Engaging New Jersey families in learning and development during prekindergarten and kindergarten: FACT SHEET
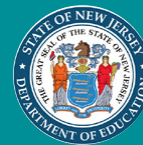
Strong partnerships, in which adults at home and school work together, can help families feel empowered to engage in and support the learning and teaching happening at school. These partnerships are crucial in the early years, when children acquire foundational skills in literacy, math, and social-emotional behavior that prepare them for life-long success. In fact, family involvement in learning can have the most impact in the early years, with research showing a positive link between family involvement and children's academic performance, behavior, and adjustment to school.[1]

This fact sheet is based on literature on engaging families in student learning and targeted discussions with educators and other practitioners across New Jersey. It provides districts, schools, and educators with resources they can use to build relationships, communicate effectively with families, and help engage them in their children's learning and development.

New Jersey's work to support high quality family-school partnerships

The New Jersey Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education has developed a model and opportunities for school administrators and staff to support and encourage families to engage in children's learning. This model, which acknowledges the different perspectives and expectations of families, aims to expand student learning beyond the classroom and use family engagement as a driver of student success. As part of this effort, the REL Mid-Atlantic and the department have partnered to provide districts and schools with resources that consider equity, feasibility, and accessibility.

All children deserve a supportive adult at home to ensure their health, safety, education, and general welfare. Sometimes that person is the child's parent. Other times, it can be someone who serves in a parenting-like or legal protective role. Here, we use the terms parents and families interchangeably and honor all individuals who support, love, and care for children.

Effective partnerships start by acknowledging and overcoming barriers

Bringing effective partnership strategies to life requires acknowledging educators' and families' challenges and barriers, their biases, and equity and accessibility issues that can prevent families and educators from teaming to support student success.[2] Research suggests that schools serving large populations of students of color and those living in poverty may need the most support to engage parents, who can face challenges or systemic barriers that make it more difficult for them to get involved in their children's learning.[3]

Family barriers[4]

- Facing competing priorities for time and energy, such as work and family responsibilities
- Feeling discouraged from or unwelcome to participate in learning
- Having a mindset that learning and education are the school's responsibility
- Lacking confidence to support learning

Teacher barriers[5]

- Balancing competing priorities and other work responsibilities
- Maintaining a healthy work-life balance
- Lacking appropriate support or resources from school or district leaders
- Feeling discouraged by lack of family involvement

Equity and accessibility barriers[6]

- Language barriers
- Implicit and explicit biases related to race, class, and immigration status
- Lack of comfort with and accessibility to digital tools for communication and learning

Critical components of high quality family-school partnerships

Relationship building | **Communication** | **Hands-on support**
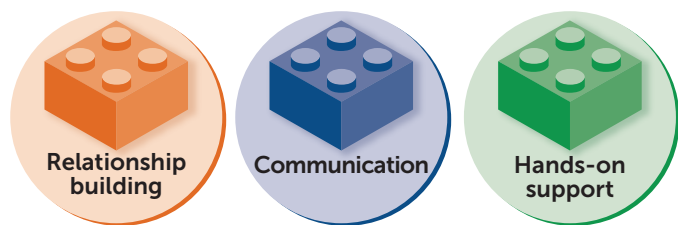
The following tips build on these three components and can help overcome barriers.

Relationship Building

Building positive relationships between families and school staff lays the foundation for a successful family-school partnership.[7] Recognizing and respecting what families bring to the partnership can help everyone work together to support children's learning. For example:

- **Be receptive, and welcome family participation.**[8] School environments that are warm, caring, and receptive to family participation and feedback are more likely to have high levels of effective family engagement. Schools should recognize that some parents hold back because they expect the school to initiate involvement. Other parents may be hesitant to become involved because they had negative experiences before or feel unable to help. Schools should think carefully about how to create opportunities for all families to engage and incorporate their voices into children's learning. Check out this infographic from REL Pacific on "Addressing Equity Through Student and Family Voice in Classroom Learning."

- **Promote trusting relationships.**[9] School staff can promote trusting relationships by recognizing families' vulnerabilities, asking questions to get to know families and their children, and approaching families with respect, empathy, support, and understanding. These strategies can help parents feel comfortable and motivated to engage in their child's learning.

