

Family - Parent Engagement Strategy

What is Family - Parent Engagement?

Parent engagement is an overarching principle and approach for involving families in decisions about themselves, their children, services, and their communities. It includes a wide array of activities, such as:

- Direct relationships with service providers
- Mutual support shared among parents
- Advocacy by parents on behalf of their families
- Decision-making and advisory roles in agencies
- Leadership in the community

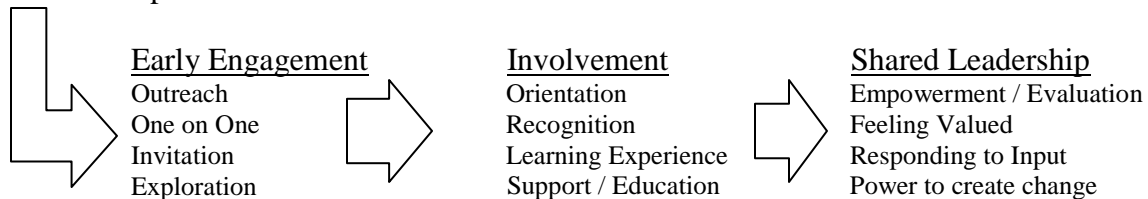
For public, private, and grassroots organizations committed to community building efforts, parent and family engagement helps ensure buy-in for shared goals and strategies. Just as importantly, community networks of support are strongest when built by and with engaged parents and other residents.

Differentiating Engagement from Involvement

“Engagement,” in comparison to involvement, comes from en, meaning “**make**,” and gage, meaning “**pledge**” – to make a pledge (Harper, 2002), to make a moral commitment (Sykes, 1976, p. 343). The word engagement is further defined as “contact by fitting together; ... the meshing of gears” (Engagement). The implication is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial. (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 12-13)

Continuum of Parent Engagement/Involvement/Empowerment

Passive Participant



Parent Engagement in Education

Important Questions for Consideration

1. What factors contribute to parents being involved in or disengaged from their children's school?
2. What impact does parental involvement have on student performance?
3. What types of parent involvement might produce positive outcomes?

Parent engagement matters. Study after study has shown us that student achievement improves when parents play an active role in their children's education, and that good schools become even better schools when parents are involved. It is recognized that parent engagement is a key factor in the enhancement of student achievement and well-being. Students are more likely to be motivated, to earn higher grades, to have better behaviour and social skills, and to continue their education to a higher level when their parents are actively engaged in supporting their success at school.

Parents and caregivers significantly impact students' learning, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial background, or parents' education level. As a matter of fact, the most accurate predictor of student academic achievement is the degree to which families encourage learning; communicate high, achievable expectations to children; and become involved in their children's education. Parent involvement also contributes to better school attendance, higher rates of homework completion, lower rates of student violence and substance abuse, fewer placements in special education, higher graduation rates, and higher rates of enrollment in higher education. For schools, high levels of parent involvement correlate with higher teacher morale, higher teacher ratings by parents, higher student achievement, and better academic reputations.

(Henderson and Berla, 1994).

It is equally important to recognize that parent engagement takes many forms.

- serving on school councils and Parent Involvement Committees (PICs)
- volunteering for field trips and school activities
- making sure there is a quiet place set aside to do homework,
- helping with homework
- meeting with teachers
- talking to your child about their day at school
- good parenting in the home
- provision of a secure and stable environment
- intellectual stimulation
- parent-child discussion
- good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations
- good citizenship
- contact with schools to share information

Although the common terminology used in describing the relationships between parents/guardians and the schools is typically "parent involvement," we have chosen the term "parent engagement" because it reflects the reciprocity and mutual commitment we feel is critical in developing lasting relations between schools and families.

Parent Engagement

Vision: Every school embraces a collaborative culture for students, parents, teachers, staff and community that sustains quality parental engagement and promotes the social, emotional, and academic growth of our children.

Mission: The WRDSB will build capacity and create tools to foster partnerships among families, schools, and communities that result in shared responsibilities for student, school, and community success.

WRDSB Core Values: Respect; Empathy; Cooperation; Trust; Honesty; Initiative; Integrity;

Beliefs:

- Parents are their children's first teacher and should be respected as valuable and necessary assets to their children's education.
- Parents and schools have a shared responsibility for the academic achievement of their children.
- Parents, regardless of education level, socio-economic status, ethnicity or culture, must be empowered by schools to support their child's education.
- Parents have the right to be involved and informed about school policies and their children's academic progress.
- Parents have the right to hold schools accountable for a welcoming, safe and inclusive learning environment.
- Parents have a right to be meaningfully engaged in the decision-making process of the school.
- Parents and families benefit when schools serve as a resource for the entire community and the community serves as a resource for schools.

Goals:

1) **Welcoming Environment:** School staffs will create a customer service driven, warm and welcoming environment and collaborative relationships with parents of all students and members of the community.

2) **Training & Learning:** Schools will provide multiple learning opportunities to enable parents/community to navigate the educational system and to support their children's learning (JK-12).

3) **Communication:** Schools and parents will engage in regular, two-way communication about school programs, student progress, and student needs, in a language and format that provides equal access for all participants.

