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The Essential Playbook for Family Engagement in Middle School

Introduction to the Playbook

Developed for school and district leaders, Family and Communication Engagement (FACE) departments, educators, and all departments charged with engaging families, this playbook offers evidence-based strategies to enhance family engagement in middle schools. It is a comprehensive resource for those seeking to implement broad-based improvements and establish strong family partnerships within this crucial educational context. The playbook provides actionable steps and practical approaches to ensure that family engagement is not just a concept but also a dynamic and integral part of the student development process during the middle school years.

Why Family Engagement in Middle School Matters

Family engagement is broadly defined as a shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities to actively support children's learning. Research indicates that family engagement is connected to stronger social–emotional development, higher school attendance, and better academic outcomes.

Central to the school–family partnership is relational trust, which serves as the foundation for positive and productive interactions among students, families, and educators. In this context, relational trust refers to mutual respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity that each party brings to their interactions. It involves open communication, reliability, and a shared commitment to the well-being and success of the students.

Building relational trust is pivotal to ensuring that families remain connected and invested in their children's education, particularly during the critical transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school.

Early adolescence marks a period of cognitive, biological, and social–emotional development coupled with adjustments to new school environments, curricula, and higher academic expectations (Hill & Tyson, 2009). The cultivation of relational trust during this phase is crucial for maintaining engagement and ensuring that families have the confidence and means to support their children's educational journey from elementary to middle school.

Typically, there is a decline in family engagement from elementary to middle school, which can be attributed to several factors (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Children seek more independence, schools provide fewer structured opportunities for parental involvement, and the complexity of middle school structures and schedules can be daunting. Communication from middle schools may become less frequent or less personalized, and resources to support family engagement initiatives may not be as readily available as in elementary schools. This can leave many families feeling disconnected and uncertain about their role.

Organizational Structure of the Playbook and Practical Application

To effectively enhance family engagement in middle schools, this playbook is organized around four critical elements: Capacity, Process, Infrastructure, and Outcomes. It guides readers from the initial step of conducting a family engagement needs assessment to implementing strategies that reflect the interconnected nature of these elements, all within a cycle of continuous improvement.

- **Capacity** develops through targeted professional learning that builds the abilities and motivation for effective engagement.
- **Process** guides the selection and implementation of evidence-based practices tailored to the needs identified in the needs assessment.
- **Infrastructure** ensures that the right resources and policies are in place to support these practices.
- **Outcomes** measure the impact of engagement initiatives, with insights used to refine and advance the plan.
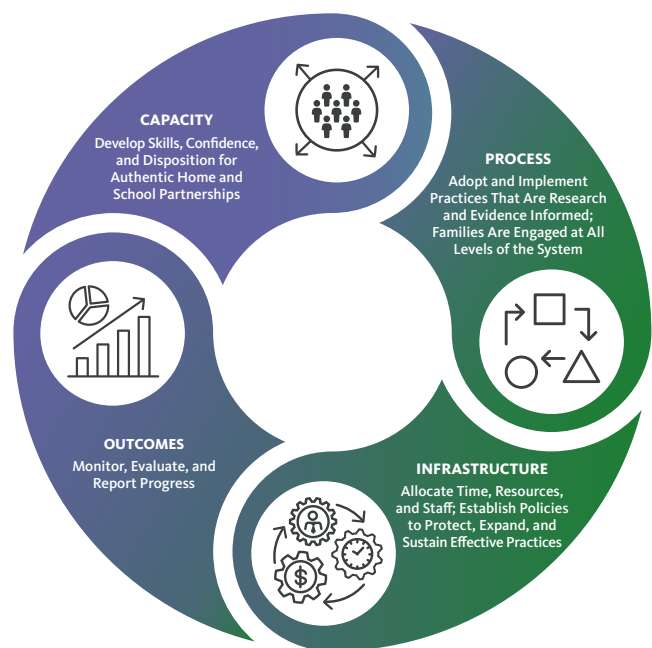
The playbook presents these elements through an illustrative table that evolves alongside the needs identified by the school community interest holders. Each section further includes tangible examples that demonstrate the application of these elements, providing schools with actionable guidance to build and sustain robust family partnerships.

Building on this foundation, the playbook provides real-world examples from various middle schools that highlight how the findings from needs assessments have been used to inform and develop effective family engagement strategies. These examples showcase actionable steps taken by schools to address the identified needs. The playbook encourages readers to draw on these examples to craft tailored approaches that resonate with their schools' particular needs and cultures.

