

REL Mid-Atlantic Educator Effectiveness Webinar Series
Engaging Families in Partnership Programs to Promote Student Success
Q&A for Dr. Joyce L. Epstein
August 27, 2015

In this webinar, Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools, discussed what the research says about effective family engagement. The [webinar](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) are also available.

Questions

1. What does emerging research say about the link between academic success and family involvement?

Many studies report that family engagement and community partnerships not only increase student performance, but also change a student's attitude towards school. Well-designed and well-implemented community partnerships can lead to higher grades and test scores, better attendance, improved behavior, better social skills, more classes passed and/or more credits earned, and increased graduation rates.

2. How can community organizations best work with parents to increase engagement? What does this engagement look like? What are some examples?

When schools develop goal-linked partnerships, they activate six types of family and community engagement in my framework. These are:

1. Parenting—Understand child development and have educators know their families.
2. Communicating—Talk about school programs and children's progress; it's a two-way process.
3. Volunteering—Encourage families to participate at school, in class, at home, and as an audience.
4. Learning at Home—Encourage connections on homework, course choices, and other talents.
5. Decision Making—Be sure that all major groups are represented on school committees.
6. Collaborating with Community—Encourage the use of resources and volunteer participation from many groups and agencies.

Community partners may serve on the school's Action Team for Partnerships, or members of the Action Team may enlist community partners (e.g., businesses, faith-based groups, senior citizens, colleges, and others) to support specific family engagement activities that are scheduled in the One Year Action Plan for Partnerships. Community partners and volunteers can work in many ways across the six types of involvement to improve school programs, enrich students' education, and provide services and resources to students and families. Many community organizations (e.g., cultural

groups, foreign language media, faith-based organizations) can serve as important communicators between schools and families.

3. How can we measure the relationship between parental involvement and student academic achievement?

The relationship can be measured by changes in student academic performance. Effects studies require longitudinal data and rigorous research methods. For information on the results of partnerships, see Chapter 3 and for options to evaluate the nature and results of programs and practices of family engagement, see Chapter 9 in:

Epstein, J. L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Third edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

4. Are there any proven or promising models for engaging families of high school students? Of middle school students?

The approaches of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) are used effectively in schools at all grade levels. Chapter 6 in the handbook cited above (Epstein et al., 2009) focuses on developing effective partnership programs in middle and high schools. Also see examples from middle and high schools using these approaches in the *Promising Partnership Practices* series at www.partnershipschools.com in the section "Success Stories."

The most effective family engagement activities at the middle and high school levels will be age appropriate and linked to goals for academics and behavior in the School Improvement Plan.

Examples of engagement activities are parent-teacher conferences on academic goals, support from the parent-teacher organization for a parent center, and private donor fundraising to purchase books for the classroom. For more examples, see *Samplers: Research and Involvement Activities in Reading, Math, Science, Attendance, Behavior, College and Career*, and *Guides for Preschool, Middle School, and High School* and other resources at www.partnershipschools.com.

Following the model of six types of involvement, below are six examples of how to engage parents of students in any demographic group in activities focused on reading at the elementary level. See similar outlines in Chapter 6 of Epstein et al. (2009) for using the six types to reach goals in middle and high schools.

- Type 1: Workshops for parents on various ways to read aloud with young children.
- Type 2: Parent-teacher-student conferences on reading goals and on reading progress. Use of new technologies to communicate.
- Type 3: Reading-partner volunteers, guest readers of favorite stories, and other organized, ongoing read-with-me activities.
- Type 4: Weekly interactive reading homework for all students to read aloud to a family partner, links to reading and writing assignments.

- Type 5: PTA/PTO support for a family room or parent center to provide information on children’s reading, conduct book swaps, and sponsor other reading activities.
- Type 6: Donations from business partners of books for classrooms, for the school library, or for children to take home.

5. How can we engage community partners in schools, specifically for students in career preparation programs?

It is important that programs reach out to their specific target audience. To engage community partners in college and career awareness, planning, and related experiences, see the NNPS Samplers on *College and Careers* and on *Middle School and High School* at www.partnershipschoools.com.

6. How can we engage families of students in after-school programs?

Depending on the Action Team’s goals, the family and engagement strategies are the same as those for regular K–12 programming. Activities should help create a “family-like” school setting and a “school-like” family setting by creating a welcoming environment for students, parents, and teachers at home and in school. This is achieved not only by promoting parent involvement but also by creating school, family, and community partnerships. In a unified partnership program, a representative from the after-school program can serve on the school-based Action Team for Partnerships. Alternatively, an after-school program that serves children from many different schools in a community can establish its own Action Team for Partnerships, write its own One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships, and build its capacities to work with students’ families and community partners.

