in less than 15 minutes maximum so you may need to prioritize some questions over others. For most questions it is recommended that you ask respondents to answer based on a specific scale, such as the following:

- (1) Never
- (2) Sometimes
- (3) Often
- (4) Always

You may also want to add open ended questions to get additional context from respondents. They may be specific questions, or you may simply prompt, “Please describe your response to this question.”

### Sample Family Survey Questions

#### Core Principle 1: Creating a Welcoming Environment

- I have a personal relationship with one or more school staff members.
- I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and opinions.
- When entering the school, I am greeted personally.
- When entering the school I have a clear sense of where to go.
- I find the overall school environment inviting.

- Information about school and community programs for my child(ren) and my family are available in common areas for me to access.
- There are opportunities for me or other members of my family to participate in meaningful volunteer opportunities within the school.
- School activities are designed with my family's individual needs and interests in mind.
- I see myself, my family, and our beliefs, culture, and background reflected in the school.

## **Core Principle 2: Building Effective Two-Way Communication**

### **Effective Communication Strategies**

- The school has a system in place to share information with me about my child(ren) on a regular basis.
- The school has a system in place for me to share information about my child(ren) with them on a regular basis.
- Information is given to my family with enough time for me to respond or follow-up appropriately as needed.
- I receive communication from the school throughout the year
- I receive communication from different individuals at the school.
- Communications from the school are respectful and honest.
- Communications from the school encourage me to give feedback and input.

### **Communication Across Roles**

- I feel comfortable contacting my child(ren)'s educators.
- My child(ren)'s educators are easy to contact.
- I feel comfortable contacting the school's administrators.
- The school's administrators are easy to contact
- School staff understand how best to communicate with me.
- I am regularly asked for my input regarding issues and concerns.

### **Culturally Proficient Communication**

- Educators at the school have an understanding of how my family thinks about education.
- Educators at the school have meaningful conversations with my family about my child(ren)'s education.
- School activities are representative of my family.
- I feel safe sharing information about my child(ren), family, culture or experience to enhance my child(ren)'s learning.

## **Core Principle 3: Supporting the Success of Students**

- My child(ren)'s educators partner with me to support my child(ren)'s learning.
- My child(ren)'s educators partner with me to identify goals for my child(ren).
- My child(ren)'s educators ask me for information about my child, family, culture, values, norms, beliefs and/or community to use in classroom planning.

- My child(ren)'s educators ask me for information about my culture, values, beliefs and/or community to use in classroom planning.
- I work with teachers, administrators and other school staff to identify, act on, and achieve my hopes and goals for my child(ren).
- My child(ren)'s educators get to know my family and our story so that they can understand what my family needs to support my child(ren)'s learning.
- The school gives me information, tools, and training on how my child(ren) are learning and growing.
- The school gives me information, tools, and training on ways I can help my child learn outside of school.
- I know what my child is learning in their classroom.
- The school seeks my help with my child(ren)'s education even when there are not problems.

#### **Core Principle 4: Sharing Power and Responsibility**

- I am a part of school planning and leadership .
- There are meaningful volunteer opportunities for families at the school.
- There are opportunities for me to learn new skills from the school so that I can help with school planning.
- I am given information about how to understand information provided about my child, including test t results.
- I have enough information to help the school staff make decisions about my child's education.
- Teachers and school staff give me clear information so I can make decisions about my child(ren)'s education.
- My child(ren) and I participate with staff and community members in planning and creating school programs.
- The school thinks about how my family likes to make decisions when making decisions about my child and their time at school.
- My child's teachers understand how their own culture may impact their beliefs and assumptions about my child, my family and my community.

#### **Core Principle 5: Partnering with the Community**

- The school gives me information about community programs and resources that may help my child(ren)'s learning and well-being.
- Educators have knowledge of my community.
- Educators have knowledge of my family's specific needs.
- The school has partnered with community organizations such as libraries, health and youth programs.
- The school helps me find programs that can give me and my family things that we need.



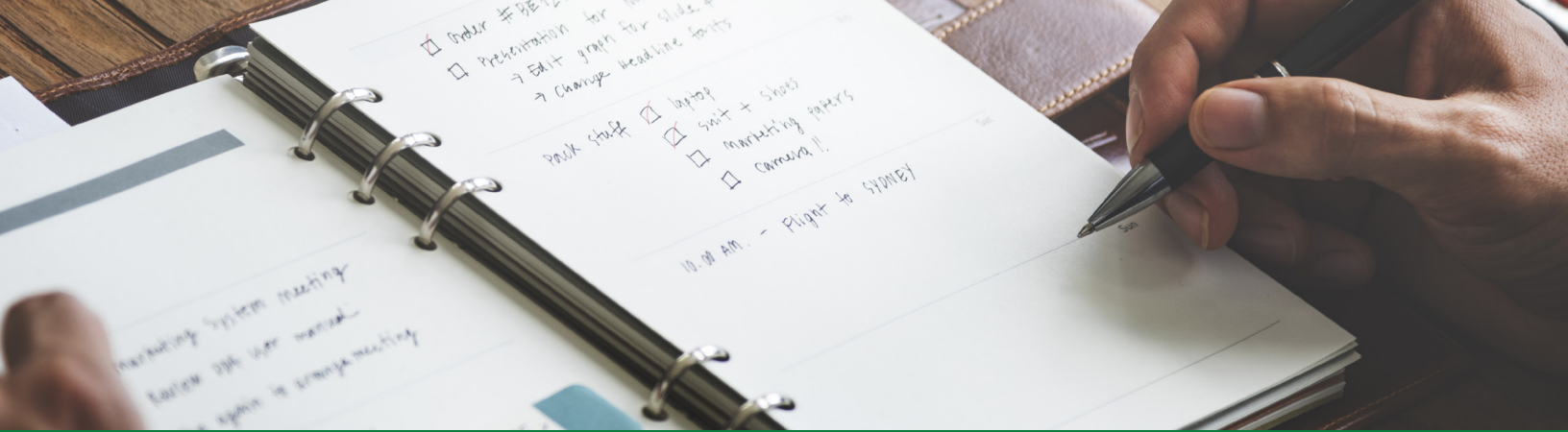
### **Core Principle 6: Providing Equity and Access**