At the end of this playbook, you will find a dedicated section detailing these examples, offering practical insights to help you develop engagement approaches that align with the unique context and diversity of your school community.

Figure 1. The Four Elements

CAPACITY — Develop Skills, Confidence, and Disposition for Authentic Home and School Partnerships

PROCESS — Adopt and Implement Practices That Are Research and Evidence Informed; Families Are Engaged at All Levels of the System

OUTCOMES — Monitor, Evaluate, and Report Progress

INFRASTRUCTURE — Allocate Time, Resources, and Staff; Establish Policies to Protect, Expand, and Sustain Effective Practices

The Role of Needs Assessments in Family Engagement

The needs assessment is an initial and essential step in developing a tailored family engagement plan. The process encompasses a variety of methods to gather insights, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, and the analysis of existing school data such as climate surveys and student attendance records.

The creation of the needs assessment tools—be it questionnaires or interview protocols—should be a collaborative effort led by a team of school and district leaders, educators, and family engagement specialists. The aim is to ensure that the tools are comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the school's objectives.

Administering the needs assessment involves collecting and analyzing data from a wide range of school community members: students, teachers, families, school and district leaders, and community partners. This inclusive approach is designed for the team to gain a deep understanding of the perspectives, needs, and aspirations of all parties involved in the educational process. It is this breadth of insight that ensures the family engagement plan is finely tuned to the specific context and challenges of a particular school environment.
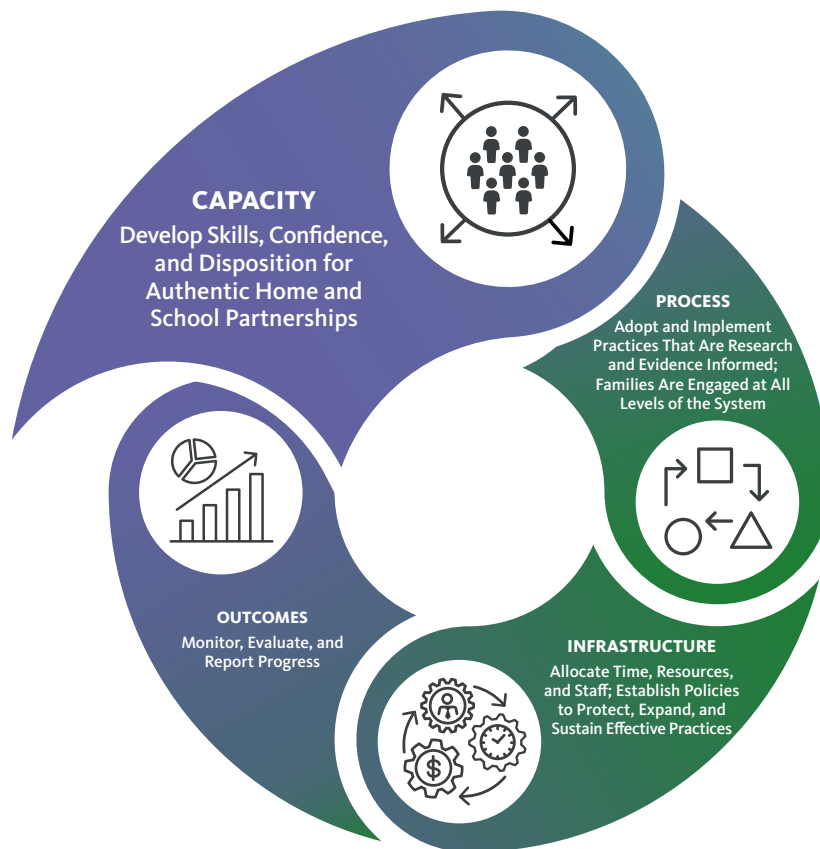
The needs assessment is critical in developing effective family engagement plans, providing valuable insights that inform initiatives undertaken across the four key elements—**Capacity**, **Process**, **Infrastructure**, and **Outcomes**. Integrating these insights is needed for fostering meaningful family engagement and, ultimately, improving student achievement.

The Four Elements

Having established the importance of family engagement in middle school and the critical first step of conducting a needs assessment, we can now explore the playbook's foundational elements more closely. The playbook presents strategies and examples that focus on the four key elements. The needs assessment provides the backdrop for the family engagement plan, identifying key areas that require focused attention and resources.