7. How can we engage families of students with severe attendance problems?

Ideas for engaging families of students with severe attendance problems (e.g., frequent or chronic absenteeism) include orienting parents on school policies and expectations for student attendance and on-time arrival; giving parents the name and phone number of a school contact person to call with questions related to attendance; creating two-way communication channels for teachers and parents to share attendance and other information about students; rewarding or recognizing students for excellent or improved attendance; conducting strong after-school programs for students to motivate them to come to school; making home visits; and referring chronically absent students to counselors, mentors, or truant officers in firm and positive ways. See the NNPS *Sampler on Attendance* at www.partnershipschoools.com.

8. What does research say about engaging parents of students with disabilities?

Family, school, and community partnerships must operate from an equity/strengths model in which they value the contributions that each partner can make to support students academically. Action plans should be goal linked and be directed at supporting students academically. Whether students with disabilities are mainstreamed or served in special classes, their parents must feel welcome at the school and respected as important guides in their children’s education—like all other parents. A teacher and/or parent of a child with special needs should serve on the Action Team for

Partnerships to ensure that the special interests of families of children with disabilities are well served.

9. What are some ways to engage diverse families (linguistic, cultural, and social)?

All school programs must meet the needs and interests of the students and families served at the school. All families have strengths and must feel welcome as part of the whole school community. Families' special interests or needs also must be met (e.g., information in understandable languages, translations, interpreters at school meetings). For information and examples, see:

Hutchins, D. J., Greenfeld, M. D., Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., & Galindo, C. (2012). *Multicultural Partnerships: Involve All Families*. New York: Taylor and Francis.

10. How do we address family engagement in an economically poor district where many parents are immigrants, underemployed, working many part-time jobs with varying shifts, and there is less representation of parents at home?

All schools are different and represent different populations, so it is important to work with the resources available and operate from an equity/strengths model. Family engagement considerations and plans should include and value the resources that the community has. In NNPS, more than 70 percent of schools receive Title I funds, and many are in very poor communities. They are using the research-based structures and processes to organize partnership programs that engage all students' families in productive ways.

11. What are some specific examples of engaging families when there is a language barrier (i.e., parents of English language learners and English as a second language [ELL/ESL] students)? What are some ideas for family events or communication that are formal yet welcoming?

Family engagement plans should be individualized and designed to address the specific needs of the school population. Schools should evaluate what families need, how to support them, and then work with the families to create programs that support their specific communities.

For more information, see Hutchins et al. (2012) and the books in the *Promising Partnership Practices* series at www.partnershipschoools.com in which many schools serving families with ELL/ESL students and with diverse linguistic backgrounds report their approaches to multicultural partnerships.

12. How can schools and districts create structures and processes to engage families so that the system is sustainable even after grant funding is no longer available?

The first step in creating a sustainable process is to create an action team with different perspectives on an engagement strategy. The team should involve teachers, parents/family members, the principal, other school staff (e.g., counselor, nurse), and students. The second step is gathering the resources and funding. This may come in the form of Title I funding or private donations or fundraising.

The most sustainable partnership programs are developed when district and organization Leaders for Partnerships become expert facilitators who can help all schools in a district (not just one or two, here or there) engage all parents as partners in their children’s education.

NNPS helps any district and school to develop its leadership and sustainable partnership programs, whether there are special funds or not, so that family and community engagement becomes a permanent part of district culture and good school organization. Extra or special grant funds are not needed. Most schools have Title I or general funds that will support a well-organized partnership program. See how that’s done in Epstein et al. (2009).

13. What recommendations do you have for parents who want to get involved when the current school culture does not encourage family involvement?

If possible, rally the support of your district and/or school principal so that the school’s change in culture can be step by step for the long term. Work with the parent-teacher association or interested teachers to start a partnership program in ways that will assist teachers to help more students do better in school. That kind of purposeful work will “grow” and improve from year to year.

14. What are best practices for engaging parents in schools, and how can educators communicate with parents who are reluctant to be involved?

It is very important—first and foremost—to create a welcoming environment for parents and community partners using a strengths model. Rather than focusing on the challenges or problems in a community, a plan will work with family strengths and their interest in children’s success in school. Many studies show that just about ALL parents want to and can be involved in their children’s education, regardless of income, race, ethnicity, education, language spoken at home, and other background variables. This approach is opposite that of “deficit” models that label some parents as uninvolved and that operate on the belief that some do not value education for their children. Data indicate that this is not a fair or accurate view of parents’ aspirations for their children’s success in school. On scores of surveys, parents say they would be more involved if they were given useful, clear, and timely information on how to help their children in specific ways.