- The school understands what has been hard for our family and what we do well, how we are currently doing, and what we want for our child(ren).
- The school has ways to communicate with families who are not native English speakers (such as providing interpreters, having bilingual staff, or connecting families who speak the same language to one another).
- The school considers and addresses' my families cultural and language needs when creating and sending important information to my family.
- The members of school advisory groups and committees reflect my family and the rest of the families in the school, including families living in poverty, those who have limited English proficiency and those who have disabilities.
- Teachers understand the unique characteristics and strengths that my family brings to the school.
- The school uses my family's strengths to support improved outcomes for students.
- Teachers understand how my child's culture and background impacts them, including how they are or are not engaged with the school.

### **Core Principle 7: Ensuring Sustainability**

- The school has requested feedback from my family to help them plan.
- The school has enough resources and support to maintain meaningful and effective family engagement opportunities that have the power to positively impact my child(ren)'s learning and achievement.
- Family engagement activities are linked across classrooms and seem aligned with other school projects.





## Sample Process Agenda for Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement

### Purpose of This Resource

This process agenda is intended to give you an idea of what a meeting devoted to action planning and stakeholder engagement might look like in practice. A process agenda includes more detail than an agenda that is shared with participants. It offers additional details about each meeting activity, including its anticipated duration, purpose, participants, process, and relevant handouts/materials. Meeting facilitators often use a process agenda to ensure that meeting objectives are met and that very little is left to chance.

It is recommended that you include the core components of this agenda, but details like timing and participants may be modified to meet your needs.

Possible goals for this meeting include the following:

- Identifying priority areas for your family engagement work;
- Identifying an improvement strategy;
- Identify the intended outcomes of your family engagement work;
- Developing an action plan; and
- Developing an evaluation plan.

*Given the number of activities needed to achieve these goals, it is recommended that you address the items in this process agenda across multiple meetings.*

### Considerations

As you prepare for your meeting on action planning and stakeholder engagement, you will want to consider the following:

- Where will the meeting be held?
- Who will facilitate the meeting?
- When should the meeting be held (e.g., date, time)?
- Who should participate?
- Will you need to include time for introductions?
- How much time do you have?
- What materials are available?
- Will participants need a break?

## Materials

- Agenda (optional)
- Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen (optional)
- Pens/pencils
- Copies of the “Family Engagement Brainstorming Document”
- Copies of the “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template”

Proposed Length	Activity	Purpose	Individuals Involved	Process	Handouts/ Materials
10 minutes	Introductions	Get to know those who are participating in the meeting.	All	Provide name, role, and school/district. (You may also opt to do a more in-depth icebreaker.)	None
5 minutes	Overview of Agenda	Offer a preview of the meeting’s activities and answer any questions.	Facilitator	Provide an overview of the meeting agenda and answer any questions.	Agenda
5-15 minutes	Goals	Align goals and expectations for the meeting.	Facilitator	Determine shared goals for the meeting.	Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen
30-45 minutes	Family Engagement Brainstorming	Identify possible priority areas for your family engagement work in the current or coming school year.	All (e.g., principal, special education director, family engagement coordinator, special education staff representative(s), teacher representative(s), and/or school social worker).	Respond to each question/prompt in the “Family Engagement Brainstorming Document.” You may do this independently or in a group.	Family Engagement Brainstorming Document
1-3 hours	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement	Articulate short-, medium-, and long-term plans for action planning and stakeholder engagement.	All	As a team, respond to each question/prompt in the “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template.”	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template
5-10 minutes	Wrap Up and Next Steps	Clean up space and wrap up the day.	Facilitator/All	Clean up any materials that were used throughout the day. Review next steps and adjourn the meeting.	N/A

*Note: If you decide to break this content into multiple meetings, a logical break in the content occurs between brainstorming and action planning. It is recommended that you spend one meeting completing the brainstorming activities and the next meeting completing a quick review of the brainstorm and moving into action planning.*



## Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet

### Purpose of This Resource

This resource is intended to help individuals or groups identify priority areas for their family engagement work in the current or coming school year. At a minimum, you will need the results of the family engagement self-assessment to complete this worksheet. It is recommended that you bring additional information about family engagement activities, such as school surveys, notes from family focus groups, etc. to help you complete this worksheet. A variety of perspectives are encouraged for the completion of this worksheet as well. Consider including administrators, special educators, general educators, and families in the discussion.

### Directions

Discuss each question as a group and decide how you will identify your priority areas for improvement and answers to the remaining questions. Will you use consensus, a vote, or some other method? Respond to each question as you work through the document. If you are working on family engagement alone, you can complete this document independently.

<b>Based on the information you have reviewed, what are the highest priority areas for family engagement you would like to address as a school or in your classroom? List 1-4 priorities below.</b>	<b>Why have you chosen this priority area?</b>
1.	

**Based on the information you have reviewed, what are the highest priority areas for family engagement you would like to address as a school or in your classroom? List 1-4 priorities below.**

**Why have you chosen this priority area?**

2.

3.

4.

**For the priorities listed above, what are the unique considerations for different subgroups in your school?**

At a minimum, consider families of students with disabilities; families from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; families experiencing challenges; and any other unique groups of families in your school or district. For example, families of students with disabilities may need additional information about how they can contribute in the IEP team in addition to more general family engagement activities.

