RESEARCH BRIEF | JULY 2019

Leveraging Families for Student Success

INTRODUCTION

Making family involvement a central component of the school community positively affects students' success in school and their career aspirations (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Social Cognitive Career Theory indicates that individual achievement aspirations are influenced by both social and cognitive factors. A student's beliefs about their abilities to attain a particular career and their interest level in a career pathway are highly influenced by their social relationships, especially within their family and during early adolescence (Turner & Lapan, 2002). For example, students measure the appropriateness of their career choices against how they think their families will value that career path, and they judge their own potential competency at a vocation based on their family's support. They are also inclined to hold value for and self-efficacy toward certain occupations when those occupations align with themes that are supported by their family and community (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). In light of these findings, including families in school processes for developing students' academic and career pathways is a critical part of student success (Turner & Lapan, 2002). However, schools are often not confident in how to better involve families, and likewise, families are not always sure of how to best support their children as students and future professionals. This is often a result of tensions in the structures, systems, and norms between homes and institutions of education (Mapp & Kutner, 2013).

LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES

A social reform paradigm shift is currently affecting programs of community service, including those intended to increase family engagement in schools (Mapp & Kutner, 2013; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010; Baurm, Kniffin, & Priest, 2015). This shift represents a movement away from a historical focus on affecting change by providing services rather than developing tools and assets within the community where the change is desired (Baum, Kniffin, & Priest, 2015). In the case of schools specifically, there has been a tendency to view families as liabilities, as opposed to assets that may be leveraged for student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This perspective alone can be the downfall of family partnership efforts because it undermines trust and the potential to build positive and supportive relationships with families for the sake of student achievement. Meaningful learning and shared responsibility can only take place when there is a foundation of trust and respect between families and school (Mapp & Kutner, 2013).

Language, structures, and relationships have been identified by researchers as some of the primary components for enacting a shift from viewing families as liabilities and toward viewing them as assets (Baur, Kniffin, & Priest, 2015).

> *Schools, leaders, and staff can begin by shifting their vocabulary about family engagement, and thus the way they think about it, from an approach of "doing for" to "working with" students and families.*
>
> **(Baur, Kniffin, & Priest, 2015)**

Additionally, thinking should frame efforts towards family engagement as an on-going part of the whole-school system rather than as "random acts" (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010, p. 1). But words and thoughts are not enough. School structures aimed at increasing family engagement should be supported by leaders through the school's budget, policies, and culture (Mapp & Kutner, 2015). Mapp and Kutner's (2013) framework for family-school partnerships defines "opportunity conditions" as an integration of this shift in approach into whole-school practices such as the training of staff, development of curriculum, and planning of extra-curricular events (p. 8).

Guiding questions for systemic and integrated family involvement

1. How can our school use opportunities when families are on school premises to the most advantage?

2. How can our school use the extra-curricular activities that families already attend to also engage them in terms of enriching their involvement in monitoring or advocating for their student's academic or career development progress?

3. How can our school make it easier for families to attend events?

4. How can our school leverage the ways that families engage with their students and the school outside of the school building?

MASLOW'S LEVELS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a model describing human motivation. It has been referenced and used in numerous community services applications including education and social work. The general idea is that the first level of needs will be primary motivators until those needs are met and then the next level of needs will emerge as primary motivators (Maslow, 1943). It is often not within our power or even our place to urge others along on the pyramid. For example, offering students a snack before a test is a one-time boost, rather than a solution, to the problem of food insecurity, and it likely won't move them to the next level of motivators on the pyramid. However, this model can inform our processes of engaging with others and help us to identify the strengths of families who are operating on each level.

NEEDS		ASSETS
Moral Cause, creativity, innovation	**5** INNOVATOR	Problem-solving, vision
Self-respect, self-improvement	**4** ACHIEVER	High expectations, motivated
Connections, belonging	**3** SEEKER	Eager to learn, attentive
Safety, security	**2** PROTECTOR	Work ethic, perseverance
Food, shelter	**1** SURVIVOR	Resilient, adaptive

Maslow, A.H. (1943). "A theory of human motivation". Psychological Review. 50 (4): 370–96. CiteSeerX 10.1.1.334.7586.

Families of students may be found on all levels of this pyramid, though in varying proportions based on a school's demographics. Efforts to engage families must recognize that the primary goals (and motivators of participation) will differ depending on the families' current level. There is likely little to no extra effort needed to get a family that is in the achiever or innovator level to attend an event planned at the school. However, for families on the survivor or protector levels, barriers to attendance at school events and navigating the school's systems might be related to income, work schedules, and language proficiency (Mapp & Kutner 2013). Cognizance of these barriers can inspire strategies that are responsive to the strengths and goals of families at these levels. Schools can then consider alternative ways for families to meet school goals from home, offer variety in participation options, or scaffold trust-building and the navigation of their school systems (Epstien & Salinas, 2004; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Awareness can improve the quality of engagement with schools for families operating on higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy as well. Families on the seeker and even the achiever levels have a strong motivational base for participation, but they also need affirmation that they are where they belong, contributing correctly, respected, and sharing in the decision-making process for their student (Maslow, 2004; Mapp & Kutner, 2013). Strategies should take into consideration how to scaffold confidence in families' ability to advocate for their students, in terms of development, academics, and the career discovery journey (Epstien & Salinas, 2014; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

LEVERAGING RELATIONSHIPS

The shift to an asset-based approach to family-school relationships involves moving from an expert-driven approach to a shared-knowledge approach (Baur, Kniffen, & Priest, 2015; Mapp & Kutner, 2014; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). Just as social cognitive theory suggests that family's beliefs about their students' ability shapes a student's beliefs about their own ability, a teacher or principal's beliefs about a family's ability shapes that family's beliefs about their own ability (Bandura, 1976).

If we believe that families can participate in their student's academic and career success, then relationships move from seeing families as passive clients who we advise, to seeing them as expert partners on their own children's and community's needs (Ishimaru et al, 2016). An assets approach urges us to look for families' strengths and help them identify resources for success instead of expecting failure because of perceived liabilities. We give families options and chances to take responsibility rather than seeing them as incapable of affecting change (Mapp & Kutner, 2013).

In addition to the traditional one-on-one relationship between a family and a teacher (or other school personnel), a great deal of potential can be leveraged through families' relationships with one another (Ishimaru et al, 2016; Han & Love, 2015). Especially in low-income and low English-proficient families, peer liaisons can effectively bridge engagement by helping navigate systems and interpretation (Han & Love, 2015). The traditional forms of family engagement are largely creations of white middle-class norms. Family engagement efforts aimed at community-building between families can better leverage strengths and resources in ways that reflect the cultural norms and practices of families outside this demographic (Ishimaru et al, 2016).

Guiding questions for building the capacity of family relationships

1. How can our school facilitate community building between families?

2. How can our school facilitate peer support relationships between families?

3. How can our school engage families as partners in curriculum goals and their student's progress?

4. How can our school engage families as partners in their student's career development process?

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