Element 1: Capacity

Figure 2. Capacity Element

CAPACITY
Develop Skills, Confidence, and Disposition for Authentic Home and School Partnerships

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OUTCOMES
Monitor, Evaluate, and Report Progress

INFRASTRUCTURE
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What It Is

School staff and families must develop knowledge, skills, confidence, and the disposition necessary to engage in authentic home and school partnerships. Gaining "capacity" refers to the process of enhancing one's ability to effectively participate in these partnerships. This is achieved through active engagement in professional development opportunities, such as coaching, book studies, webinars, learning circles, conferences, and peer support. The greater your knowledge and skills, the more opportunities you have to improve practices and outcomes.

Why It Is Important

Capacity is the engine that drives progress and innovation in family engagement.

- Deepen knowledge and understanding of evidence-based practices that raise the standard of home and school partnerships.

- Provide professional learning opportunities that connect educators' needs with collaborative work alongside families, enhancing overall engagement.

- Enrich learning experiences that cultivate a shift in mindsets among educators, leading to more effective outreach and stronger connections with families.

As you embark on enhancing family engagement in your school, turn to this practical table for guidance. It is designed with your needs in mind and provides examples and actionable steps derived from needs assessment findings.
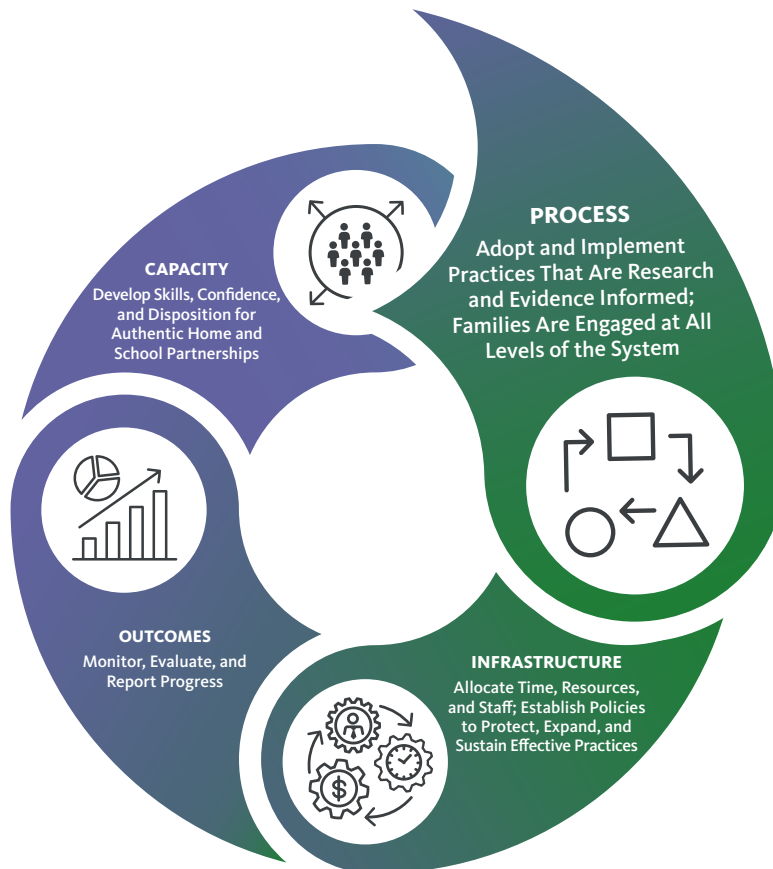
In the following example, we address a real-life scenario that surfaced through our work with schools: families feeling uninformed and disconnected from their children's school. We address the common need of middle school families for increased communication and stronger connection with educators. In Table 1, you will find specific professional development strategies to help you and your staff communicate more effectively with families, thus bridging communication gaps and building stronger partnerships. Use this visual resource as a starting point and guide to methodically cultivate these relationships and gradually increase family engagement, one step at a time.

Illustrative Table 1.
Enhancing Family Engagement Through Capacity Development

Element 1 Capacity	Element 2 Process	Element 3 Infrastructure	Element 4 Outcomes
Professional learning experiences focused on improving communication and relationship development between educators and families: • offered a foundational 2-hour professional development on family engagement • facilitated a yearlong book study on the importance of family engagement • created 10-minute discussion opportunities during staff meetings for sharing family engagement successes and challenges			

Element 2: Process

Figure 3. Process Element

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What It Is

Transitioning from foundational concepts to actionable engagement, we turn our attention to the **Process** element. **Process** describes *how the work gets done*—the selection and implementation of evidence-based strategies and practices that districts and schools use to engage families in making decisions about their children's education. It involves assigning clear roles and responsibilities to ensure that tasks are completed and desired outcomes are realized. Essentially, **Process** is the series of actionable steps that operationalize **Capacity** (Element 1), putting it into practice.