**What resources (information and/or support) will you need to address the priorities identified above? At**

a minimum, consider buy-in, personnel, financial resources, guidance, and information you may need to be successful.

**What current initiatives and activities can be leveraged to support the priorities you have identified for family engagement?** Consider school-, district-, and state- level initiatives that might contribute to your work.

**What challenges do you anticipate as you work to address your identified priorities?** Consider support, available resources, staff time, etc.

Now that you have completed this worksheet, reflect on your identified priorities. Based on your responses to the questions above, do you need to make any changes to your identified priorities, including the order in which you plan to address them?

Once you have finalized your priorities, continue your planning activities by completing the **“Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template”**.





## Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template

### Purpose of This Resource

The purpose of this document is to provide a template for short-, medium-, and long-term school-based family engagement action planning and help you reflect on how to involve stakeholders throughout the process.

### Directions

Complete\* this document after you have completed the self-assessment, any additional data collection activities, and the “Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet.” Throughout the school year, you may wish to revisit this document to reflect on your current practices or to develop and implement new goals and improvement strategies.

The first half of this template will help you set priorities for family engagement. The second half of this document will help you decide which activities are achievable given your available resources.

Begin by listing up to four priority areas you have chosen to focus on from the “Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet.” Remember that focusing on no more than three or four core principles or priority areas will help ensure your success. Then, for each core principle, write down the improvement strategy you will use for each, including the first step, next steps, and long-term steps needed to meet your goals. Finally, determine who will be responsible for overseeing the work on each priority task, and include a tentative timeline and completion date for tasks.

Additional questions for consideration and planning are included in this document. Feel free to review these after you have identified and planned for each core principle you have identified as a priority.

*\*It is recommended that this template be completed by a school team that is responsible for schoolwide planning around family engagement. However, individuals may also use it to guide their own practice.*

## 1. Identify Relevant Stakeholders Who Should Be Involved in the Family Engagement Work

In order to achieve your desired outcomes, you will need to involve stakeholders in this work. Complete the table below based on your desired long-term outcomes for family engagement. This information will help you establish a family engagement team in Step 2.

Types of Stakeholders	Individuals, Groups, or Organizations
<b>Beneficiaries</b> Who are the potential beneficiaries of the work?	
<b>Supporters</b> Who are the supporters (or potential supporters) of the work?	
<b>Opponents</b> Who are the opponents (i.e., people who will likely not be in favor of the work)?	
<b>Resource Providers</b> Who can provide resources to ensure the strategy is implemented?	
<b>Vulnerable Groups</b> Who are the vulnerable groups that might be affected by the strategy?	
<b>Other Stakeholders</b> Who else should be involved in this work that is not listed above?	

## 2. Identify a Family Engagement Team

Based on the stakeholder information identified above, who should be included on the team that will lead ongoing implementation of family engagement activities? Consider the following representatives:

- District administrator(s);
- School principal(s);
- Special education director;
- Family engagement coordinator;
- Family representative(s);
- Special education staff representative(s);
- Teacher representative(s); and/or
- School social worker.

List the members of your family engagement team below.

Team lead(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Additional members and their roles:

Member Name	Group Represented (district administrator, families, etc.)	Anticipated Role on the Family Engagement Team (How will they support this work?)

### 3. Identify the Improvement Strategies You Could Use to Support Work in Each Priority Area

With your Family Engagement Team, review the core principles you identified as priorities in the *Family Engagement Brainstorming Worksheet*. Copy each one below. Then identify your goal(s) for each priority area and at least one improvement strategy that will help you achieve your goal. Improvement strategies may involve creating new resources, providing training, or making changes to the ways that you currently do things. You may use the same improvement strategy for multiple core principles. In this step, you are still brainstorming possibilities and refining your focus.

	Core Principle 1: _____ _____ _____	Core Principle 2: _____ _____ _____ (Optional)	Core Principle 3: _____ _____ _____ (Optional)	Core Principle 4: _____ _____ _____ (Optional)
Why we are focusing on this core principle				
Our goal for this core principle				

	Core Principle 1: _____ _____	Core Principle 2: _____ _____ (Optional)	Core Principle 3: _____ _____ (Optional)	Core Principle 4: _____ _____ (Optional)
The improvement strategy we will use for this core principle based on stakeholder data and the self-assessment results: (Note: you may use the same improvement strategy for more than one core principle.)				
Additional notes				

#### 4. Identify the Intended Outcomes of the Improvement Strategy(ies) You Have Selected

Outcomes are the specific results or effects you hope to achieve as a result of your family engagement work. List the outcomes you hope to achieve based on the improvement strategy(ies) you have listed above. Remember that these outcomes need to be measurable. You should identify at least one outcome for each improvement strategy.

Here are some examples of outcomes you may wish to consider, with examples of how they could be measured:

- Short-Term
  - » Develop an action plan for improving family engagement
  - » Measurement: A completed action plan detailing the steps to take, who is responsible for each, and a deadline for completion.
- Medium-Term
  - » Create a new vision statement for family engagement
  - » Measurement: A completed vision statement that has been incorporated into the school handbook and shared with families through a school announcement, a print version in the main office, and an email to all families.
- Long-Term
  - » Create a part- or full-time family engagement specialist position
  - » Measurement: A written job description, secured funding, and a posting for the new position on job websites by May 1st.

	Short-Term (3-6 months)	How will you know you have achieved this outcome? (i.e., What measurement will you use to determine if the outcome has been met?)	Medium- Term (6 months - 1 year)	How will you know you have achieved this outcome? (i.e., What measurement will you use to determine if the outcome has been met?)	Long-Term (> 1 year)	How will you know you have achieved this outcome? (i.e., What measurement will you use to determine if the outcome has been met?)	Notes
Improvement Strategy 1							
Improvement Strategy 2 (Optional)							
Improvement Strategy 3 (Optional)							
Improvement Strategy 4 (Optional)							

### 5. Consider the Resources Available to Implement the Improvement Strategies and Achieve the Outcomes Identified Above

Implementing improvement strategies requires time and resources. Before developing an action plan, consider what is needed for successful implementation (as defined in Step 2 above where you indicated how you will know whether each outcome has been achieved). Use this section to identify what general resources are available and what resources are needed to implement your improvement strategies and achieve your intended outcomes.