15. Can you suggest specific systemic ways to shift educators’ practice within districts and schools (i.e., policies, meaningful partnerships, clearly defined roles, etc.)?

The best way to shift educators’ practice is (1) to identify a district Leader for Partnerships who is passionate about helping all schools work better with their own students’ families, and (2) to establish a school-based Action Team for Partnerships that plans, implements, evaluates, and continually improves family and community engagement linked to student success in school. This means working, over time, to engage all families—not just a few—in ways that support student learning and development, based on goals in the School Improvement Plan.

16. How can family engagement strategies be incorporated into teacher and administrator preparation courses?

Professors of education must add topics of partnership program development to their (preservice) college courses for future teachers, principals, counselors, and other education professionals. See this textbook with chapters that will enrich different courses (e.g., education foundations, leadership, research, methods of teaching):

Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Second edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Chapter 1 of this book includes several references to other preservice strategies and studies.

17. How are school-based parent coordinators being supported in their roles, and what types of certification/licensing are proposed for validation as a field in education?

Some certification programs are available for validation of school-based parent coordinators. Mostly, Leaders for Partnerships are identified and require focused training, such as that offered by NNPS at its fall Leadership Development Conference. See agenda and registration information at:

<http://nnps.jhucos.com/professional-development/nnps-leadership-development-conferences/>

When a district joins NNPS, the Leader for Partnerships is offered ongoing professional development, which is augmented at the fall conference. Over time, leaders learn to help many school teams (e.g., one full-time equivalent facilitator can guide up to 30 school-based Action Teams for Partnerships using the NNPS leadership strategies). Also see Chapter 7 on district and state leadership for partnerships in Epstein et al. (2009).

Johns Hopkins University's School of Education offers a certificate in family and community engagement within its master's degree program. Other universities may offer ways that a master's degree candidate can specialize in leadership on school, family, and community partnerships.

18. What are the skills that are most needed by future teachers to establish effective community/family collaborations?

Beginning teachers need to understand the new directions discussed in this webinar for a full appreciation of how programs of family and community engagement can be developed with a focus on student success in school. With a good course, new teachers will enter the profession with a positive mindset about engaging all students' families, regardless of family background, students' grade level, or other variables. However, even with an excellent course, in-service education is needed so that new teachers see the importance of teamwork in their own school and the workings of an Action Team for Partnerships, as described in this webinar.

19. What is the most effective online engagement strategy?

The most effective online engagement strategy will vary, based on the options available to parents in a particular school. Both low-tech and high-tech communications may be effective in connecting with all parents in their favorite ways. Some parents like to receive email from a teacher; some are comfortable with the Parent Portal; some use Facebook or prefer to see information on the school's website. Action Teams for Partnerships and students' grade level teachers must survey parents to

identify preferred communication channels and use multiple strategies to make sure that all parents are well connected with their children’s teachers and with the school.

20. How can families and schools leverage social media for authentic family engagement?

Families and schools can leverage social media in various ways for authentic family engagement, including livestreaming and using the internet to send home information. (See the response to question 19.)

21. How are the financial responsibilities associated with family engagement, if any, handled?

There are various ways to support family engagement. Schools can write proposals, use Title I funds, obtain in-kind support from organizations in the community, and identify other funding sources. Funds must be identified to cover costs of activities included in a school’s One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships. (See average costs and sources of funds for schools, districts, and states in Chapter 7 of Epstein et al. [2009].)

22. What are the challenges schools and districts often face when pursuing family engagement, and how are these overcome?

Schools and districts face common and unique challenges as they develop their programs of school, family, and community partnerships. (See tables and examples of challenges in Chapter 1.1 and other sections of Epstein et al. [2009].) All challenges can be addressed by strong teams, following a strengths/equity model and evaluating and improving programs from one year to the next. In schools, when one challenge is solved, a new challenge will arise. Solutions depend on creative thinking and design to reach out to all families in ways that support specific goals for student learning and development.

Resources

Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Second edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Epstein, J. L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Third edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hutchins, D. J., Greenfeld, M. D., Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., & Galindo, C. (2012). *Multicultural Partnerships: Involve All Families*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.

National Network of Partnership Schools (2015). Johns Hopkins University.
www.partnershipschools.com.