Why It Is Important

Processes are targeted and deliberate actions in pursuit of positive results.

- Evidence-based strategies and actions lead to higher impact and better use of time and resources, benefiting both educators and families.
- Clear family engagement plans with defined action steps and roles enhance collaboration and ensure accountability among educators, families, and community partners.
- Opportunities to participate in rich learning experiences foster high expectations in families and a strong sense of investment in their children's education.
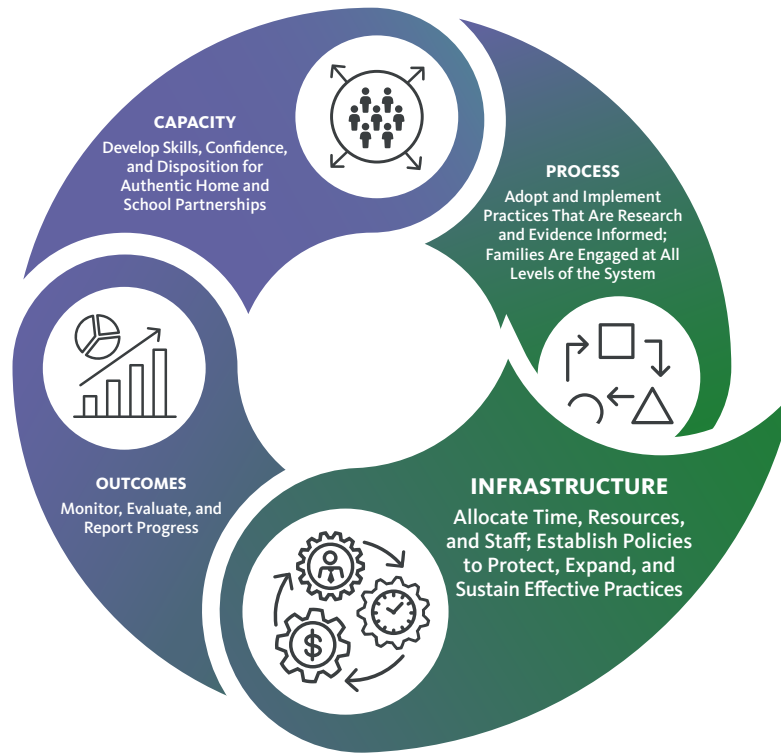
Table 2 details the processes that turn family engagement plans into actions, highlighting strategies that ensure regular, meaningful communication and collaborative efforts between schools and families.

Illustrative Table 2.
Enhancing Family Engagement Through Process Implementation

Element 1 Capacity	Element 2 Process	Element 3 Infrastructure	Element 4 Outcomes
Professional learning experiences focused on improving communication and relationship development between educators and families: • offered a foundational 2-hour professional development on family engagement • facilitated a yearlong book study on the importance of family engagement • created 10-minute discussion opportunities during staff meetings for sharing family engagement successes and challenges	**Strategies to improve communication and relationships between educators and families:** • equipped teachers with phone scripts to support them in making 3–5 weekly positive phone calls to families • collaborated as grade-level teams to create Weekly Learning Connection updates, keeping families informed on classroom learning and encouraging at-home engagement • organized a Family and Community Engagement Committee that met monthly to plan and oversee engagement strategies		

Element 3: Infrastructure

Figure 4. Infrastructure Element

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What It Is

Infrastructure involves the purposeful allocation of time, resources, and staff by districts and schools, as well as the establishment of policies that sustain and preserve effective partnerships between home and school. By strategically allocating staff, time, and resources, schools and communities can create, protect, and expand impactful family engagement initiatives. Infrastructure is fundamental for the effective implementation of the **Capacity** built (Element 1) and the **Processes** implemented (Element 2).

Why It Is Important

Infrastructure strengthens the systems that enable growth.

- Ensure that the systems and resources in place give all partners what they need to implement strategies and practices effectively.

- Dedicate staff for family engagement to formalize support systems.

