

PATHWAY TWO: FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The Family, School, and Community Partnerships Pathway can simultaneously seem like the easiest Pathway for a Community-District Team (Team) to address and the most challenging. It seems obvious that a Team centered in the community and district would be well-situated to connect families, schools, and communities. However, it is often challenging to gain buy-in and support for educational improvements from those who do not work in education on a daily basis. This Pathway is key to successful Ready Schools initiatives that require the support of families and communities to make a difference in the lives of all of the children in the community.



Key Understandings

- ▶ There should be a shared understanding among family, school, and community entities that families are children's first teachers.
- ▶ Families, schools, and communities should actively partner to address academic needs of and support for families and students.
- ▶ General public awareness of the critical nature of early years is key to gaining support from a wide population of stakeholders in the community.
- ▶ The Community-District Team's vision and mission must be understood by all community stakeholders.
- ▶ It is important that the school board and superintendent are educated on the Ready Schools Initiative and supportive of the action plan.
- ▶ Families, schools, communities, and service providers need to have a common readiness language.





The Work

The work of the Community-District Team includes the following major tasks:

The Team should develop and use a common language to discuss Ready Schools topics.

- ▶ Brochures, newsletters, and websites provide a visual means of sharing the language while trainings, meetings, and events can also provide an auditory means. It is important to make the language as family-friendly as possible so that education jargon does not present a barrier.

The Team should communicate the premise that families are children's first teachers.

- ▶ Families teach their children every day through conversations (questioning and answering), outings (grocery shopping), and daily tasks (sorting the laundry). While these activities present powerful teaching opportunities, they are often overlooked as educational. Demonstrating how families teach their children on a daily basis gives more prestige and recognition to this important piece of the Ready Schools puzzle.

The Team should identify and meet the needs of families in the community.

- ▶ Asking families about their needs and providing the support requested builds trust and encourages the collaboration needed to do the work of Ready Schools.
- ▶ Respecting the cultural diversity in the community will require involving families in the discussion of ideas and planning of activities that meet the needs of all families.

The Team should identify and obtain resources to sustain the Ready Schools Initiative.

- ▶ Families and communities provide a wealth of resources outside of financial support. Tapping into the interests and abilities of families and communities enables the Community-District Team to increase their capacity to do the work of Ready Schools.



The Team should communicate the Team's vision, mission, and goals through words and actions.

- ▶ One way to determine if families, schools, and the community are aware of the vision, mission, and goals of the Community-District Team is to ask stakeholders. Basic questions can reveal the community's perception of the Team's vision, mission, and goals. Questions might include: "What does the Team do to engage in the work of Ready Schools?" and "At what events are Team members present?" To move beyond collaboratively developed documents, the Community-District Team must follow through with actions.

The Team should engage community leaders (civic, faith, and business) in Ready Schools work.

- ▶ Community-District Teams must find creative ways to engage community leaders especially in tough economic times when resources are sparse.



Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

Ideally, a significant number of the members of the Community-District Team should be individuals who are not primarily associated with the schools or school district. It is important, however, for there to be several key members on the Team who are school personnel, to ensure connections and collaboration with the Ready Schools School-Based Teams and district and school buy-in. Community, religious, and cultural organizations can provide valuable information to the Team, district, and schools about communicating, planning, and responding to the needs and preferences of families and children.

Examples of Team members include:

School personnel; family members of children aged 3 to 8; early education professionals; community organization representatives; community, faith, and business leaders; higher education professionals from local institutions; city council members; and directors of a community social services group. Team membership should reflect the diversity present in the community.

It is important that, to the extent possible, the non-school members, such as family members and community organization professionals, are not also teachers in the schools. Although teachers are important members of the group, making sure others are also in the group provides a variety of perspectives to extend the work of the Team to the whole community, not just those already well-versed in the educational processes.



Sustainability

One challenge many Community-District Teams note is developing relationships and maintaining connections with Team members whose busy professional and personal lives often mean they cannot attend meetings regularly. Barriers to Team participation include childcare, transportation, and work schedules. Some community and family members that would be desirable on the Team may not feel comfortable attending meetings. One way to address this challenge is to ask more than one family representative or more than one early care and education professional to participate. Another way to encourage a variety of community members to participate is to have Level One members and Level Two members. Level One members would be those who can attend regular meetings and Level Two members could be those who are involved in specific projects on an intermittent basis. This strategy has had success in the districts served by the Down East Partnership for Children (Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools and Edgecombe County Public Schools). It is also very important to have flexible and varied Team meeting times, schedules, and locations.

One example of creatively engaging community partners comes from Carteret County. The Carteret County Partnership for Children held a Family Fun Quest and engaged the community by having business sponsors participate in the event. Sponsors had booths with approved educational activities and giveaways. A dentist participated in the event and said that he was happily surprised to not only advertise his business but also learn about initiatives that advocate for early childhood education. This type of activity spurs sustainability. Flyers and templates for organizing such an event are included in Appendix C, Resources for Pathway Two: Family, School, and Community Partnerships at the end of the Toolkit.

