Creating Environments that Work for All Students: Real Manuals for Real Teachers

Increasing Family Involvement for Special Populations

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Creating Environments that Work for All Students:
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Introduction

Improving family involvement is both an individual goal for each teacher and a school-wide goal for the School Advisory Committee as reflected in the school Continuous Improvement Plan. This section will focus on activities for individual teachers, particularly in special education programs.

Family involvement is a significant factor in improving educational outcomes. The family makes critical contributions to student achievement from the earliest childhood years through high school, and efforts to improve children’s outcomes are much more effective when the family is actively involved.

When family involvement is increased

Students and families benefit by:

- Higher grades
- Better attendance and homework completion
- More positive attitudes
- Higher graduation rates
- Higher rates of college enrollment

Teachers and schools benefit by:

- Improved teacher morale
- Improved school climate
- Higher ratings of teachers by parents
- More support from families
**Family Stereotypes – A Major Barrier**

We often think in terms of stereotypes when we consider the families of children who have disabilities (i.e., they cause the problems of their children; they deny the problems; they don't really care; they are overprotective; etc.).

**Overcoming the Barrier of Stereotypes – Some Helpful Values**

 ⇩ **Strengths-Based.** Every person and every family has some strengths. We need to identify each student’s strengths and use them as the foundation of our collaboration with families. Special education, by its nature, is very deficit oriented. This can wear away at a family. A focus on strengths is refreshing and leads to a more effective partnership with the family. Strength-based thinking does not rule out the existence of needs and problems in a family, but rather encourages collaboration with and support of families in the education of their children.

 ⇩ **Cultural and Social Class Sensitivity.** Many racial and ethnic cultures have traditions, customs, and values that a member of a different culture may not understand or may even misinterpret with a negative consequence. The same may be true for social class differences. We all need to continue to educate ourselves about the diversity that makes up our community.

 ⇩ **Accepting Families as Equal Decision-making Partners.** Professionals spend many years in training to learn how to help children. They develop a level of expertise that has been evaluated through university tests and state certification standards. However, we all need to realize that no single profession or agency has all the expertise and resources necessary to solve the broad range of complex problems that challenge children who have disabilities and their families. This does not diminish the worth or value of any individual but it does illustrate that we all need to collaborate and pool our expertise and resources in the best interest of our students. This includes accepting families as equal decision making partners and valuing the expert knowledge they have of their children. For example, children do behave differently at home and in school. When a parent reports this, it is a legitimate piece of information that should be as valued as the observations of any professional.

 ⇩ **Unconditional Help.** When we help students and support families it has to be without strings attached. While it is perfectly sound science to develop interventions with students that are “contingency” based (a reward is given after some successful action) we need to be careful not to incorrectly expand this to our overall relationships with students and families. For example, we cannot have the attitude that we will help families if they conform to our middle class value system or that we will help students only if they dress a certain way or meet our expectations.
Facilitating Family Involvement

Home/School Communication

- Communication is critical in establishing positive relationships with the families of children in special education.
- Focus on successes rather than problems.
- Parents/caregivers will be more receptive if they are not always hearing complaints.

Communicating Classroom Information

- Families need information about academic and behavioral progress to help their children meet expectations established by them and the school.
- Developing early, frequent, on-going communication helps to establish positive relationships with families (see pages 11 – 15 for suggestions).
Activities that Can Make a Difference

✏ Send home a welcoming note at the beginning of the year or second semester. If a student joins your class during the year, send a note home. Make sure that families understand that while you may not respond to communication immediately, you will respond as quickly as you can. Provide families with a copy of your syllabus, if possible.

• A syllabus works well if it includes an introduction to you and the course, the curriculum to be covered during the school year, your grading policy, supplies needed, and the best times and methods for communication with you. (See sample in the Resource Section)

✏ Make phone calls to the family to say hello and relay some positive event. This will help establish rapport if you need to speak with the parents because of a negative incident later in the year. It will also help you understand family circumstances that might impact the student’s performance in your classroom.

• Document all communication with the family in a manner that works best for you (See sample log in the Resource Section). Make a note of the parent’s/guardian’s name and relationship to the student.

✏ Develop a system of communication around the daily planner. This can have an amazingly positive effect on assignment completion. Tie this into frequent feedback on academic performance. Send home positive notes as often as possible. It’s always nice to have a piece of paper to save or send to grandparents.

• Use the student planner to communicate with parents/guardians.

✏ Compose a brief information sheet for parents. List the services that are available to support their child. Let parents know how they can help in your class or in the school.