- What personnel will be necessary to implement your improvement strategy(ies) and achieve the identified outcomes (consider role and knowledge/expertise)?
  
- How much staff time will be needed to implement your improvement strategy(ies) and achieve the identified outcomes?

- Will additional time (beyond staff time) be needed to implement your improvement strategy(ies) and achieve the identified outcomes?
- What fiscal resources (if any) are required to implement your improvement strategy(ies) and achieve the identified outcomes?
- What other resources are needed to implement the identified improvement strategy(ies) and achieve the identified outcomes (consider space, materials, and other resources)?
- What stakeholder knowledge and expertise is necessary to successfully implement the identified improvement strategy(ies)(consider teachers, administrators, families, and other participants)?
- What other initiatives are happening at the school, district, and state level? How do these align with the improvement strategies identified above? Are there opportunities to leverage or align work in those initiatives with your work in family engagement?
- Given your current resources, which implementation strategies seem achievable? Can you reasonably do what you have proposed in the time allowed and with the current resources?
- Do you need additional resources to achieve your short-, medium-, and/or long-term outcomes? If so, how will you get them?



- How can your improvement strategies align with other current initiatives? What can you leverage from other work to ensure success here?
  
- Based on all of this information, which improvement strategies will you focus on as you develop your action plan?

## 6. Develop an Action Plan

Now that you have identified improvement strategy(ies) for each short-, medium-, and long-term outcome, identify the steps needed to reach each outcome, who will be involved, what resources will be needed, and what the general timeline will be for the activities. Remember to consider how families will be involved in activities to help reach the desired outcomes. Use the tables below to articulate the steps for achieving each identified outcome. (Make additional copies of each table, as needed.)

### Short-Term Action Planning

What are our immediate next steps (in the next three months)?	Who is responsible for this step?	What is the deadline for this step?	What resources do we need to complete this step?	Which stakeholders need to be involved in this step and how?

### Medium-Term Action Planning

What are our immediate next steps (in the next six months)?	Who is responsible for this step?	What is the deadline for this step?	What resources do we need to complete this step?	Which stakeholders need to be involved in this step and how?

What are our immediate next steps (in the next six months)?	Who is responsible for this step?	What is the deadline for this step?	What resources do we need to complete this step?	Which stakeholders need to be involved in this step and how?

## 7. Develop an Evaluation Plan

An evaluation plan helps you understand whether or not you have achieved your intended activities and outcomes. Consider the following questions when designing your improvement strategy evaluation plan:

- How will you know each of the activities identified in Step 6 occurred as intended?
- What data will be collected on each activity, and how will you collect it? What existing data collection systems could be used for this initiative? Do you need to collect additional data to know if the planned activities occurred and were of high quality?
- How will you know whether each of the short-term outcomes identified in Step 6 was achieved?
- What data will be collected about each short-term outcome, and how will you collect it? What existing data collection systems could be used for this initiative? Do you need to collect additional data to know if your intended short-term outcomes were achieved?
- How will you know whether each of the medium-term outcomes identified in Step 6 was achieved?

- What data will be collected on each medium-term outcome, and how will you collect it? What existing data collection systems could be used for this initiative? Do you need to collect additional data to know if your intended medium-term outcomes were achieved?
- Who will be responsible for managing the data collection and analysis for your family engagement work? How often will you collect each type of data?
- How will the data collected for this work be shared with stakeholders, including families?

## 8. Ongoing Action Planning and Reflective Practice

In order to achieve the intended outcomes described above your family engagement team will need to meet regularly, check-in on the implementation of improvement activities, and revise your action plan as needed to reflect changes, challenges, and opportunities that arise in your school or district. Use the space below to develop a plan for ongoing discussions about this work.

- How often will the family engagement team need to meet based on the activities identified in the action plan above?
- How frequently will the family engagement team solicit feedback from other stakeholders? How will the team identify when additional stakeholder input is needed beyond the regularly scheduled opportunities for feedback?
- How often will the family engagement team revisit this document to review and revise (as necessary) the action plan and evaluation plan? Note: it is recommended you revisit this document as a team at least once every six months.



## Sample Process Agenda for Sustainability Planning

### Purpose of This Resource

This process agenda is intended to give you an idea of what a meeting devoted to sustainability planning might look like in practice. Sustainability planning is an ongoing activity that you conduct throughout your work on family engagement. In the “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template” you identified short-, medium-, and long-term goals and outcomes, including a timeline for regular meetings. Use this sample process agenda to help you plan for and implement those ongoing regular meetings.

As a reminder, a process agenda includes more detail than an agenda that is shared with participants. It offers additional details about each meeting activity, including its anticipated duration, purpose, participants, process, and relevant handouts/materials. Meeting facilitators often use a process agenda to ensure that meeting objectives are met and that very little is left to chance.

It is recommended that you include the core components of this agenda, but details like timing and participants may be modified to meet your needs.

Possible goals for this meeting include the following:

- Reviewing your priority areas for your family engagement work;
- Reviewing progress on implementing your identified improvement strategy(ies);
- Reviewing progress toward the intended outcomes of your family engagement work;
- Reviewing and possibly revising your action plan; and
- Planning for ongoing stakeholder engagement.

*A list of possible discussion points for each of these topics is included at the end of this document.*

### Considerations

As you prepare for your meeting on sustainability planning, consider the following:

- Where will the meeting be held?
- Who will facilitate the meeting?
- When should the meeting be held (e.g., date, time)?
- Who should participate?
- Will you need to include time for introductions?