4) **Leadership & Advocacy:** Schools will support parents/community as advocates for their own children's education, the school's performance, and community issues that affect outcomes for all students.

5) **Decision-Making:** Schools will create and ensure an inclusive culture whereby the participation and decision-making of all stakeholders, including parents and community, is valued and intentional.

6) **Community Partners:** Schools will engage and partner with community/business organizations to plan and implement services and strategies to improve student achievement.

In 1995, Epstein summarized a decade of research and the development of best practices in parental involvement in her article *School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share*. In this 1995 report, Epstein demonstrated six groupings of different types of involvement and mapped the expected outcomes for students, teachers, and parents that occur from each of the different “types” of involvement.

According to Epstein all six types of involvement working in concert are needed to make a difference for student learning. These include:

1. Parenting Skills (improve home environments)

Decisions parents make about diet, entertainment, healthcare, and discipline correlate with different outcomes in terms of student learning. Many schools provide parent education and support programs to help parents build more effective, developmentally appropriate parenting skills.

Strategic Intent:

Build the confidence and capacity of parents by providing access to resources to:

Support the growth and development of their children.

Gain knowledge and skills to remain resilient in the difficult task of raising a child

Become aware of issues facing their children, and how they might recognize and deal with those issues (e.g., bullying)

Elementary and Secondary

Establish a parent resource centre within the school with books, DVDs etc.

either within the library or within a dedicated Parent’s Room

Organize guest speaking events to cover topics of interest to parents (helping children at home, building literacy skills at home, bullying, etc.)

Partner with other schools to expand available range of topics.

Announce other events occurring in the community that might be of interest to school parents

Until kids come with instruction manuals, everyone in the business of helping children succeed needs to recognize the need to continuously build skills in dealing with children. Teachers need teaching skills, parents need parenting skills and resilience.

2. Communication (two-way -- school-to-home, home-to-school)

Communication between parents and teachers should be two-way, frequent, and meaningful. Communication should also invite parents to share ideas, help form school goals and clarify institutional expectations. When communication is frequent and high-quality, parents' evaluation of their child's teacher, level of comfort with their child's school, and involvement in school-based activities are all substantially higher.

Strategic Intent:

Establish an informative two-way dialogue between home and school to:

- Build a sense of school community
- Exchange information about upcoming events in the school or in a child's life
- Enable parents and teachers to monitor a student's progress and reinforce key messages

Elementary and Secondary

- School newsletters
- Emails
- Class newsletters to keep parents up to date on curriculum progress and how parents can help at home
- Websites - schools, classes, departments
- Use of a voicemail system to share information
- School signs to announce upcoming events or accomplishments
- Telephone calls to home
- A class parent telephone tree
- Student 'courier packs' to get information to and from home
- Use of student agendas
- Distinct communications initiatives to meet address the informational needs of different types of parents
- Mailing items to home when necessary
- Handouts at curriculum nights or parent teacher interview nights

This is the most important method for engaging parents as all other types of involvement depend on a foundation of good communication - at both the elementary and secondary levels.

3. Volunteering (recruit and organize parent help)

Engaging parents and caregivers in school-based volunteer opportunities is usually one of the first ways that parents and school personnel envision "parent involvement." In reality, parent volunteering is one kind of parent involvement that demonstrates little impact on student learning, but volunteering can be an important way to build linkages between parents and schools that lead to more family engagement overall.

Strategic Intent:

Increase the capacity of the school to support student learning by:

- Providing volunteers with opportunities to develop and contribute
- Encouraging parents and members of the community to volunteer in a variety of activities of their choosing
- Supporting volunteers with training, direction and appreciation

Elementary - Secondary

- Actively welcome volunteers into the school
- Recruit, provide instruction and direction and recognize volunteers for their contributions
- Encourage teachers to identify key roles for volunteers to assist with key curriculum goals (e.g., literacy), class field trips or special events - parents who want to volunteer want to know how they can help
- Field trip supervisors
- Class readers
- Math or Science helpers
- Library or office assistance
- Establish a joint parent/teacher leadership team to coordinate volunteering activities within the school
- Hold volunteer meetings separately from the school council (many volunteers are not interested in school council issues)

Board level and School level

- Leverage resources from Volunteer Canada, including the Canadian Code for Volunteering to assist in creating rewarding experiences for school volunteers

4. Learning at Home (specific home tutoring assistance)

When parents help teach their child, the parents not only improve the child's skills, but they also increase their own feelings of competence, which, in turn, motivates students to perform better still.⁶ When teachers send home strategies and suggestions of ways parents could support learning, parents often respond favorably.⁷ In general, the more schools engage parents in specific student learning tasks, the more likely student achievement is to improve. This includes parent involvement in homework tasks as well as helping students adopt regular study and homework routines.

