26 Family engagement

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How to use this policy

Schools and families are the two most powerful determinants on children's developmental and academic outcomes. Thus, it is critical that schools and families work together, in a partnership where each partner is seen as making unique but equally valuable contributions to a child's learning and experience of school. This policy demonstrates how schools and families might work together, in culturally respectful ways. This policy example is intentionally broad and school policy creators are encouraged to delete and build upon suggestions below to create a policy that best represents their school.

[To adapt and use this policy, delete or modify the text as indicated]

[INSERT name of school] Family engagement

Rationale

A large body of evidence has established that, across age groups and population types, the involvement of families in children's education is positively associated with children's academic success (i.e., Wilder, 2013). Positive school-family partnerships can also impact students' school engagement, intrinsic motivation, perceived competence and control (Weihua & Williams, 2010), social development and sense of wellbeing (Willemse et al., 2018). Furthermore, schools may serve as effective conduit points to holistically address students' needs, bringing together parents/carers, schools and community and health services (Reupert et al., 2014). Effective school-family partnerships are therefore critical to high-quality education.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1992) provides the theoretical basis for acknowledging home and school environments as collective determinants of children's academic, behavioural, social and emotional outcomes. The basic assumption of the theory is that students are continually influenced by reciprocal interactions with their environments, including classrooms and families. This means that family problems will influence a child's learning at school and conversely, that problems at school will impact a child's behaviour

at home (Christenson, 2004). Another principle of this theory is the notion of synergy, whereby it is acknowledged that schools and families together can achieve more together than either could alone (Christenson, 2004). Moreover, the influence of culture, socioeconomic status and language is emphasised in ecological systems theory, which means that schools will need to utilise different engagement strategies for different families, as there is no one standard way of involving all family types. Overall, congruence in shared goals and messages between schools and families is needed to promote a positive trajectory for children's learning (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to acknowledge the importance of family engagement as an essential contributor to students' learning. The policy aims to promote family participation in schools in various ways and provide a framework for effective school-family partnerships at the class and school level.

Scope

Families include any type of home arrangement that cares for and brings up children. As applies particularly for indigenous families but also others, the term family often includes extended family members, potentially including parents, several children, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. This policy defines parents as those who assume parental responsibility for a child and may include biological parents, carers or guardians. Children include pre-school, primary and secondary students. There are different ways that families might be engaged in school life and their child's learning, and these vary in intensity, duration and focus (Reupert, 2020).

[INSERT specific roles and responsibilities of individuals or teams]

Policy statement

[INSERT name of school] recognises parents/carers as equal partners in a student's learning journey. We value the diversity that our families bring to the school and respect their traditions and values. This policy draws on research evidence about school-family partnerships, including that from various cultural groups (e.g. Francis, et al., 2016). The following policy and related procedures developed for [INSERT name of school] will be reviewed regularly, in consultation with parents/carers and other family members, experts in the field and the school community, including relevant health and community leaders and services.

School leaders at [INSERT name of school] will

- Establish a school environment that is welcoming of parents/carers and other family members (Auerbach, 2010).

- Emphasise and acknowledge to parents/carers, teachers and the community, the important contributions that families make to a child's learning (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).
- Develop and promote relevant, timely and accessible information between school and families, in multiple formats (hard copy, electronic, telephone, face-to-face) about school initiatives and programs. To ensure communication is two-way, communication procedures are needed from (i) school/teacher to family and (ii) family to school/teacher (Reupert, 2020).
- Actively elicit parent/carer views about school policies, school programs and initiatives and when addressing school issues (Epstein, 1990).
- Establish a problem-solving process for families who are experiencing problems with the school that includes, as a last resort, a grievance procedure for parents/carers.
- Clarify and limit the expectations of learning at home and homework, allowing also for some children whose parents are not always able to assist in homework activities (Cooper, 2015).
- Include parent/carer representatives on school boards and other governance committees, recognizing that only some families are positioned to participate in these ways (Auerbach, 2010).
- Develop and disseminate procedures for family members and community members to visit the school, including sign in/out procedures.
- Provide accessible and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers and parents to further develop skills in effective school-family partnerships. Provide specific training to school staff about cultural awareness and communicating with families from diverse communities. Develop educators' skills in learning from families about their children's strengths, approaches to learning, and relationships with adults. Further skill building is provided to families about supporting their children's learning at school and home (Epstein, 1990).
- Ensure systems are in place to link family members to appropriate community and health services. These procedures clarify referral pathways for different children and families; the type of information that is provided from the school to the external service/s; the information provided from the service to the school; and how services, the school and family might work together in the best interest of the student (Reupert et al., 2014).
- Develop strategies to monitor and evaluate school and teacher procedures for engaging, communicating and problem solving with families, including how satisfied parents/caregivers are with these procedures (Reupert, 2020).

Teachers at **[INSERT name of school]** will:

- Acknowledge and respect family strengths that contribute to student learning at school (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).

- Incorporate families' cultural traditions and values as teaching resources (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).
- Communicate respectfully with families and with the assumption that parents/carers are doing the best that they can to support their children's education (Minke & Woodford, in press).
- Invite parent/carers participation in the school and classroom in ways that are responsive to families' needs. Recognise that not all parents/carers are able to take up various volunteer roles. When parents/carers volunteer, this assistance is in addition to, and not instead of, paid support (Auerbach, 2010).
- Collaborate with parents/carers about the teaching and learning strategies that they might use in the classroom and at home to support children's learning (Vickers & Minke, 1995).
- Ensure that parents/carers are given opportunities to ask questions about their child's learning and progress and are provided with timely and regular information about the progress of their children (Anderson & Minke, 2010).
- Seek information from parents/carers regarding family needs and preferred methods of communication (Minke & Woodford, in press).

Family members at **[INSERT name of school]** will:

- Understand and comply with the relevant policies and procedures related to visiting the school.
- Value quality teaching and respect the professionalism of teachers, school leaders and other school staff.
- Use the school's problem-solving processes, including grievance procedures, if they have a problem with the school.

Authorship

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Related policy and documents

[INSERT RELEVANT POLICY AND DOCUMENTS]

Date of ratification

This policy was ratified on the [INSERT DATE].

Rating of evidence base

Figure 26.1. Family Engagement Rating of Evidence.

Author Note. There has been a substantial amount of well-designed empirical evidence supporting strong school-family relationships and their impact on student outcomes. These have predominately focused on students’ learning skills and academic achievement, with relatively less focused on other student outcomes. More research is needed on the impact of partnerships on teachers and schools. There is a need for further longitudinal studies to confirm the impact of school-family partnerships on students (not only focusing on achievement), families and schools. Most research has focused on families in anglo-phile societies. It takes considerable time and resources to build authentic school-family partnerships, and for some, a significant attitude shift. Authentic school-family partnerships have the potential to positively transform the students’ experiences.

Date of review

This policy will be reviewed by [INSERT DATE].

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