- **Respect cultural differences.**[10] School staff should reflect on any biases or assumptions they may have about how families "should" be educating or raising their children or interacting with schools. Cultural differences can sometimes create misunderstanding and mistrust, which can be exacerbated by language differences. Schools and districts can provide professional development that includes specific examples of how staff can understand and support children and families with different cultural values. Schools can

invest in culturally grounded and inclusive activities so families feel valued and comfortable getting involved. Check out this REL West blog post on "Engaging Students and Families from Diverse Populations During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

- **Start off strong!**[11] The pre-K and kindergarten years are a pivotal time to establish strong connections with families. Home visits or calls can help build a connection and rapport with families before the school year begins, and help children transition to new grade levels. Family engagement techniques specific to early school transitions can be found in the REL Mid-Atlantic fact sheet: "Supporting School Transitions for Young Learners: Considerations in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond."

- **Collaborate on shared learning goals.**[12] Learning goals should incorporate the family's input and experience with their child. Teachers can ask families how they want to be involved in learning and goal-setting and ask them to share information about the child so teachers can better support children's learning in the classroom. Schools can create structured opportunities to help facilitate goal-setting during parent-teacher conferences.

Family engagement tips from New Jersey educators and district staff[13]

☑ **Be creative** about how to get parents "in the door" for initial conversations. Consider offering them a meal, grocery store gift cards, or household supplies.

☑ **Set clear expectations** and identify resources early in the school year so families know how they can contribute. Parent engagement in learning goes beyond participating in fundraisers and attending school events.

☑ **Be receptive** and open to new ideas and feedback from families.

☑ **Recognize** that some parents may be afraid to participate, think they have nothing to contribute, or feel unwelcome. Provide a venue for them to ask questions without feeling intimidated.

☑ **Be inclusive** and consider barriers related to differences in language, cultural backgrounds, or student disabilities.

☑ Some parents' contact information changes frequently. **Check in** with them regularly for current phone numbers and email addresses. **Help parents** sign up for an email address if they don't have one.

Communication

Schools can form meaningful partnerships with families by establishing strong, open lines of two-way communication. Some best practices include:

- **Use communication that is inclusive and accessible.**[14] During the pandemic, educators found that creating more accessible communication through virtual meetings, phone calls, and/or email messages improved response and overall engagement. Many educators plan to continue these practices after the COVID era. Being flexible and incorporating family communication preferences shows respect and understanding for competing priorities. Formats that are easy to read, listen to, and understand promote equitable access. When communicating with non-English–speaking families, schools can provide translated materials.

- **Avoid the use of professional jargon.**[15] Using acronyms and buzzwords from the education field such as "cohort," "Tier 1," or "IEP" can leave parents and families confused and alienated. Instead, help families develop a shared language and understanding about learning and school processes by using familiar terms, such as "group" instead of "cohort." These small changes can increase understanding and help families feel comfortable asking teachers questions without feeling intimidated.

- **Collaborate with families to develop shared expectations for their role in learning.**[16] Families need a clear understanding of how they can help their children learn outside the classroom. Consider outlining specific expectations to guide parents' role in the partnership. For example, teachers can show families how to observe the ways children apply new knowledge and skills at home; they can provide families with concrete outcomes to assess and ways to share their observations with the teacher. Family feedback can then become part of a teacher's formative assessment of the child.

- **Build on children's interests and competencies.**[17] Near the beginning of the school year, teachers can ask families to share their child's interests, strengths, and areas for growth, so they can identify engaging activities that meet the needs of their students. Teachers should consistently communicate with families throughout the year, highlighting what is going well. Then when challenges arise, the partnership is already in place, and families will feel comfortable giving input on strategies and next steps.

Characteristics of effective support for families:[18]

- ☑ **Use instructions** that are clear and easy to understand.
- ☑ **Provide ongoing support**, not one time only.
- ☑ **Offer activities** that are accessible, easy to implement, and not time-consuming.
- ☑ **Use optional activities** that families can incorporate into daily life, so they do not feel like homework.
- ☑ **Tailor activities** to children's developmental stage, interests, and needs.
- ☑ **Encourage families** to give feedback, and integrate it into teachers' formative assessments.
- ☑ Materials should be available in the family's **home language**.
- ☑ **Encourage teachers** to show the importance of family participation and its connection to children's learning goals.

Hands-on support

After establishing a positive family-school relationship, school staff can support families by sharing ideas, strategies, and hands-on activities and support. When sharing resources, provide guidance on how to use them and ask families to give feedback, so they know they are valued and empowered as partners in their children's learning.

- **Supports should be accessible and easy to use.** Teachers can provide sample questions parents can ask children during daily activities to prompt critical thinking. Encourage families to incorporate the concept of "teachable moments"—everyday events and experiences that provide an opportunity to further a child's learning—into their routines. Share the ideas from this REL Pacific video with families.