✏ Find out if you have families that do not speak English. Make resources available to them to facilitate communication with the school including translators and school information in their languages.

• Often students who are not identified as ESOL have parents who don’t speak English. Make sure to ask at the beginning of the school year. (A good website about involving Hispanic parents can be found at www.topher.net/~spurgeon)

✏ Enlist a core of parents with whom you communicate regularly to reach out and invite other parents to school events. They can share their positive stories about the school and special education.
Increasing Family Involvement

- Develop a partnership process and encourage parents and teachers to participate.
- Be aware of and support parent involvement activities developed by the School Advisory Committee. Make sure they include Special Education.
- Document contact that you have with parents so that you are able to follow up on their requests and refer back to previous conversations.

Suggestions for the School Advisory Committee

- Conduct a brief survey to learn about family perceptions and needs. This survey should be short and easy to complete. Most questions could use a rating scale to get the opinions about how families view different activities, etc. These will be easy to score but there should be some open-ended questions to find out what families would like to see at the school.
- Promote a family support group at the school. This is a parent run group to support each other and share information. It is not group therapy. Teachers and administrators may be invited to give specific information about a topic. There are support groups in other school districts that may help in the start up. USF staff can help.
- Offer a parent training program based on local family needs and interests. There are parents who want help in raising their children. There are some low-keyed programs and topics that can be very helpful to these families. USF can help with this.
- Provide refreshments at family events. This is a good way to increase attendance.

Suggestions for Working with Parents

These are some suggestions for helping families to be more involved in their children’s educations.

1. Always be professional.
2. Strive for clear, consistent communication.
3. Be honest and sensitive.
4. Be precise.
5. Inform parents of problems, and, when appropriate, organize a conference to discuss the problem. Keep summaries of conferences on file.
6. Stress the positive.
7. Work together.
8. Whenever possible, ask parents for suggestions about how to work with their children. They know their children best.
9. Don’t use special education jargon. Use terms that everyone can easily understand.
Getting Started

It is important to get families involved in your classroom as soon as possible. The panel recommended the following activities to help do this quickly and efficiently:

- **Send home a welcome letter** with school contact information and information specific to your classroom and routine.

- **Establish positive contact** with each student's family.

- **Establish a positive relationship** with each student.

- **Give parents a phone number** and email address and a time when they can reach you.

- **Help involve students** in special education and their families in school activities such as extra-curricular and volunteer activities.

- **Get involved in the School Advisory Committee (SAC) and the school volunteer program.**

### Family Involvement Checklists

It is important to have a clear picture of how your school interacts with students' families. There are several checklists to help you increase family involvement in your classroom and the school.

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**Family Friendly Schools Checklist**

- **School Climate**
  - There are directions posted for parents to find their way around the school.
  - There is a comfortable reception and information area for parents.
  - There is an orientation program for incoming students and parents.
  - There is a program for students and parents who come to the school after the beginning of the year.
  - Posted signs warmly welcome parents.

- **Communication**
  - Office personnel greet parents in a friendly, courteous way.
  - The principal is available for conferences.
  - The school sends home a directory of parent organization representatives.
  - The school holds annual open houses and back to school nights.
  - The school has a plan for emergencies and burning questions.
  - Parents know where to go with concerns, questions and compliments.
  - The school permits parents to observe in class.

- **Collaboration**
  - Involvement in your classroom and the school.

- **Family Involvement Checklists**
  - **Help involve students**
    - Send home a welcome letter.
    - It is important to get families involved in your classroom as soon as possible.

  - **Establish positive contact**
    - Send home a welcome letter.

  - **Help parents**
    - Help parents increase family involvement in your classroom.

  - **Collaboration**
    - Serve on an advisory or decision-making committee.

  - **School Climate**
    - Share information with a student or class about a hobby.

  - **Communication**
    - Share information with students about a country you visited or lived in.

  - **Collaboration**
    - Help set up an internship or apprenticeship for a student at a business, workplace.

  - **School Climate**
    - Share information with students about a country you visited or lived in.

  - **Collaboration**
    - Serve on an advisory or decision-making committee.

  - **School Climate**
    - Help students work on a final exhibition or project (can also be done at home).

  - **Collaboration**
    - Help coach an athletic team.

  - **School Climate**
    - Help plan a new playground for the school.

  - **Collaboration**
    - Help to create a natural area outside the building where students can learn.

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**Ways Families Can Help Schools**

- **Enter to school in aid**
  - Share information with a student or class about a hobby.

- **Establish positive contact**
  - Share information with students about a country you visited or lived in.

- **Give parents a phone number** and email address and a time when they can reach you.