The Importance of the School within the Community

You need to understand, in a rural community like this, the school is the community and the people at the school are trusted. So, if anything is going to happen, it will have to be connected to the school.

–Chatham Ready Schools Team Member



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Focus on Families

1. Are a wide range of families involved in Ready Schools work?
 - » If one Team concern is increasing family involvement, take a step back, look at the big picture from the perspectives of families, and make sure the Team work aligns with their needs and is explained in terms of how it does so.
 - » Are activities sensitive to the diversity of families?
2. Can you identify the greatest need of families in your community? How well do you address that need?
 - » The Team can consider conducting family surveys in various modes (paper, web-based, phone conversations, surveys, or focus groups at community events) to gather information from families about their needs. See Appendix C, Resources for Pathway Two: Family, School, and Community Partnerships for an example of a family survey from the Down East Partnership for Children.

Thinking Beyond Families

3. In what ways does the Community-District Team support school-business partnerships?
 - » Teams can provide information to business leaders regarding school and business partnerships including benefits, expectations, and resources needed and available.
 - » Local non-profits can adopt schools and provide money and/or resources to support school-business partnerships.
 - » Teams can involve the Chamber of Commerce in supporting the school district (e.g., providing sponsorships, tutors, speakers, in-kind donations, internships, etc.).
4. Have you collected an inventory of community and district/school assets, resources, and needs?
 - » Businesses may be hesitant or unable to provide funding for events, but they may be able to provide food for a family night dinner or volunteers to provide activity centers for children so their families can attend Community-District Team events.
 - » Teams should consider holding a community forum to discuss challenges and the resources and assets available to help meet those challenges.

Evaluating District Responsibilities

5. Does the district value authentic family and community involvement in school decision-making?
 - » See The Citizen's Handbook (http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/2_16_visioning.html) for examples of ways to engage all stakeholders guiding change in schools, districts, and communities.
6. Does the district promote an open door policy for family involvement?
 - » Is it clear to all families that they are welcome, their ideas are appreciated, and they are members of the team?
 - » Does the district show understanding of the value of the varied perspectives of families and community groups through their policies and practices?
7. Does the district offer professional development on effectively engaging families and communities?
 - » Consider offering workshops that bring families, early childhood professionals, and school personnel together to address the topic collaboratively.
 - » Use information gathered through a focus group on families and engagement with community organizations and businesses to guide conversations.



Taking Action

Support Families as Teachers

Provide resources (strategies, ideas, training) for families that support them in teaching their children.

- ▶ One elementary school served by the Down East Partnership for Children created a family resource center designed to help families feel they were welcome at the school. This space was available for parent-teacher conferences; held a library of additional resources available for families, such as Rosetta Stone for English as a Second Language; and provided other items to support families.
- ▶ The above idea could be expanded to be more of a community resource center. Consider housing it outside of a school, at a community center, a faith-based facility, or a local library.
- ▶ Members of social services organizations and health organizations could also hold "office hours" in the space to encourage more families to access their services and help them see the benefit of the family, school, and community connections.
- ▶ Consider holding or sponsoring community events (story time at libraries, free days at museums, etc.) that support children and families.

Develop a Community Resource Guide

Support the development of a community resource guide available in appropriate languages for families depicting community support providers.

- ▶ Developing a guide that addresses social needs, as well as educational resources, helps families know that educational supports are available in their communities.
- ▶ Including community organizations, social services, and health providers in this guide is an easy way to encourage buy-in from community groups that might not otherwise consider themselves explicitly connected to the schools or district.
- ▶ See the Community Resource Guide provided with permission from Davidson County in Appendix C, Resources for Pathway Two: Family, School, and Community Partnerships for a detailed example.

Make Data-Driven Decisions

Track data regarding the type of events that are well attended by families.

- ▶ For example, are there families from certain groups that attend school performances but do not attend PTO meetings? If so, consider offering PTO information booths at the school performances and sending materials home with families after the show.
- ▶ Consider holding high-profile, well-publicized events at the beginning of the school year in order to build relationships and community earlier in the school year. For example, The Wayne County Community-District Team shared a story of a principal who scheduled Field Day during the first semester of school. The principal set up an information booth near the entrance of the Field Day festivities and had individual conversations with families who attended. The principal handed each family a packet of materials, including any forms that needed to be completed to start the school year successfully.



Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Some families may seem less involved and more difficult to contact.