- Allocate time for staff to engage with families to strengthen communication and collaboration, enhancing overall family engagement efforts.

- Braid funding for family engagement to enhance educators' professional learning experiences and the quality of family resources and learning opportunities.

- Establish policies protecting effective family engagement practices to formalize what schools value.
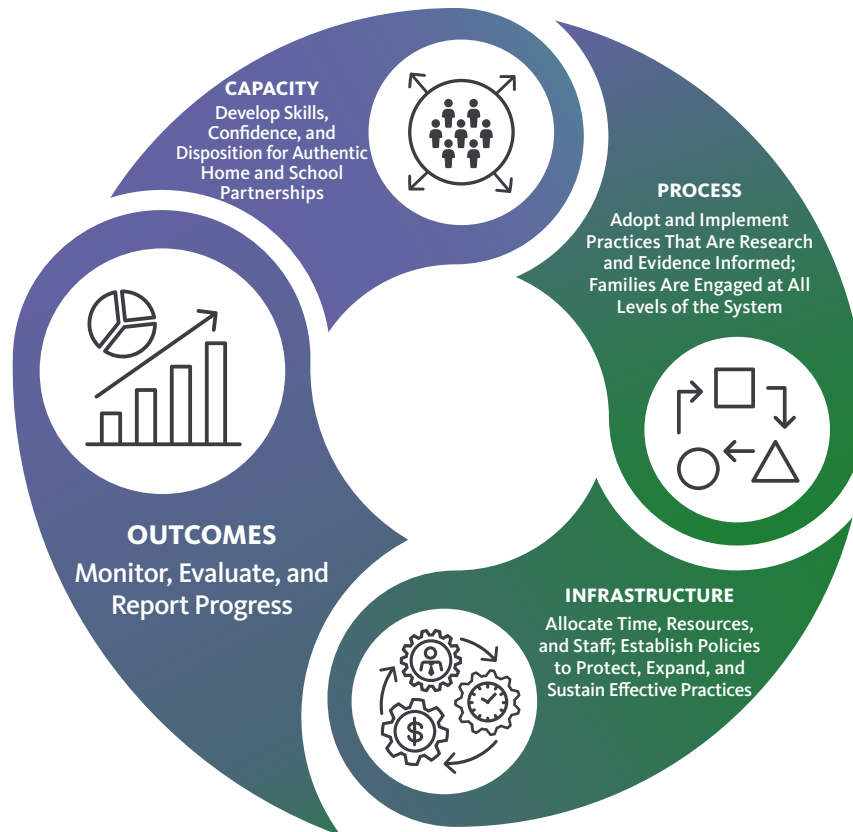
The third element, Infrastructure, supports and sustains the strategies and practices essential for engaging families within the school community. Table 3 illustrates this integration, showcasing how structured systems and dedicated resources contribute to the practical implementation of communication and relationship development efforts.

Illustrative Table 3.
Enhancing Family Engagement Through Infrastructure Development

Element 1 Capacity	Element 2 Process	Element 3 Infrastructure	Element 4 Outcomes
Professional learning experiences focused on improving communication and relationship development between educators and families: • offered a foundational 2-hour professional development on family engagement • facilitated a yearlong book study on the importance of family engagement • created 10-minute discussion opportunities during staff meetings for sharing family engagement successes and challenges	Strategies to improve communication and relationships between educators and families: • equipped teachers with phone scripts to support them in making 3–5 weekly positive phone calls to families • collaborated as grade-level teams to create Weekly Learning Connection updates, keeping families informed on classroom learning and encouraging at-home engagement • organized a Family and Community Engagement Committee that met monthly to plan and oversee engagement strategies	Systems to support implementation of strategies: • implemented a tracking system for logging staff communication efforts • selected staff members to champion, oversee, and manage the implementation of engagement strategies • established a centralized resource hub offering educators access to family engagement resources and tools	

Element 4: Outcomes

Figure 5. Outcomes Element

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What It Is

Outcomes are the measurable indicators used to assess the success of family and community engagement efforts. They capture the effectiveness of and fidelity to the strategies implemented, providing a clear picture of how the plan is performing across the three foundational elements of **Capacity** (Element 1), **Process** (Element 2), and **Infrastructure** (Element 3). By analyzing and sharing these results, educators can identify strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Continually monitoring and assessing outcomes is crucial for verifying that engagement efforts meet the intended objectives. Sharing these findings openly with staff, families, and community partners promotes a culture of transparency, trust, and collaboration. Such vigilance in the evaluation process ensures that family engagement initiatives are meaningfully contributing to the overarching goals of an educational community.