- How much time do you have?
- What materials are available?
- Will participants need a break?

## Materials

- Agenda (optional)
- Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen (optional)
- Pens/pencils
- Copies of the completed “Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template”

Proposed Length	Activity	Purpose	Individuals Involved	Process	Handouts/ Materials
5 minutes	Overview of Agenda	Offer a preview of the meeting’s activities and answer any questions.	Facilitator	Provide an overview of the meeting agenda and answer any questions.	Agenda
5-15 minutes	Goals	Align goals and expectations for the meeting.	Facilitator	Determine shared goals for the meeting.	Chart paper and/or projected laptop screen
15-30 minutes	Reviewing Priority Areas for Family Engagement	What are the identified priority areas for family engagement work, and where do they currently stand?	Members of the family engagement team identified in the action planning step.	Review the identified priority areas and any information gathered about them since the last meeting.	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template
15-30 minutes	Improvement Strategy Updates	Identify progress on short-, medium-, and long-term plans for the improvement strategies.	Members of the family engagement team identified in the action planning step.	As a team, review the identified activities and update the plan accordingly.	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template
15-30 minutes	Intended Outcomes and Action Plan Updates	Identify progress on short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.	Members of the family engagement team identified in the action planning step.	As a team, review the identified intended outcomes and update the plan accordingly.	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template
15-30 minutes	Stakeholder Engagement Planning	Plan for ongoing stakeholder engagement.	Members of the family engagement team identified in the action planning step.	As a team, review the stakeholder engagement plan and discuss next steps.	Action Planning and Stakeholder Engagement Template

Proposed Length	Activity	Purpose	Individuals Involved	Process	Handouts/ Materials
5-10 minutes	Wrap Up and Next Steps	Clean up space and wrap up the day.	Facilitator/All	Clean up any materials that were used throughout the day. Review next steps and adjourn the meeting.	N/A

### Possible Discussion Points for “Reviewing Priority Areas for Family Engagement”

- Are the priorities we identified in our plan still our priorities? Why or why not?
- Have new priorities emerged since our last meeting?

### Possible Discussion Points for “Improvement Strategy Updates”

- Are the strategies we put in place to improve our family engagement working? Why or why not?
- Has anyone tried something else that the whole group should consider?

### Possible Discussion Points for “Intended Outcomes and Action Plan Updates”

- To what extent are we meeting our intended outcomes? Are we making the progress we’d like to see at this point?
- Do we need to make any updates to our action plan based on what we have achieved so far?

### Possible Discussion Points for “Stakeholder Engagement Planning”

- How do we involve stakeholders, including families, in our cycle of continuous improvement for family engagement?
- In what ways will we solicit feedback on how the implementation of the action plan is going?





## Partnering with Your Child's School: What Families Need to Know, Share, and Ask

### Purpose of This Resource

It is okay — even encouraged — to be proactive in your child's education. You do not need to wait for an invitation to become more involved! You are indeed your child's first teacher, and you have a very important role in helping your child continue to grow and learn once they are in school. Partnering with your child's teachers is the first step to ensuring you are well informed about what your child is learning and how they are progressing.

This resource includes guiding questions and recommendations for creating a partnership that includes two-way communication with your child's teachers and school. The goal of using this form is to create a partnership that can help you and the school work together to better support your child's learning and development.

### What You Need to Know

As you think about how to partner with your child's teachers and school, it will be helpful to determine the following basic information about the school, including how it is organized and who your main contact will be.

- Who is in charge? (i.e., Who makes decisions about what your child is learning or about discipline when there is an issue?)
- Who will be spending the most time with your child?
- What should you do if you have a question or concern? Whom should you contact?
- When is the best time to reach out to this person?
- What is the best way to connect with teachers, administrators, school staff, and other core contacts?
- How is information shared with families?
- How can families be involved in school activities and decision-making?

You may also choose to ask your child's primary teacher(s) some or all of the questions below.<sup>1</sup>

- What academic standards do you use, and what should I know about them? (Academic standards may be Common Core, or may be developed by your state to reflect what students should learn in each grade.)

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Heick, T. (2013, August 29). Parents: 19 meaningful questions you should ask your child's teacher. Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/19-questions-for-parents-terry-heick>

- What are the most important and complex concepts or skills my child needs to understand by the end of the year?
- What instructional strategies and/or learning models (e.g., project-based learning, game-based learning) will you use throughout the year and why?
- How do you encourage creativity and critical thinking in your lessons?
- How can I support reading, math fluency, and other skills at home?
- How do you personalize learning in your classroom? How is this done at the school level?
- How do you measure academic progress?
- How do you help children who are struggling in class?
- Are there school or district resources that we should be using to support our child's learning?
- What technology would you recommend to help support my child's self-directed learning?
- Is there anything I haven't asked but should?

## What You Can Share

Helping your child's teachers and your school's administrators understand your family's context, culture, priorities, and knowledge is an important contribution to your child's education. Many educators are very skilled at asking for this information, but some may need some prompting from you to get the conversation going. A good way to start is to talk about you, your child, and your family.

- Discuss your child's interests.
- Provide insights into your family's culture and customs (for example, your preferred language, country of origin, beliefs, and/or traditions).
- Offer suggestions for how the school can respect, reflect, and recognize your family's culture (for example, displaying pictures and art, telling stories, providing music through instruments or songs, and sharing traditions) throughout the year.

Next, talk about how and when you and your family could engage in school activities.

- Explain how you would like to be involved in school activities, noting convenient days, times, and locations.
- Offer the school suggestions for helping you be more involved (for example, providing transportation and/or child care).
- Share your hobbies, skills, talents, and interests!
- Share any ideas you have for how the school could better engage other families in your community.