- **Help involve students** in special education and their families in school activities such as extra-curricular and volunteer activities.

- **Get involved in the School Advisory Committee (SAC) and the school volunteer program.**

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**Home/School Communication Survey**

Think about the following that apply to your school.

- **We notify families about student awards and recognition**
  - We provide clear information about students' participation in special education and their families in school activities such as extra-curricular and volunteer activities.

- **Communication**
  - We notify families about student awards and recognition.

- **Collaboration**
  - We notify families about student awards and recognition.

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Internet Resources:

www.topher.net/~spurgeon/
  Involving Hispanic Families in Their Children’s Education

www.ldonline.com
  LD online is a web site on learning disabilities for parents, teachers, and other professionals

www.behavioradvisor.com
  Behavior Management: Dr. Mac’s Amazing Behavior Management Advice Site

www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm
  National Network of Partnership Schools: Epstein’s Six Types of Involvement
Sample Welcome Letter

Created by:
Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Welcome to a new school year. I am writing to let you know that I am __________’s teacher this year and will be working closely with __________ and you to ensure that the school year goes smoothly. As __________’s teacher, in addition to planning and delivering instruction, my responsibilities include:

• Keeping you informed of successes or problems that arise and asking for your feedback.
• Regularly monitoring your child’s progress in class.

Your involvement in this process is crucial in helping me to help your child be successful this year.

Please feel free to contact me with your questions, concerns, and suggestions.
Call me at: ______________________.
The best times to reach me are: ________________________________.
My email address is: ________________________________________.
I look forward to working with you and ______________________.

Sincerely,
Family Friendly Schools Checklist

School Climate
___ Posted signs warmly welcome parents.
___ There are directions posted for parents to find their way around the school.
___ Office personnel greet parents in a friendly, courteous way.
___ There is a comfortable reception and information area for parents.
___ The principal is available for conferences.
___ There is an orientation program for incoming students and parents.
___ There is a program for students and parents who come to the school after the beginning of the year.
___ There are regular social occasions where parents and school staff can get to know each other.
___ The school permits parents to observe in class.
___ The school has an “Open Door” policy where parents are welcome at any time during the school day.

Communication
___ There is a school newsletter with up-to-date information.
___ The school sends home a calendar listing dates of parent-teacher conferences, report cards and other major events.
___ The school sends home a directory of parent organization representatives and school personnel, with phone numbers.
___ The school holds annual open houses and back to school nights.
___ The school has a plan for emergencies and burning questions.
___ Parents know where to go with concerns, questions and compliments.

Collaboration
___ The school requires at least one parent-teacher conference each year.
___ The school provides in-service training to help teachers work with parents.
___ There is an early warning policy in effect for teachers to consult with parents promptly if a child is falling behind or having social difficulties.
___ High schools require parent approval on students’ choices of courses.
___ The school furnishes information to parents of students enrolled in exceptional education programs regarding training and resources available through the District.

Continued
Advisors and Decision Makers
___ The school publishes a policy handbook for parents.
___ There is a mechanism for obtaining parent input on new policies and programs.
___ There is a parent-teacher organization that meets at least once a month.
___ The staff informs and enlists the help of parents immediately when serious problems arise in the school.
___ Parents are readily consulted regarding major school policy changes.
___ There are varied opportunities for parents to be involved in decision-making (SAC, PTA, school suggestion box, etc.).

Outreach to All Families
___ There is an opportunity for non-custodial parents to be informed about their children’s performance and school events.
___ Teachers communicate at times convenient to parents who have jobs and cannot easily get away during the workday.
___ Written communications are provided in the primary language of the family.

Partnership Philosophy
___ The school has a written statement about partnerships with parents.
___ Time is spent during staff meetings discussing working with parents.
___ Teachers are encouraged to consult with the principal if they are having difficulty dealing with a parent.
___ A staff member substitutes in the classroom to allow teachers and other staff to have meetings with parents.

Volunteer Participation
___ The school has an organized volunteer program with a coordinator.
___ There is a wide variety of jobs available for volunteers, including ones that could be done at home or on weekends.
___ All parents are expected to volunteer or participate in some way during the school year.
___ The volunteer program is reassessed periodically.


From Creating Family-Friendly Schools
Ways Families Can Help Schools

Come to school to assist
___ Share information with a student or class about a hobby.
___ Share information with a student or a class about a career.
___ Share information with students about a country you visited or lived in.
___ Tutor one or a small group of students in reading, math, or other area.
___ Help coach an athletic team.
___ Help put out a school or classroom newsletter (can also be done at home).
___ Help sew or paint a display.
___ Help build something (such as a loft in a classroom or new playground).
___ Help students work on a final exhibition or project (can also be done at home or workplace).
___ Help answer the school’s phone.
___ Help plan a new playground for the school.

