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## **Why and how do you link family engagement practices to learning?**

*Dr. Karen Mapp, former Deputy Superintendent of Family and Community Engagement in Boston Public Schools and co-author of Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family–School Partnerships,*<sup>1</sup> *describes the highlights of the book's chapter entitled “Linking to Learning: How Will Involving Parents Help Your Test Scores?”*

### **1. How do you define family engagement that is “linked to learning?”**

Our conception of being “linked to learning” started when Anne Henderson and I were working on our first book, *A New Wave of Evidence*.<sup>2</sup> We looked at the research on family engagement and its impact on a range of outcomes, including academic achievement, attendance, and attitudes about school. The research told us that those family engagement practices that were linked to learning seemed to have a greater effect on student outcomes.

In my practice-based experiences, I have noticed that many family engagement activities are anything but learning-centric. For instance, there are always efforts to involve families in fundraising and school procedures and policies. Sometimes families are exposed to conversations about the academic plan for the year or, in high school, parents receive a syllabus. But these practices alone are not substantively linking families to their children's learning. In our new book, we give examples of how to strengthen the link to learning in family engagement activities. For example, school newsletters should always have some tips and tools to help parents to support their children's learning.

When we talk about being linked to learning, we're talking about engaging with families in a way that will support the learning process for each student. Also—let's face it—we often have to sell the concept of family and community engagement, and administrators and policymakers need to realize that this is an important strategy to help support student learning. Engaging families should not be seen as something extra that school staff engage in “when they have time.” Just as you have particular curricular strategies, such as instructional coaching and professional development, linking family engagement to learning focuses this work on improving and enhancing the instructional core. Richard Elmore, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, talks about how any school reform initiative should affect the instructional core,<sup>3</sup> and engaging families can absolutely make this impact. This is part of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model<sup>4</sup> as well. Having partnerships with families means that various systems—student, family, and school—are aligned and working in concert to support learning.

## **2. What advice would you offer to schools that struggle to get families to participate in their programs, such as workshops for improving parenting skills and training to understanding standards and assessments?**

I encourage educators to do a self-diagnostic. The first thing you have to ask yourself is what kind of relationships you have with families. Do families know you—the principals, the teachers—and have you built a solid relationship with them? If their first contact with you is a flyer or notice about a parenting class, it's not surprising that you have trouble getting people to attend. Through interviewing parents at schools that have strong relationships with families, I've found that parents like to come in when they know and feel respected by the school staff. Dr. Steve Constantino, founder of Family Friendly Schools, tells a story of when he was a principal and used to sit at a local Denny's every Thursday night to meet and talk with families. Parents would go because they wanted to see what was going on and because they felt a connection to him. The parents said that they would attend other programs that he initiated because they knew that he was invested in them. In my past work, I've emphasized the joining process, which consists of welcoming parents and honoring them—in other words, meeting them where they are and then connecting with them around issues of student learning. The relationship piece is key because, without the relationships, parents won't be compelled to attend even the best and most useful family engagement programs.

Another simple way to engage families is by focusing on making engagement in their child's learning fun. For example, this year at the Orchard Gardens Pilot School in Boston, school staff changed the name of a program previously entitled "Curriculum Night" to "Family Fun Night." In addition to infusing the new program with activities that were fun for parents, the new name signaled a new awareness about marketing these family events. Oftentimes, activities that start as pure fun gain momentum among parents, and parents are then more likely to show up to other events as well.

The last piece of advice I would share with schools and districts is that they have to offer programs that parents want. It is important to do some sort of survey or needs assessment of parents before planning begins. Don't make assumptions about what families need and want without asking them first. You not only have to ask about the content of workshops and trainings, but also what supports parents need in order to attend those events, such as child care and translation services. This lets families know that you are serious about getting them engaged.

The bottom line is that you should do the same to engage families in school as you would to invite a guest in your home—you want to welcome them, build a relationship with them, and you want to offer information and experiences in which they are personally interested.

### **3. What are some ways that educators can improve open houses and parent–teacher conferences in order to help families support their children's learning in a more meaningful way?**

In this chapter of our book, we provide a number of suggestions to school staff on how to construct their open houses, classroom visits, and parent–teacher conferences in ways that are more meaningful and are linked to learning. On page 84, there is a table that lays out what school staff should do more or less of to engage families. For example, something you can do more of is to display student work. When I was working as Deputy Superintendent in Boston, I visited the Murphy School and noticed that they had wonderful bulletin boards all over the school that used student work to explain their math curriculum. I spent 20 minutes looking at the bulletin boards, which featured explanations of how the kids arrived at their answers. These displays of student work were engaging for me, and I could see how they could be engaging for parents as well.

For parent–teacher conferences, we recommend that students lead the conferences. Sometimes this happens in middle and high school, but I have also seen it used effectively with younger children in the elementary grades. Of course, teachers and students have to be trained to make these effective, but student-led conferences allow for a much richer conversation among parents, teachers and and students. Sometimes, particularly with teenagers, we find that this is a good opportunity to build a contract between student, teacher, and family as to what can be done by each person to encourage student learning.

1 Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family–school partnerships*. New York: New York Press.

2 Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Available at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>

3 Elmore, R. F. (2004). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice, and performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

4 Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.