PATHWAY TWO: FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Family, school, and community partnerships are the foundation upon which local Ready Schools Initiatives are built. They work together in the following ways:

➤ The families, school, and community partner to address academic, social, and cultural needs of students.

➤ The school district works with families to determine practices and policies that encourage a variety of opportunities for community and family participation in all aspects of school life.

➤ The families, school, and community partner to foster children's school readiness and to support children's learning and development in and outside of schools.

➤ The families, school, and community partner to provide opportunities and services that support child-specific learning.

Key Understandings

Effective family, school, and community partnerships involve mutual trust, open two-way communication, and the belief that all children can succeed in school. In order for this partnership to be successful, all parties must be engaged.

To better understand the Family, School, and Community Partnerships Pathway, consider the following:

➤ All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them.

➤ All families have the capacity to support their children's learning.

➤ Families, community, and school staff should actively partner to address academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs of students and families.

➤ Schools often decide independently what constitutes family involvement. Some families feel alienated from schools. It is important to learn from families their beliefs about the role of schools and teachers in their children's lives, as well as how they think they could benefit from engagement with the school and classroom.

➤ Community, religious, and cultural organizations can provide schools with valuable information to help them communicate, plan, and respond to the needs and preferences of children and families.

➤ Community-initiated activities provide opportunities for family and school interactions.

Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Schools and communities may wish to reflect on the following questions as they engage in the Ready Schools Assessment Process. These questions, along with suggested tools, may help further the collaborative work of schools, families, and communities:

➤ Do the school's polices and educational practices encourage positive relationships with families and the community?

➤ What does the research say about best practices for encouraging family and community involvement? Are we implementing those best practices?

➤ Does the school provide multiple opportunities for families with varied availability, backgrounds, talents, and abilities to be involved in the school?

➤ Does our staff have sufficient training in family-centered practices so that they are comfortable engaging with families for the sake of developing strong family school partnerships?

➤ Does our staff understand the strong links between family engagement and positive learning outcomes for children?

➤ Do we remember to look at family and community involvement in schools at higher grade levels as well as elementary school?

Remember that dialogue is a vital part of any genuine effort to look deeply into school practices and policies. Real change will be sustained by a regular and honest exchange of ideas within a collaborative team.

Taking Action

The following guiding questions and activities can help schools and districts begin or further their work in family, school, and community partnerships.

1. What are the characteristics of effective family/community involvement?

Relationships with families begin long before children arrive at school. Effective family involvement means more than holding annual parent teacher conferences or back-to-school nights. Effective family involvement is established through the development of personal relationships, open communication, and mutual respect. These must begin as early as possible and long before a child arrives at school.

2. How do we build these early relationships?

Explore the possibility of the "community school model" (Coalition for Community Schools). A community school is a public school acting as a hub. It collaborates with many partners to provide supports and opportunities for children, youth, families, and community members before, after, and during school hours, seven days a week. Community story time, mentoring, English or foreign language classes, family reading programs, and family support services may be some of the activities provided.

Ready Schools in Action:
Nash County Elementary School Establishes Family Resource Center

With support from the Down East Partnership for Children and funding from the school, Title I, and private grants, a family resource center was established at Winstead Avenue Elementary School. The school's decision to create a family resource center was based on the findings from the High/Scope Assessment.

The center is a quiet, informal, friendly room where family members, teachers, and students can meet in conference or in special study. In addition to a closet fully stocked with children's clothing, shoes, toys, and other items for emergency needs, there are computers, books, ESL materials, learning games, and education brochures.

Funding for transportation has also been a part of the program to enable families to participate in school programs and conferences.

Strategies for Building Partnerships

If you were to look into an open and welcoming school you would see that:

☑ All staff greet children, visitors, and each other in a friendly way.

☑ Front office staff acknowledges visitors as they walk in the door.

☑ The principal is visible and available.

☑ Teachers greet children and families as they arrive and leave each day.

☑ The school has a bulletin board with pictures of all the staff and other children and families.

☑ There is artwork throughout the school which reflects the diversity of the school community.

Partnering with the Community:

➤ Contact your local child care resource and referral agency (CCR&R) or Smart Start partnership about how to build relationships with the child care community. This can be an effective method for reaching out to children and their families long before they get to school. Talk directly with child care providers about the curriculum they are using and invite them to bring children to the school for special visits.

➤ Create a community resource guide communicating specific information about the community/school and the resources and services available. Information pertaining to the school system, kindergarten entry, human services, civic organizations, health tips, and opportunities for volunteerism could all be addressed.