Finally, share any concerns, ideas, or insights you have about your child and/or their progress with school staff. It is important to approach these conversations as opportunities for joint problem solving rather than a time to blame the school staff. Prepare your thoughts before you go in, and help set the tone of partnership when you start the conversation (for example, by saying, "I think together we can figure out what to do.")

- Explain what is (or isn't) working well for your child in their classroom or in the school as a whole.

- Offer recommendations for addressing these concerns based on your experiences at home and in your community with your child.
- Be open to the suggestions that your child’s teacher or school administrators offer, and work toward some kind of middle ground in your decisions about actions to take.

## How to Share Information About Your Child

You know your child better than anyone else, so it is very important to share information with your child’s teacher or others in the school so that they can understand things like your child’s preferences, how they learn best at home, their important relationships, and how they handle frustration when problem solving (just to name a few). Below there are some suggestions for ways that you can share useful information with your child’s teacher(s) or others in the school.

- Set up an introductory meeting with your child’s teacher. Use this time to explain what behaviors are “normal” for your child and what behaviors are cause for concern. Also let them know what their favorite things are, who they are friends with, what you know will calm them when upset — anything that you think will help make the teacher’s life easier if they know in advance. If possible, share this with teachers in writing so they can refer back to it over time.
- Keep teachers informed (via phone, email, or in-person chats) of any changes in your child’s routine or circumstances. These could be as simple as a sleepless night or as complex as a change in family structure or new medication. Ask teachers to let you know if they have questions or concerns, or notice out-of-the-ordinary reactions or behaviors in your child.
- Provide the school with relevant and up-to-date information about your child’s emergency contacts and, if applicable, medications or treatments. It is also important to ensure that your child’s teacher and the school personnel understand any legal arrangements (such as custody) so they can be in compliance with court orders or other arrangements.
- Encourage your child’s teacher(s) or school to adopt a two-way communication tool to share updates on students’ academic progress and/or social-emotional development. Some teachers may use simple fill-in-the-blank sheets, while others use technology such as ClassDojo, Edmodo, Schoology, or PowerSchool to promote communication. Ask your child’s teacher for their preferences for how to hear from you and keep two-way communication open.

## Ways to Get Involved

There are several ways to get involved at your child’s school. While bake sales and open houses are common choices, there are other less traditional but potentially more meaningful ways to engage. Each of them will have an impact on your child’s success in school!

Some options include the following:

- Visit the school. This often happens at the beginning of the year, but it can happen anytime in the school year. Introduce yourself to your child’s teacher(s) and those who may interact with your child regularly, such as crossing guards, office staff, school counselors, and cafeteria personnel.
- Extend learning time at home. Connect with your child’s teacher(s) about what is happening in the classroom, and ask for resources so that you can reinforce school learning during out-of-school time.

- Join school- or district-level groups that are supporting your school. This can include the PTA but may also include school or special education advisory groups, or groups that the principal or other leadership has formed to address a particular issue. If a group has not yet included families but you think it could, volunteer to add the parent perspective to the group.
- Join (or start) a classroom volunteer program. Talk with school administrators and teachers to find out what would be most helpful, and create opportunities for families who can come to the school, as well as for others who can help from home.
- Follow (or create) the school’s social media accounts. These may be used to livestream events, share general information/announcements, or share pictures from events and field trips. They can also help facilitate connections among families.
- Contribute to (or launch) an e-newsletter for families and school personnel. This can be a great way for busy families to stay connected, particularly if their schedule makes it difficult to attend on-site events.
- Encourage your child’s school to have a “family room” (or center) for family meetings and sharing of resources.
- Develop a phone tree, listserv, or social media group to have keep families informed and up to date.
- Offer to help out during lunch or special projects such as teacher appreciation events, back to school nights, or school picnics.
- Help your child’s teacher develop a “Giving Tree,” which is a list of items or supplies that s/he needs for their classroom. Donate (and encourage others to donate) used books, school and art supplies, or other materials to your child’s teacher.
- Volunteer to be a guest reader or guest teacher in your child’s classroom, or to help with subject matter support (for example, helping a small group of children with math).
- Volunteer to share your family’s traditions and/or culture during festival or holiday times.

This list is not exhaustive, but hopefully it gave you some ideas that you can use in your child’s school. If you have other ideas about ways to get involved or to share information with teachers, don’t hesitate to try them. *You are your child’s first and most important teacher!*





## Resources for Vermont Families

This reference document includes links and contact information for agencies within Vermont offering resources available to families and their children, including services for mental health, child care subsidies, crisis prevention, and child care. This resource will provide you with a brief overview of what is offered - you are invited to visit their websites or call to learn more about each program, including eligibility, services and potential costs.



**Vermont Agency of Education (AOE):** The Vermont AOE is the agency responsible for preschool through grade 12 education. Through its programs, AOE provides families and community members across the state the support needed to ensure all students are successful in the public education system. Visit the website at <https://education.vermont.gov/> to find out more information on resources available for families including special education, mediation, education options and local school contact information. Families can also call (802) 479-1030 to get answers to general questions.



**Vermont Family Network (VFN):** The VFN is the Parent Training and Information (PTI) center for the state of Vermont, which means that they host a variety of resources for families across the state, particularly families with children with special needs. VFN offers information on advocacy and leadership, disabilities or special health needs, early childhood development, general and special educations, health care access, mental health and transition to adulthood. For additional information access the website <http://www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/> or call their number at 1-800-800-4005.



**Vermont Medicaid:** The Vermont Medicaid program provides Medicaid health insurance to eligible low-income families. Vermont Medicaid offers access to a list of Medicaid care providers and contact their information through the Vermont Medicaid portal located at <http://www.vtmedicaid.com/#/providerLookup>. For additional information on Medicaid eligibility and programs offered through Medicaid, contact Vermont Health Connect at 1-855-899-9600 or visit the website <http://info.healthconnect.vermont.gov/Medicaid>.