Help arrange learning opportunities in the community
___ Help set up an internship or apprenticeship for a student at a business, organization, or agency.
___ Host a one-day “shadow study” for one or a small group of students about a career in business or some other organization.
___ Go on a local field trip with a teacher and a group of students.
___ Go on an extended (3-5 day) cross-country field trip with a teacher and students.
___ Contact a particular local business or organization regarding possible cooperation.
___ Help to create a natural area outside the building where students can learn.

Serve on an advisory or decision-making committee
___ Serve on the school advisory committee.
___ Serve on a school committee that reports to the SAC.
___ Serve on a district committee representing the school.
___ Serve as an officer in the PTSA.
___ Help organize a parent organization for the school.
___ Help design a parent and/or student survey for the school.
___ Help conduct and/or tabulate results of a parent survey regarding the school.

Continued
Ways Families Can Help Schools (Continued)

Share information or advocate for the school
___ Serve as a member of a “telephone tree” to distribute information quickly.
___ Write a letter to legislators about the school. Write a letter to school board members about the school.
___ Go to a school board meeting to advocate for the school.
___ Go to another school to provide information about this school.
___ Help design a brochure or booklet about the school.
___ Help translate information from the school into a language other than English.
___ Help translate a parent-teacher conference for people who don’t speak English well.
___ Provide transportation to a parent-teacher conference for a parent who needs a ride.
___ Write an article for publication in a magazine about the school’s activities.
___ Help arrange for a political leader (mayor, city council, state representative, member of Congress) to visit the school.

Increase financial resources available to the school
___ Help write a proposal that would bring new resources to the school.
___ Donate materials to the school.
___ Arrange for a business or other organization to donate materials to the school.
___ Help with a fundraiser for the school.
**Home/School Communication Survey**

Check each of the following that applies to your school

___ We have formal conferences with every parent at least once a year.
___ We provide language translators to assist families as needed.
___ We provide clear information about report cards and how grades are earned.
___ Parents pick up report cards.

Our school newsletter includes:

___ a calendar of school events
___ student activity information
___ curriculum and program information
___ school volunteer information
___ school governance information
___ samples of student writing and artwork
___ a column to address parents’ questions
___ recognition of students, families, and community members
___ other _______________________

___ We provide clear information about selecting courses, programs, and activities in this school.
___ We send home folders of student work weekly or monthly for parent review and comments.
___ Staff members send home positive messages about students on a regular basis.
___ We notify families about student awards and recognition.
___ We contact the families of students having academic or behavior problems.
___ Teachers have easy access to telephones to communicate with parents during or after school.
___ Parents have the telephone numbers of the school, principal, teachers and counselors.
___ We have a homework hotline for students and families to hear daily assignments and messages.
___ We conduct an annual survey for families to share information and concerns about students’ needs and reaction to school programs.

Parent/Guardian Information Form
Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Please type or print clearly

Student’s Name: __________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian: _______________________________________________________

Address: _______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Phone Numbers:
   Home: (___) ___-_____
   Work: (___) ___-_____ Ext. _____

Email: _________________________________________________________________

Would you rather be contacted by:
   □ Phone
   □ Email
   □ Both

The best times to contact you are: __________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Would you like to be contacted:
   □ Once a month
   □ Twice a month
   □ Once a quarter
   □ Twice a quarter

Additional Information: ___________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Real Manuals for Real Teachers
Parent Input Questionnaire

Created by: Kari Kroll, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Student’s Name: __________________________   Grade__________   DOB: _________

Dear Parents/Guardians:
Please answer the following questions about your son/daughter. Your input is greatly appreciated and extremely important to us.

My son’s/daughter’s strengths are:

My area’s of concern for my son/daughter are:

I would like my son/daughter to work on:

After completing high school, I would like my son/daughter to:
(What kind of education or employment do you envision for your child?)

Other comments:
Parents will appreciate a simple assignment calendar that lists the major assignments for each month.

**Assignment Calendar**

Month: ______________

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### Parent Contact Log

*Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School*

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Conclusion

Families can be our greatest educational allies, and we can be theirs. If we make the effort to establish frequent, positive communication with families, the benefits to students, families, and the school will be great. This manual provides some basic strategies for increasing family involvement in the classroom and the school. Not all families will respond with the same amount of enthusiasm to your attempts to help them be involved, but some will, and these families will benefit greatly from your sincere efforts.