- **Share information about children's learning and development goals.** Teachers can use this handout, available in both English and Spanish, to provide tips families can use at home. The handout also encourages teachers to share what children are learning in the classroom, and asks families to share their observations and experiences with the teacher in return. Using a handout like this can show families their engagement matters.

- **Create learning kits.**[19] Families may appreciate take-home kits for supporting children's learning, including developmentally appropriate manipulatives such as multicolor beads and string that can help teach foundational math skills like counting, sorting, and sequencing. Check out resources from Make Connections, which include English and Spanish family handouts geared toward teaching young children math through manipulatives and storytelling.

- **Engage through text messages to help families reinforce learning at home.**[20] Schools can text parents with ideas for learning activities that are connected to what children are learning in the classroom. These should be simple, short activities accessible to families with limited resources. The text messages can break down the complexity of teaching into small steps that are easy for families to use. Research suggests that when teachers communicate more consistently and frequently with parents in this way, parents feel better informed, are more likely to become involved in learning, and think their children can do better in school. Teachers can work together to draft content during curriculum preparation.

- **Encourage and demonstrate support through videos.**[21] Videos can model best practices for supporting children's learning. For example, teachers can record videos that show parents how to ask children questions and encourage discussion while reading picture books. Families can learn from these strategies and watch the videos with their children. Teachers can also encourage parents of English learners to read and tell stories to their children in their home language. Check out this REL West Interactive "Readalouds" video for an example.

How can district and school leaders support this work?

Administrators can guide and support educators to build their capacity and sustain effective family-school relationships. They can acknowledge both the advantages and challenges of using family engagement as a driver of student success.[22]

- Teachers and other school staff may find family engagement practices burdensome.[23] School leaders can demonstrate the importance of this work by ensuring educators have the time and resources to

Resources for educators and families

Supports don't have to be created from scratch. Schools can share many existing research-based resources with families.

▶ These resources from the New Jersey Department of Education provide fun ideas to help children learn and grow.

▶ Several REL products help families support young students' learning and well-being, literacy skills, math skills, English language learning, and early writing skills.

▶ This toolkit includes materials that can help families understand the importance of attendance in the early years, and show them how to work with schools to reduce chronic absenteeism.

▶ These FAQs show where teachers, caregivers, and parents can find free digital resources to support early math learning.

▶ Check out the Parents and Families section of the REL COVID-19 website for more resources!

▶ The What Works Clearinghouse offers resources on kindergarten reading and English language learning.

engage families. Leaders can also consider how to incorporate teacher compensation and planning/prep time for these efforts.[24]

- Administrators can consider offering professional development on family engagement, provide materials teachers can use with families, and offer support and feedback around related practices.[25] Creating action plans can help prepare and guide family engagement and ensure it is consistent and sustainable.[26]

- District or school-wide initiatives can help support family engagement and reduce teacher burden.[27] For example, New Jersey state-funded early childhood education programs require implementation of an Early Childhood Advisory Council, which is a group of community stakeholders that support children as they move from preschool through grade 3 by assessing and prioritizing their needs and identifying resources to meet these needs. Many New Jersey districts also employ a community parent involvement specialist or family worker who supports and engages families, connecting them with the community and district resources needed for their children to thrive in school. Districts without this position could consider incorporating a similar role to support school staff in building and maintaining family-school partnerships.

- School leaders should be sensitive to the possibility that inherent biases or negative assumptions can cloud relationship building with families. It's important to establish both respect and personal regard for families directly and support teachers to do the same.[28] Effective school leaders also foster a school climate that seeks to understand families' vulnerabilities and build trust and communication. Staff should be supported through integrated, comprehensive bias training to avoid pitfalls that inhibit family engagement.[29]

- Districts can hire more translators or consider partnering with local organizations that provide translation services to non-English–speaking families.[30]

- Districts can allocate resources to help families with low incomes access and use online learning platforms to improve their engagement, especially during remote or hybrid learning.[31] If possible, districts should pick one online learning platform and help parents learn to master it to avoid overwhelming them with multiple log-ins and links for each student or teacher.[32]

- Schools can build on adaptations made during the COVID pandemic to engage families, and consider holding focus groups or using other tools to learn what worked well and what could have been better.[33] Check out the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center's Preschool During the Pandemic video series, which includes a facilitator's guide with reflective prompts and resources, including episodes on family engagement. Check out these FAQs on state and district responses to COVID-19: How Are Districts Engaging Parents and Families to Support Student Learning?

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