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Culturally Diverse Families: Enhancing Home-School Relationships

BY JANINE M. JONES

Successful schools, as defined by high student achievement, high graduation rates, and high attendance, almost always have high levels of collaboration among all parties, including administrators, educators, professional support staff (such as school psychologists, school counselors, nurses, and school social workers), and families. Parents may be the most difficult to integrate into the collaborative process. They often face barriers to school involvement, including limited financial resources, negative past experiences with schooling, and linguistic and cultural differences. Educators also face barriers to involving parents, including a lack of resources (time and money) for family outreach, fear of conflict, and stereotypes about families and cultures. Yet research shows that students are considerably more likely to succeed when parents are actively involved in their children's education (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Nuttall, Li, and Kaplan, 2006).

In order to foster an environment where families and educators are effective collaborators, schools need to create a sense of community that is inclusive of families, particularly of the cultural values and expectations of families of color. Some ethnically diverse communities have different expectations of the role of school and the role of families. For example, some families perceive school staff as the educational experts who know best. These families may feel that they do not have anything to contribute to the educational environment and will accept any recommendations by teachers or administrators without asking questions or understanding the true meaning of these decisions. To encourage these families to become involved, schools can give them clear opportunities to contribute as respected partners, thus helping to create a sense of community in which all parties have a sense of ownership and shared goals. These goals should emphasize optimal learning and socioemotional development of all children in school.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND COLLABORATIVE HOME-SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Schools that most effectively create collaborative partnerships with diverse families have characteristics in common: open communication, open-door policies, active parent associations and advisory councils, parent volunteers, an inclusive school culture, and shared responsibility for successes and failures.

Open communication. The environment encourages communication at all times, including informal conferences that can be called by anyone. School personnel typically initiate family-school

meetings. However, the truly collaborative environment supports and encourages parent requests for meetings, to which the school is immediately responsive. Multilingual staff are available to reduce communication barriers.

Open-door policies. Open doors for administrators, educators, and support staff facilitate communication. Physical barriers can become psychological barriers to families who are reluctant to initiate contact with school staff. When doors are open (figuratively as well as physically), even the most hesitant person will feel welcome to share information, ask questions, and otherwise participate.

Active parent associations and advisory councils. Parent associations and school advisory councils are often the means by which parents learn the culture of the school and become more involved. Participation can create a sense of ownership of the school's successes and failures and ways for parents to be involved in decision making. The parent association or council should have equal representation from all the groups within the school in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity. If this level of representation is not present, the school administration should strive toward recruiting and maintaining such representatives. Parent associations that involve leaders in the community can be powerful supports for family-school relationships.

Parent volunteers. Collaborative schools have a wide range of options for parent volunteers and a large pool of volunteers who participate at all levels of the school's operations. These volunteers represent the diversity of the school population so that all voices are considered when decisions are made. The parent volunteer pool may vary at times due to the school's needs and parents' availability.

Inclusive school culture. The culture of the school must match or be sensitive to the cultural values and needs of the families within the school community. It is crucial that the students and families see themselves reflected in the artwork and messages posted on the walls of the school, in school celebrations, in the curriculum, and in the factors considered when decisions are made. For example, when planning cultural activities, the school can work with families to ensure that celebrations and other events are culturally appropriate. In addition, the expertise of cultural liaisons (also known as cultural brokers or cultural advocates) can be used to help build an inclusive school culture.

Shared responsibility for successes and failures. When families are involved in all levels of school governance, there is a sense of shared responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes. Families will be more supportive of school policies and school improvement efforts if they are included in all levels of decision making.

KEY STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION

Several key strategies can be used to enhance communication and collaboration among schools and diverse families. These strategies include implementing structural changes, preparing staff, adopting a "no surprises" policy, increasing regular communication, using strengths to manage weaknesses, and empowering parents.

Structural Changes. Proportional representation of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity in activities to build home-school partnerships is vital to the success of individual students and the

school overall. School administrators should communicate regularly with all parents to identify and monitor any barriers to their participation. As soon as possible (and annually as necessary), modifications to school structure should be made to remove and reduce participation barriers (Christenson, 2003) and facilitate parent involvement at all levels. Examples of participation barriers include:

- Meetings scheduled at times when parents have to work
- Lack of child care
- Lack of transportation to school
- Lack of access to interpreters and/or cultural advocates (e.g., cultural liaisons)
- Lack of positive communication between families and staff

As administrators obtain feedback from parents, changes can be implemented that will facilitate optimal collaboration, such as scheduling evening meetings where child care is provided and incorporating interpreters in all school activities.

