

The Board's Role: Engaging Families to Improve Learning

Set clear expectations

➤ **Develop a set of positive beliefs about family involvement at the board table.**

When the board/superintendent team identifies their beliefs about parents as important partners in student learning, the work unifies the board and charts the course for district efforts. Communicating the beliefs verbally and in written policy promotes a district-wide culture of strong school and family connections to improve student learning.

Research Brief:

Experts say that school leaders who have been successful in building strong family involvement efforts express the beliefs that all parents have dreams for and want the best for their children and that all parents, regardless of background, can help their children learn.

- **Set expectations that all district efforts to connect with families are focused on learning.** District staff work hard to increase family involvement for different purposes such as volunteerism or fundraising, but only those that are *linked to learning* will result in improved student achievement. The board/superintendent team should make sure that efforts designed to engage families earn the biggest impact. Family involvement should be implemented as a **strategy** to support the district's learning goals, and should be a part of every school's improvement plan. For example, if the district's improvement focus is on reading comprehension, a question that should be addressed district-wide is "*How will we empower our parents to support our goal to ensure all children learn to read well?*"
- **Set expectations that programs and initiatives will result in trusting, respectful and meaningful relationships among school staff, families and community members.** Communicating expectations for a district culture that invites and honors parents as equal partners in their children's education is a key role for the board/superintendent team.

Research Brief:

Experts say that building effective partnerships is the most important aspect to building strong school-family-community connections to improve student learning.

Create conditions for success

➤ **Provide supports to develop strong connections with families focused on learning.**

A key role of the board is to ensure that staff is equipped with knowledge and skills to develop meaningful relationships with families based on mutual trust and respect. Staff also require the time needed to build partnerships, engage in two-way communication about student learning, and promote a variety of ways parents can support children's learning, including supporting children's learning at home.

Research Brief:

How parents decide to be involved in their children's learning is heavily influenced by past schooling experiences. Since parental "role construction" is shaped by social experiences, schools can help change how parents view themselves and can help parents see themselves as important partners in their children's learning.

Hold the System Accountable to the Expectations

➤ **Monitor to ensure all family engagement initiatives are focused on student learning and support district/building learning goals.**

A critical role for board members is to monitor the impact of parent involvement programs on student learning. The board must determine what they will accept as evidence of progress toward the set expectations – data can be both formal (e.g. student achievement data, surveys etc.) and informal (e.g. anecdotal information, meeting agendas, etc.).

One effective method of monitoring progress is to ask guiding questions at the board table. For example, the question, "*What evidence do we have that parents know and understand what their children are expected to learn this year?*" conveys the board's belief that parents are important partners in children's learning success and also defines the kind of information the board wants to see to help monitor and recognize the effectiveness of district efforts. For additional guiding questions see, *Guiding Questions: Family & Community Connections to Improve Learning* at www.schoolboardresearch.org.

Build Collective Will

➤ **Advocate for an increased network of school-community partnerships and resources that help parents support their children's learning.**

Ensuring students succeed in school is a moral, economic and civic issue. As locally elected officials and community members, the board can work with local businesses and organizations to help the community embrace a shared responsibility to ensure the learning of all students. Together, school leaders, community partners and parents can identify barriers to parent involvement and create innovative solutions that meet the diverse needs of local families.

An Iowa example:

Waterloo school district leaders met with local businesses to minimize the barriers to parent involvement. As a result, local businesses agreed to give parents paid time off from work to attend parent-teacher conferences, while the district agreed to offer parent-teacher conferences during various times of the day and evening to meet the diverse needs of families.

Learn Together as a Board/Superintendent Team

- **Establish time at the board table to learn and discuss parent involvement as a strategy to improve learning.** Developing common understandings about the research on parent involvement and defining common beliefs among board members provides the board with important information to help guide effective decision-making. Investing time to learn about local families – their strengths, their needs and their beliefs about school and family roles to support learning – enables the board ensure district efforts are responsive to the diverse needs of families and children.

For additional information or more resources on engaging parents to improve student learning, contact Lou Ann Gvist at the Iowa School Boards Foundation, Lgvist@ia-sb.org, (515) 288-1991 or 1-800-795-4272; or visit www.schoolboardresearch.org

References:

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