Why It Is Important

Outcomes are the information that helps us get better at getting better.

- Make data-driven decisions to align improvements with school growth.
- Collect and evaluate feedback data to tailor and enhance engagement efforts.
- Leverage outcomes to inform policy for strategic resource management.

With the Outcomes presented here, we reach the culmination of our playbook's elements. This final element encapsulates our collective efforts in data collection and serves as a springboard for ongoing refinement and enhancement. The integration of **Capacity**, **Process**, **Infrastructure**, and **Outcomes** creates a dynamic cycle of continuous improvement. This ensures that our family engagement strategies remain effective, responsive, and aligned with the evolving needs of the school community.

Illustrative Table 4.
Enhancing Family Engagement Through Outcomes Measurement

Element 1 Capacity	Element 2 Process	Element 3 Infrastructure	Element 4 Outcomes
Professional learning experiences focused on improving communication and relationship development between educators and families: • offered a foundational 2-hour professional development on family engagement • facilitated a yearlong book study on the importance of family engagement • created 10-minute discussion opportunities during staff meetings for sharing family engagement successes and challenges	**Strategies to improve communication and relationships between educators and families:** • equipped teachers with phone scripts to support them in making 3–5 weekly positive phone calls to families • collaborated as grade-level teams to create Weekly Learning Connection updates, keeping families informed on classroom learning and encouraging at-home engagement • organized a Family and Community Engagement Committee that met monthly to plan and oversee engagement strategies	**Systems to support implementation of strategies:** • implemented a tracking system for logging staff communication efforts • selected staff members to champion, oversee, and manage the implementation of engagement strategies • established a centralized resource hub offering educators access to family engagement resources and tools	**Data collection plan and tools used to measure the effectiveness of Elements 1–3:** • administered surveys to teachers, families, and students • conducted family focus groups • collected exit tickets at the end of teacher professional development sessions and family activities • utilized student attendance records

Real-World Family Engagement Strategies in Middle School

As we move from examining the discrete steps involved in each element to observing their application in the larger school context, it is critical to recognize the interdependence of these elements. They are not intended to function independently. Instead, they are interrelated, with each element amplifying the impact of the previous one. **Capacity**, **Process**, **Infrastructure**, and **Outcomes** form a cohesive family engagement strategy. This interplay of elements demonstrates how, when combined, they hold the potential to create a more connected and vibrant school community. As we see these elements come together in practice, we recognize their complementary roles in creating an educational environment in which every member of a school community feels supported and valued.

Orientation Sessions for Middle School Families

Strategy: "How to Junior High 101." Orientation sessions titled "How to Junior High 101" prepared families for the transition to middle school, providing them with critical information and building a foundation for strong school–family relationships.

Implementation: engaging activities. Essential information sessions began with an icebreaker to establish connections followed by opportunities for families to meet school staff. Key topics such as schedules, grading systems, and expectations were discussed. Families received guidance on contacting staff, navigating school resources, and participating in extracurriculars and volunteer opportunities. The sessions concluded with a school tour and a Q&A segment.

Accessibility: language support and translations. To accommodate the diverse languages spoken by families in the community, orientation materials were available in multiple languages, and interpreters were present during the sessions to ensure clear communication and understanding. Virtual orientation videos were also translated to extend this accessibility online.

Alternative provisions: virtual orientation for wider access. For those unable to attend the live sessions, school staff and student leadership created virtual orientation videos that covered the same essential information. These resources were posted online for convenient access by all families, ensuring that everyone had the necessary information regardless of their ability to attend in person.

Outcomes: feedback and continuous improvement. The orientation sessions successfully engaged families in the educational process, as evidenced by positive feedback and an observed increase in family involvement at the start of the school year.

Welcoming New Families

Strategy: personalized greetings/at-home porch visits offered a personal touch to welcoming new middle school students and their families. Organized before the school year began, these visits were gestures of hospitality and community building.

Implementation: caravan of connection and community center meetups. School staff formed a caravan to travel to the homes of incoming students for porch visits, conducting these visits outdoors for relaxed and friendly conversations. Additionally, staff met families at a local community center, offering an alternative space for those who preferred or needed a more central meeting location and thus providing broader access and more opportunities for connection.