Strategic Intent:

Enable parents to provide helpful assistance to their children at home including:

- Guidance and support to complete homework assignments
- Guidance on course selections when required
- Support to prepare for and participate on school teams, clubs and special events

Elementary and Secondary

- A clear school homework policy endorsed by the whole school
- Homework instructions that enable parents to provide home support
- Homework sign-backs
- Homework assignments and due dates on a website, in a class newsletter, an email or on a voicemail recording
- Tips to enable parents to help students (without doing the homework)
- Information about the various extracurricular school teams, clubs and events that students might participate in

Secondary

- Course selection information
- Career planning and post secondary prerequisite information to enable

Although it is mostly invisible as most of it occurs at home, research suggests that this is the most impactful method for parents to be actively involved in helping children succeed as students.

5. Decision-making (involve parents and develop parent leaders)

Like volunteering, parent and caregiver involvement in school decision-making impacts student achievement largely because it builds relationships between caregivers and schools that encourage adults to become involved in student learning.

Strategic Intent:

Stimulate a sense of partnership and ownership in decisions that support students and the school by:

- Providing parents with the timely information they need to make decisions or assist their children with decisions regarding school affairs
- Establishing conditions for an effective school council
- Inviting parents and the community into a dialogue on major issues or decisions facing students or the school

Elementary and Secondary

- Provide parents with the information they need to make informed decisions with or for their children
- Council training sessions
- Planning nights
- Guest speakers
- Share school budget information
- Share the school plan for continuous improvement, seek input and the support of the council
- Encourage school council members to network with others in the board or elsewhere in the province
- Encourage skills in teamwork
- Establish a method for resolving conflicts
- Build the skills of the school councils and parent leaders to reach out to other parents

6. Coordinating with Community Agencies (identify and interpret community services). Effective programs to involve parents in schools recognize the importance of engaging employers, religious, and community organizations in schools. These organizations not only have natural links with parents, but they have a vested interest in the success of children and youth in the local community.

Strategic Intent:

Mobilize community resources to enhance student learning and:

- Help address task of teaching all students within a community environment
- Foster community responsibility, participation and interaction
- Embed the school as an increasingly integrated part of the community

Elementary and Secondary

- Seek out community resources helpful to the school to support curriculum, fundraising or to become more integrated within the community
- Bring organizers of community groups and clubs and providers of learning opportunities to the school for a “community fair” event
- Bring a Junior Achievers program into the school
- Establish a music lesson service through the school
- Encourage parents to take advantage of community sports teams, clubs, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Guides, Sparks, Beavers, church groups
- Fill the Community Representative position on the school council
- Bring local business owners into school events
- Form relationships with local services, eg. Police, Firefighters, Ambulance Services and have them speak to students before there are emergencies

Getting Started

Effective “Parent Engagement” strategies take into account the following insights and/or practices.

The Parent Survey

Use a survey to determine what would help parents become more involved in their child's education, and in the life of the school

Put Out the Welcome Mat

Some parents may not be comfortable in a school setting. Newcomers to Canada, in particular, may have experienced a very different school setting, and may therefore be unfamiliar with the school environment.

Break Down Barriers

Many parents would welcome the opportunity to engage in the school community, but face genuine barriers to involvement

Be Event Oriented

Creative school events that appeal to the needs and interests of parents often provide a key introduction to the school.

Get the Word Out

Communication is essential to building parent involvement. What parents know and perceive about the school depends on what they see, hear and read.

Be Persistent

Building parent involvement is not an 'event' but a process. An effective parent involvement program will take place over months rather than days, and with continued effort, will be sustained over years.

Ontario's Parent Engagement Policy

The parent engagement policy identifies four key success strategies designed to support parents as partners so that they have the opportunity, skills and tools to work together with education partners and contribute fully to the success of Ontario's students and education system.

Strategy 1:

School Climate - Foster and sustain a positive, welcoming school climate in which all parent perspectives are encouraged, valued and heard.

Strategy 2:

Eliminating Barriers - Identify and remove barriers to parent engagement that may prevent some parents from fully participating in their children's learning and to reflect the diversity of our students and communities.

Strategy 3:

Supports for Parents - Provide parents with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to support student learning at home and at school.

Strategy 4:

Parent Outreach – Review and expand communication and outreach strategies such as local workshops, presentations, tools and resources, to share information and strategies related to supporting learning at home and parent engagement in schools.

Parent Engagement Conference

Potential Session Topics

Families and Schools: Listening and Learning
Culturally Responsive Parent Engagement
Families and Schools: Working Together
Understanding the Provincial Report Card
Provincial Testing: What's it all About?
Healthy Children
Getting Along at School
Healthy Relationships
Volunteering
Help from the Community
The Kinds of Involvement That Matter
School Improvement Planning Process
Conflict Resolution
Introduction to School Councils
Meeting the Teacher
Homework Tips for French Immersion
Understanding the Provincial Report Card
Provincial Testing: What's it all about?
Learning Disabilities and Special Education
Full Day Kindergarten

Helping with Homework
Summer Fun
Positive Discipline
Juggling Time
School System
Making Math Fun
Growing Pains
Transitions: The Intermediate Grades
Effective Communications
Council Leadership
Parenting Resource Centres
Learning at Home
Structures, Constitutions and Policies
Helping your Children with School
Helping with Homework
English as a Second Language
Teaching Responsibility
Growing Pains
Friends and Bullies