➤ Hold a community informational fair. Community agencies can work together to focus on a particular topic (health, kindergarten transition, early childhood, career day, etc.) and provide seminars, pamphlets, and demonstrations.

➤ Offer community-friendly events (such as story time at the library, art fairs, free days at museums, etc.) that support children and families within the community.

➤ Actively involve community organizations on the School-Based Team.

➤ Host special community nights at local schools. These can be fundraisers for school activities and involve families and their children in the school at an earlier age.

➤ Collaborate with programs already serving families of young children. Examples of these programs are Parents as Teachers, Welcome Baby, Early Head Start, and other parent education and home visitation programs. Engage these programs in connecting families with young children to special opportunities at the schools.

➤ Participate with other organizations in community events in order to help families understand the role of the school in the life of the community.

Partnering with Families:.

Make School a Resource for Families

▸ Open the school playgrounds to neighborhood families and organize regular activities to encourage use and build relationships.

▸ Offer family education and other community enrichment courses including not only GED, English, and family literacy courses but also courses in leadership development, budgeting, exercising, and cooking, among others.

▸ Provide resources targeting the developmental needs of children by age/grade level along with corresponding strategies that families could adopt at home to support their children.

▸ Create family-run support groups that provide opportunities for families to support each other and interact with one another. Sometimes families prefer this type of group because of its nonthreatening approach.

▸ Develop an interactive web-based information site for new parents. This website would provide a source of information for parents of young children and promote it wherever you find families with young children (the doctor's office, the grocery store, the library, the neighborhood park, the hair salon and barber shop, public health departments, laundromats, and the shopping mall).

Create a Welcoming Environment

▸ Build relationships with families prior to kindergarten by offering a variety of transition activities for children, including visits to kindergarten classrooms, home visits, and workshops for families.

▸ Focus on family strengths and availability. Effective family involvement does not have to occur during the regular school day.

▸ Take into consideration the varying cultural, literacy, and language backgrounds of all of their families and community members. This includes ensuring that school-home communications are available in other languages and that staff diversity reflects that of the student population.

▸ Understand that the past experiences that parents had with schools, either from their own childhood or their younger children, will influence how they feel about interacting with the school today.

Foster Open Communication

› Determine multiple ways to find out what families need and want.

› Make sure that your first communication with a family is positive.

› Ask families how they would like to be contacted. Possible responses may include paper, automated telephone alerts, dialogue journals, phone, website, etc.

› Be clear about the best ways and times for families to contact teachers and other staff at the school.

› In cases of divorce or non-custodial care situations, determine if communication should be sent to the primary and/or secondary caregiver.

› Be available during non-traditional work hours to meet or communicate with working families.

› Have regularly scheduled family meetings and conferences.

› Take into account family needs. Do they need translation services, transportation, or child care? Are there opportunities for involvement at different times of the day? Can the family do anything from home, after work, or on weekends? If the family cannot come to the school for a conference, can it be scheduled in the community or as a home visit or phone call? Who is typically coming to events? Who is not? Why?

Build Shared Ownership in the School Community

› Offer families resources on how to be effectively involved with their children at school and at home. These may include trainings on the curriculum, expectations, and ideas for activities to reinforce classroom instruction.

› Incorporate family talents. What talents do the families in your community possess? Can they be a tutor or mentor? Teach a foreign language or other skill?

› Increase volunteerism. Recruit school volunteers through families and a variety of community service organizations. Create a wish list of tasks for which volunteers are needed.

Encourage and Support Family Engagement

> ❯ Increase professional development for early childhood educators and all school staff on any of the items that are identified on the Ready Schools Assessment in answer to the questions related to engaging with families and the community.

> ❯ Create policies that incorporate family and community outreach and respect and sensitivity for cultural and economic diversity.

> ❯ Provide administrative support and encourage home visiting as a strategy for developing partnerships between families and classroom teachers. Include training for teachers on effective home visiting so that teachers are comfortable with the purpose, and competent in building positive relationships.

> ❯ Provide training in family-centered partnerships that includes staff, community, and family participants to model effective relationship building.

Do we take a family-centered approach in our school? (Adapted from the National Principles of Family Support Practice)

☐ School and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.

☐ School enhances families' capacity to support the growth and development of their children.

☐ Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.

☐ A school affirms and strengthens families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhances their ability to function in a multi-cultural society.

☐ School programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.

☐ School programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.

☐ School staff works with families to mobilize formal and informal resources and to support family development.

☐ School programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.

☐ Principles of family support are modeled in all school activities, including planning, governance, and administration.