Accessibility: engaging families where they are. By meeting families in the comfort of their own homes and at local community centers, porch visits and additional meetups broke down barriers and created comfortable settings for engagement, making the transition to middle school feel more approachable and personalized.

Resources: welcome packets and school spirit. During the visits, students were given school-branded items like T-shirts and personalized welcome signs. They also received welcome packets containing important school information and resources, which ensured that they felt part of the school community from Day 1.

Outcomes: building trust and easing anxieties. The primary goals of porch visits were to establish trust, alleviate anxieties about the transition to middle school, and lay the groundwork for a strong school–community relationship throughout the academic year. Meetings at the community center contributed to these goals by offering accessible venues for families to connect with school staff.

Positive Postcards Home

Strategy: celebrating achievements. Teachers sent home personalized postcards to acknowledge students' positive contributions and achievements, fostering a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Implementation: weekly recognition. Each week, teachers selected students to receive postcards that highlighted their successes, sending a positive message directly from the classroom to the home.

Accessibility: reaching every home. The school ensured that postcards were accessible to all families, including those who speak languages other than English, providing translations as needed.

Resources: enabling positive communication. Necessary materials and time were allocated for teachers to write and send these postcards, demonstrating the school's commitment to positive reinforcement.

Ensuring equitable recognition. A tracking system was developed to monitor the distribution of postcards, ensuring that all students had the opportunity to be recognized throughout the year.

Outcomes: building school–family connections. These postcards acted as a bridge between teachers and families, enhancing communication and reinforcing the supportive role of the school in students' lives.

Positive Phone Call Campaign (High-Five Fridays)

Strategy: reinforcing positive behavior. Staff conducted "High-Five Fridays," a campaign in which administrators made phone calls to families, celebrating students' positive behavior and achievements.

Implementation: celebratory outreach. On Fridays, teachers took time to select students who demonstrated commendable behavior or achievements and wrote about why they were chosen. Administrators then called the students' families to extend a "high five" over the phone, sharing the positive feedback and reasons for recognition.

Accessibility: inclusive recognition. Efforts were made to ensure that all families, regardless of their primary language or communication preferences, could fully participate in and appreciate these celebratory calls.

Resources: supporting teacher involvement. The school allocated specific time for teachers to select students and articulate the reasons behind each selection, underlining the school's commitment to meaningful recognition.

Tracking System: ensuring equitable recognition. A system was established to track the calls made by administrators, ensuring that recognition was distributed fairly and that all students had the opportunity to be acknowledged throughout the year.

Outcomes: cultivating a positive school culture. The High-Five Fridays initiative contributed significantly to creating a school culture that valued student accomplishments, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

Family Learning Workshop Series

Strategy: empowering families through education. Family Learning Workshops, also known as Parent University, provided families with the knowledge and tools needed to support their children's academic and personal growth and were led by a collaborative team of school counselors, teachers, administrators, and community partners.

Implementation: responsive workshops for diverse needs. Workshops were designed to address the specific needs and interests of the school and community with sessions held monthly to offer ongoing support and resources throughout the school year.

Accessibility: ensuring inclusivity with interpretation services. To guarantee that all families could benefit from the workshops, interpretation services were available to ensure that language barriers did not hinder participation and engagement.

Resources: leveraging community expertise. The workshops drew upon the collective expertise of educators and community leaders, providing a curriculum that was both diverse and reflective of the community's needs.

Sample topics: sessions to empower families and enrich learning. Consider the following workshop topics to enhance family engagement and foster educational enrichment:

- student mental health and wellness
- navigation of social media and online safety
- comprehension of adolescent development
- effective communication with teens
- middle school expectations and the "Portrait of a Graduate"
- effective use of the student information system
- acquisition of financial literacy skills

Outcomes: measuring engagement and impact. Family feedback and participation were monitored to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops with the goal of fostering a robust, well-informed partnership between families and the school.

Establishing Consistent Communication With the Weekly Learning Connection

Strategy: enhancing communication with weekly updates. The Weekly Learning Connection served as a bridge between schools and families, offering consistent updates on classroom learning objectives and fostering an informed school community.

Implementation: collaborative messaging by educators. Grade-level teams worked together to create weekly messages that detailed learning topics, provided resources, and suggested discussion points to encourage families to engage with their child's education at home.

Accessibility: inclusive and informative content. The initiative ensured that all families received the same information, promoting equity and transparency in school-to-home communication.

Resources: leveraging school communication channels. Messages were disseminated through established school communication channels, such as email, school websites, or parent portals, making it easy for families to stay connected and up to date.