- ▶ If your communities include immigrant groups or ethnic populations, consider engaging other agencies to act as a cultural liaison. If the challenge is contacting families by phone, for example, a visit to a local community center or cultural organization with a liaison may bring more success.
- ▶ Some districts representatives have gone door-to-door with a liaison in communities where families have been known to not attend many school-based functions to meet and greet them and gather information vital to a successful school experience. See the Transitions Pathway for concrete examples of how these visits work and the successes that some districts have had with them.
- ▶ A school served by the Down East Partnership for Children conducted a "Meet Me at the Bus Stop" activity. The principal and assistant principal drove a bus to school communities to host a conversational session with families who might not otherwise come to visit school. They found that families and children flocked to the bus when it was in the neighborhood and that the school personnel were able to make valuable, positive first impressions with the families.

Often teachers are the ones who ask for more family involvement or who dream of all their families being active participants in schools. Down East Partnership for Children stresses that sometimes the Community-District Team needs to ask teachers to be honest. For example, Teams can ask teachers, "What do you mean by family involvement?" A more challenging question is: "What if what you want is not how families want to be involved?"





Strategies for Overcoming Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Conduct a Book Study

Consider conducting a book study at the Community-District Team level, or as a community, to collaboratively seek ways to engage all stakeholders. The following books are ones mentioned by various Community-District Teams in North Carolina as ones that spur conversation and action to meet the goals of Teams:

- ▶ Davis, C. & Yang, A. (2005). *Parents and teachers working together*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- ▶ Henderson, A. T., Johnson, V., Mapp, K. L., & Davies, D. (2006). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family/school partnerships*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- ▶ Jacobs, G. & Crowley, K. (2010). *Reaching standards and beyond in Kindergarten: Nurturing children's sense of wonder and joy in learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Remember Families Can Be Involved in Many Ways

Remember that families do not have to come to schools to be engaged. For example, consider using a strategy described by the Down East Partnership for Children called Home Helpers. Schools provide families with activities or things that they can do from home to help.

See Working Together: School-Family-Community Partnerships (http://www.cesdp.nmhu.edu/toolkit/family_tools/index.html) for specific tools and resources about family and community involvement around six specific themes: improving communication; promoting positive parenting; enhancing student learning; increasing volunteerism; supporting decision-making and advocacy; and collaborating with the community.

Families can also make a difference by helping connect local organizations and businesses with the district or by being involved with the larger community (not just with the school).

Conduct Home Visits

A Guide to Home Visits

The Michigan Department of Education's division of Early Childhood Programs produced this thorough guide. Sample forms included. [Archived copy found on docstoc.com]
<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/7257956/2-A-Guide-to-Home-Visits>

A Guide to Team Home Visits

This guide from the San Francisco Unified School District provides rationale, preparation tips, protocols, timelines, and other suggestions.
<http://www.healthiersf.org/Forms/parentFamily/A%20Guide%20to%20Team%20Home%20Visits.pdf>

Connect with Businesses to Provide Incentives

If you feel your families need incentives to volunteer at school, after clearly defining what types of volunteerism you would like, ask local businesses to donate gift cards. When a family member volunteers, s/he has a chance to win a gift card. This strategy is one used successfully in the districts served by the Down East Partnership for Children. We are all aware of budget challenges (staff, materials, food, and personnel), and connecting with businesses is one strategy for overcoming this barrier.

For more resources see Appendix C, Resources for Pathway Two: Family, School, and Community Partnerships at the end of the Toolkit.



**Ready Schools in Action:
Redefining Parent Involvement,
Bogue Sound Elementary School in Carteret County**

The administrators, faculty, and staff revised parental involvement strategies in order to engage more families in meaningful activities. Specific examples of their activities follow.

1. They asked families when was the best time for them to attend school events.
 - ◇ While school personnel expected families to request after school events, they found that families preferred to come to school during the work day.
2. The administrators scheduled Field Day at the beginning of the year to provide an opportunity for early relationship building.
3. The teachers designed class parties and seasonal events to include embedded educational activities.
4. They conducted a survey of families. One finding was that the families did not want to attend lectures on Family Night or Open House at school. Instead, they wanted fun activities that they could do with their children at home.
 - ◇ Teachers set up centers with educational games and activities for parents to lead.
 - ◇ At the end of the program, parents were given take-home activities to do with their children.
5. The school selected a few model classrooms to be able to provide concrete information to families about the activities their children would engage in at school.
 - ◇ The administrator bought the model classrooms a digital camera and photo printer.
 - ◇ These devices allow teachers to capture teachable moments (i.e. a student's block tower that depicts an interesting design) and discuss them with children and families.
6. The school found that most children and their families enjoy seeing pictures of themselves at the events, and seeing the pictures encouraged other children and their families to attend future events.
 - ◇ Teachers include pictures of children in their newsletters to gain parents' attention.
 - ◇ Pictures are taken at family events throughout the school year and included in a slideshow that runs continually in the front of the building.
7. Teachers post educational objectives beside artwork in the hallways.
 - ◇ This practice increases awareness of the relationship between standards and activities/lessons.