Staff preparation. Staff members should strive for cultural literacy—familiarity with the characteristics, norms, customs, and values of various cultures. Palacios and Trivedi (2009) provide comprehensive descriptions of values and behaviors that are common among diverse cultural groups. School staff who prepare for meetings and school activities using such resources are often the most effective in communicating with culturally diverse families. As staff attain higher levels of cultural competence, they build a knowledge base of the cultural dos and don'ts associated with their students' families. Some considerations that are helpful in home-school collaborations include the recognition of culturally related communication styles and culturally based personal identity.

Communication styles. To foster positive interactions with families, school staff should have knowledge of communication styles. For example, for many African Americans, it is considered respectful to look away when spoken to. This communication style may be misinterpreted as disrespectful by someone unfamiliar with the culture. The meaning of touch also varies between cultures. In some, rapport includes some form of touch; in other cultures, certain types of touch are completely inappropriate (e.g., a handshake between an Orthodox Jewish man and a woman who is not a family member).

Personal identity. Personal identity refers to how people view themselves in a cultural context. For most minority groups, personal identity is collective rather than individual, or “we” rather than “I.” Understanding such differences will enhance the ability of school staff to understand diverse families and the cultural values they bring to every interaction.

No surprises. Adopting a no surprises policy helps to foster an environment conducive to collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Too often, these families feel uncomfortable or apprehensive about dealing with schools. Surprises can create misunderstandings; no one likes being caught off guard. Team meetings that include eight or nine people can be extremely intimidating to a parent who is not highly involved in the school. Prior to any formal meeting that might involve several people, it is best to have an informal meeting with family members. For example, if a team meeting is scheduled to address learning concerns, the teacher or school psychologist should meet with the family ahead of time to describe the purpose and context of the meeting, discuss the options that will be presented, and allow family members to ask

questions about procedures. This increases the likelihood the parents will feel comfortable enough to actively participate in the formal team meeting.

Regular and positive communication. A frequent complaint families have is that communication with their child's teacher is intermittent and only happens when something goes wrong. The most productive home-school collaborations involve regular communication with parents by e-mail, phone, or letter, several times a week. Such contacts are not limited to negative feedback about a child's behavior or performance. While educators recognize that students need positive reinforcement, they often forget that parents also respond to and appreciate positive feedback about their children. Parents who receive such positive messages are much more likely to participate in the school and in their children's learning. Further, beginning a meeting on a positive note sets a nonadversarial tone for a collaborative meeting that empowers families to feel like full, welcome contributors to the process.

Emphasizing Strengths. Communications that begin with a student's strengths and content that is framed as progress are received much more positively than the weekly behavior reports that some educators use. The strengths should reflect both the teacher's perspective and that of the parents. Educators can gain a parent's perspective by asking questions about a child's historical strengths and talents and how those are reflected in the child's behavior and academic skills at the present time. Families may identify strengths that school professionals have not yet observed, providing greater insight into the child. It is wise to end all meetings by revisiting the strengths of the child and considering how those can be integrated into planned interventions. When we use strengths to build upon weaker skills, the chances for success increase. Also, it always helps to end meetings on a positive note to increase family support for and ownership of any proposed changes in the child's educational program.

Empowering the parent. For ethnic minority families who have been historically disenfranchised, empowerment is crucial to establishing a collaborative relationship. There are many subtle ways to empower without being condescending. One way is to create a physical setting that is conducive to collaboration. For example, set up a seating arrangement that is free of barriers. If teachers usually sit behind a desk with parents on the other side, change that. Set up a small circle of chairs or place chairs side by side. During a conference, open-ended questions will facilitate more substantive input from parents. When giving feedback, it is also helpful to ask for parent's impressions first, before soliciting views from school personnel. When families are asked first, they are more likely to provide insight from their cultural perspective; simultaneously, school staff can increase their cultural literacy in the context of this particular child and family. Another empowering technique is to validate the parent's opinions and statements by acknowledging observations of the same patterns at school. By validating and using the parent's language (same phrasing), school staff build connections and align with families. Finally, if using interpreters during meetings, school staff should maintain as much eye contact with the family as possible to facilitate the nonverbal connection with the parents.

SUMMARY

Effective home-school collaborations can lead to the most successful educational outcomes for all students, particularly for students from culturally and linguistically diverse families. Culturally competent practices help build respectful relationships among schools and families, shared

responsibility for decision making, and a strong sense of community—all directed toward the shared goal of student success.

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- National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCRESt): <http://www.nccrest.org>
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE): <http://www.ncpie.org>

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