Outcomes: building a transparent educational partnership. By regularly sharing educational content with families, the school nurtured a transparent partnership, directly involving parents and guardians in the learning process and enhancing the overall family engagement experience.

Uniting School and Families Through School FACE Committee Initiatives

Strategy: FACE committee engagement initiatives. The school FACE committee, consisting of teachers, counselors, and support staff and supported by the district FACE department or a dedicated family and community engagement coordinator, played a crucial role in bridging the gap between families and the school. The committee spearheaded strategic initiatives that fostered meaningful connections and collaboration.

Implementation: monthly planning and event coordination. Through monthly meetings, the committee actively refined a family engagement plan that resonated with the school community's unique needs. Initiatives included organizing family workshops, cultural celebrations, and educational events that encouraged family participation and enhanced the school experience.

Accessibility: inclusive practices and feedback collection. The committee's efforts prioritized inclusivity, ensuring that all families, regardless of background or language, had opportunities to engage. Feedback was collected systematically from these events to gauge their effectiveness and inclusivity.

Alternative provisions: adapting to family needs. Recognizing that not all families could participate in traditional ways, the committee explored alternative methods to involve them, such as virtual events or take-home activities.

Outcomes: continuous improvement and sharing with staff. Committee members analyzed event feedback to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This ongoing evaluation led to adjustments in strategy, which the committee shared with the broader school staff. These shared insights and clear action steps ensured that family engagement initiatives remained dynamic, responsive, and widely supported across the school.

Strengthening School–Community Ties Through Strategic Partnerships

Strategy: forging community partnerships. The school and district built strategic partnerships with community organizations like United Way to support educational goals, particularly in addressing challenges such as chronic absenteeism.

Implementation: united efforts against absenteeism. In collaboration with United Way, the school implemented initiatives that directly supported efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism, ensuring that students and their families had the resources and support needed for consistent school attendance.

Accessibility: facilitating family participation. United Way enhanced family engagement by providing transportation solutions, such as busing for school events and bus passes, to ensure that all families had the opportunity to be involved in their children's education without barriers.

Resources: enriching the school community. The partnership with United Way enriched the school's resource offerings, making events more accessible and supporting comprehensive strategies to improve student attendance and family involvement.

Outcomes: impactful collaboration and improved attendance. The success of community partnerships was measured by their impact on reducing absenteeism and increasing family engagement with the ultimate goal of fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students.

Family Engagement Integrated With District Strategic Plan

Strategy: systematic integration of family and community engagement. The district's strategic plan systematically embedded family and community engagement, ensuring it was woven throughout educational policies and practices.

Implementation: strengthening support with FACE department. A dedicated FACE department within the district provided pivotal resources for schools, allocating time, staff, and resources specifically toward nurturing family and community connections. This department facilitated comprehensive training and offered ongoing support to embed engagement within every school's culture.

Accessibility: ensuring engagement across the board. The strategic plan's commitment to engagement was reflected in the allocation of resources, including time for staff to collaborate with families and the community, ensuring accessibility and inclusion in all aspects of school life.

Resources: committing to engagement. Investing in staff, training, and resources dedicated to family and community engagement underscored the district's commitment to these vital relationships, empowering schools to build and sustain strong partnerships.

Outcomes: measuring and sustaining impact. The strategic allocation of time, staff, and resources was continually measured against engagement outcomes, which ensured that initiatives were not only effective but also sustainable and aligned with the district's long-term educational goals.

Cultivating Engaged Leadership Through Book Studies

Strategy: leadership development through literature. The district FACE department curated relevant literature for book studies focusing on family engagement at the secondary level, with titles such as *Engage Every Family* by Steve Constantino and *Everyone Wins* by Karen Mapp.

Implementation: deepening understanding. Structured reading sessions and discussions guided school leaders through the exploration of family engagement concepts, encouraging the application of these ideas within their specific school contexts.

Accessibility: equitable access to resources. Books were provided to all participants, ensuring that each leader had the resources needed to fully engage with the material and contribute to discussions.

Resources: commitment to professional growth. The district invested in the professional development of school leaders by supplying books and organizing reflective sessions that deepened their understanding of family engagement strategies.

Outcomes: enhancing leadership capacity. The book studies enhanced school leaders' ability to develop relationships with families and implement engagement practices, especially within the context of secondary education.

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Additional Resources

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