**Vermont Agency of Human Services (AHS):** AHS connects families across the state with access to a list of programs and services in the community, such as housing and homelessness assistance, early intervention resources, child care financial assistance and disability support services. To find out more information on a variety of programs available including receiving support under emergency circumstances visit the website <http://humanservices.vermont.gov/services/> or call the AHS Secretary's Offices at 802-241-0440.



**Vermont Department of Health (DPH):** DPH is housed within the Vermont Agency of Human Services, and offers information to support the health of children, youth and families across the state.

To find out more about family planning and pregnancy, caring for infants and young children, supporting children with special health needs, WIC, and much more visit the website <http://www.healthvermont.gov/family> or contact the Maternal & Child Health Division at 802-863-7333.



**Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF):** DCF is also housed within the Vermont Agency of Human Services, and offers programs and services for adoptive parents, foster parents, parents and relatives caring for children and youth. DCF provides

resources on child development, child trauma, domestic violence, and economic help, among other areas. Visit the “Resources by Audience” or “Resources by Topic” sections of the website <https://dcf.vermont.gov/>. Call the Child Development Division within DCF at 1-800-649-2642 to receive information on developmental and strengthening services available for children and their families.



**Vermont 2-1-1** is an information and referral system that provides families across the state with access to resources and programs in local communities, including programs to support families in crisis. Families can call contact specialists by dialing 211 or text their zip code to 898211 for assistance. Families

can also visit the Vermont 2-1-1 website <http://www.vermont211.org/> to search the community resources directory.

## Notes and Additional Information

Use this area to keep notes from web searches or phone calls to service agencies.





## Preparing for and Participating in Your Child's IEP Team Meeting

Families are important members of a child's IEP team. They offer the team information about a child that no one else may know. Professionals often prepare for IEP meetings by gathering their thoughts and information about a child. This form encourages families to do the same. You may use this tool to prepare for your child's IEP team meeting and to understand how you can offer your input and knowledge before, during, and after the meeting.

### Getting Ready for the IEP Meeting

There are several steps you can take before your child's meeting. Give yourself plenty of time (approximately two weeks) to complete the activities below. Note that you do not need to complete all of the steps — only those that will help you feel more prepared for the meeting.

- Gather information about your child that may be helpful for the IEP team, such as previous IEPs (if any), medical records about your child (if available), additional evaluations (from private providers, for example), and any information your child's teachers have shared with you, such as progress reports, report cards, teacher's notes, and samples of your child's work.
- Ask for copies of any evaluations completed by school staff for the IEP team meeting. These may be copies of the first evaluations your child was given or more recent evaluations that have been completed since your child's first IEP meeting.
- Review the information you have gathered to understand how your child is currently doing in school.
- Talk to people who regularly work with your child, such as their teachers, related services providers, and care providers, to understand how he or she is doing in school.
- Write down what you think your child does well and what his or her strengths are, as well as areas of growth you are concerned about or want to talk about during the meeting.
- Complete the *IEP Meeting Planning Tool* at the end of this document based on what you currently know.
- Decide if you want another family member, friend, or advocate to attend the meeting with you. If you do want another person to attend, tell them where and when the meeting will occur.

### Getting Organized for the IEP Meeting

Because there is a lot of information shared at IEP meetings, you may find it helpful to bring your documents and resources with you. You may organize your information any way you like.

If you choose an electronic platform, make sure you will be able to use the school's wireless internet so you can access what you need. Consider bringing the following items:

- Information you have collected about your child prior to the meeting;
- The completed *IEP Meeting Planning Tool* (available below);
- Paper and pen or a computer so that you can take notes; and
- A folder or binder to keep documents you receive in the meeting together, or your computer or tablet with scanned documents.

## Participating in the IEP Meeting

Remember that you are an equal member of the IEP team. You can share information, ask for clarification, and be an active part of the discussion along with the professionals. These suggestions help create a spirit of collaboration so that your child's IEP will reflect the entire team's best thinking.

- Ask to review the current IEP, if there is one, and talk about what is working and not working for your child. Share what you think has been most helpful to your child.
- Share what you have written on the *IEP Meeting Planning Tool* and ask for reflections or comments.
- Listen to what others say about your child and ask questions.
- Ask questions if you don't understand something. There is a list of common IEP meeting terms included at the end of this document.
- Take notes if you are able. Read them aloud to ensure that you and the rest of the team agree on key points and decisions.
- Be prepared to discuss a number of different options, goals, and supports for your child. Come to the meeting with an open mind and be prepared to collaborate with the rest of the team, while sharing your unique goals and perspective.
- Remember, it is okay to ask for a break if you need it. Step out of the room or get a drink of water if you need a moment to reflect. It is also okay to ask the team to reconvene if needed. There is no rule saying an IEP must be developed in one meeting. If you decide to ask for another meeting, get a copy of the draft IEP and review it. Feel free to share it with others who may have important thoughts to share, such as your child's health providers or other family members. Ask the school about anything you don't understand in the IEP or that you feel doesn't sound like what you talked about in the IEP team meeting.

## Next Steps After the Meeting

Once the meeting is over, there are several steps you can take to ensure that there is good communication and understanding among all of your child's IEP team members. Some of these steps are more immediate; others are things you can do over time.

- Ask for a copy of any notes taken during the meeting.
- Review the list of questions you drafted before the meeting. Did you get answers to all of them? Do you have new questions? Reach out to the school if you still have questions.

- Make sure you have a signed, final copy of the IEP, as well as any consents or prior notice forms you signed during the meeting.
- Set up a conference with your child’s teachers after the new IEP has gone into effect and talk about how things are going. Schedule regular check-ins throughout the year. These can be phone calls, notes, emails, or meetings, depending on what you agree upon.
- Throughout the year, share your observations about your child’s growth and development with your child’s teachers. This can be done during short, “Guess what?” conversations or your regular check-ins.

## Key Terms to Know

### Assessment

- Assessments help educators understand how much children know, how they are using the skills they have, and how they are developing new skills. Assessments can be as simple as a teacher observing a child or as complex as a multi-step process to learn more about a student’s strengths and weaknesses.

### Accommodations

- Changes to or in a child’s learning environment that are made to help them learn. Accommodations are based on how a child learns. They are used to ensure that children can learn the same content as their peers.

### Eligibility Decision or Eligibility Determination

- In order to receive special education, children must be found eligible for special education services by the IEP team. Vermont requires that 1) the student has an established disability, 2) this disability has an adverse effect on the educational performance of the student, and 3) there is a need for specialized education. Vermont has specific criteria for what an adverse effect is but, in general, it means that a child is struggling in at least one of eight basic skill areas, such as basic reading skills or motor skills. Eligibility in Vermont also requires challenges in academic performance.

### Evaluation

- Evaluation is the process used in special education to make decisions about a child’s eligibility for special education services. It often involves formalized testing that provides numbers to indicate how a child performed compared to other children their age. These numbers are needed in order to determine if a child meets the eligibility criteria in Vermont.

### Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

- This is the legally binding document that describes a child’s educational goals, strengths, and academic challenges. It lists what types of special education services a child will receive and when they will occur, including accommodations and modifications if necessary.

### IEP Team

- A team of individuals, identified in the special education laws, that makes all decisions about a child’s eligibility for special education and decisions about how the child will be educated. This includes where a child will receive their special education services, as well as which services will be provided. The team must include, at a minimum, the parent, a special education teacher, an interpreter of test data, a district representative, and a general education teacher.

## The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

- The federal law requiring that all students with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education.

### Modifications

- A modification is a change in what a student is expected to learn. For example, a teacher may ask a class to complete ten long division problems, while a student with a modification may be asked to complete five addition problems.

### Placement

- Placement is where a student receives their special education services identified in their IEP. The school district is required to offer a continuum of placement options, meaning that there are different options for where a child can receive services.

### Procedural Safeguards

- Procedural safeguards are forms that families are asked to sign during the IEP process. They outline the rights of families and their child with a disability, and the steps to take when there is a disagreement between families and the school system. Some of the forms explain what the school can and can't do when evaluating and providing special education services to a child, while others are permissions that families give for different parts of the IEP process.

### Progress Monitoring

- The assessment and evaluation of a student to understand whether or not they are meeting their IEP goals.

### Reevaluation

- IDEA requires that the IEP team consider reevaluating a child for special education services every three years. This means that the IEP team considers whether or not they should conduct assessments to determine if a child continues to be eligible for special education services.

### Related Services

- Any supports and services a child needs to benefit from special education, such as transportation or occupational therapy.

### Screening

- Measures that are used to identify students who are struggling with grade-level concepts or skills. Screening is usually completed before evaluations and assessments.

### Special Education

- Specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. It is provided free of charge and allows your child to have access to the general education curriculum.

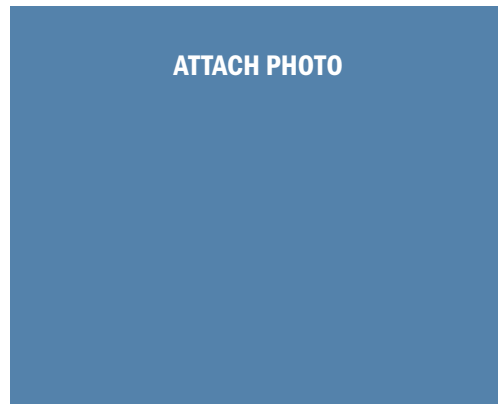
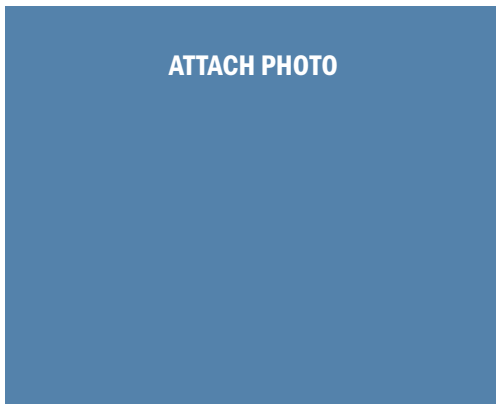
## Transition

- In special education, this term is typically used to refer to times when planning for change is needed. The first transition is early childhood transition, which takes place when children move from early intervention (birth - three) services to public preschool special education services. Secondary transition is designed to help prepare older children for success after high school. Early childhood transition is planned for before your child enters special education and is not a part of the IEP. A secondary transition plan is part of the IEP, and outlines goals and activities to prepare your child for success as a young adult.

## 504 or 504 Plan

- 504 refers to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. Section 504 has a broader definition of disability than IDEA. A 504 Plan is developed to ensure that a student attending an elementary, middle, or high school receives education accommodations to prevent discrimination based on his or her disability.

## IEP Meeting Planning Tool<sup>1</sup>



Four (4) things \_\_\_\_\_ can do on their own:

Three (3) things \_\_\_\_\_ is starting to do:

Two (2) things \_\_\_\_\_ can do with help:

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Fialka, J. (2016). "From What Matters: Reflections in Disability, Community and Love." Toronto, ON: Inclusion Press. Available at [www.danceofpartnership.com](http://www.danceofpartnership.com). "IEP One-Pager" created by Janice Fialka and Emma Fialka-Feldman.

During the next six months we will be focusing on:

Key things that will help \_\_\_\_\_ in the classroom (accommodations and/or modifications):

Questions I have for other members of the IEP Team:





