

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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Engaging parents in their children's learning

The Question:

“The positive effects of engaging parents in their children’s learning include improved student achievement and well-being. Are there any tips for engaging parents?”

The Answer:

Yes. Here are five things to consider:

1. Think about different types of engagement
2. Encourage proven strategies to enhance parent engagement
3. Identify barriers to parent engagement and develop solutions
4. Ask parents what they need
5. Provide tools and resources to support parent engagement in their children’s learning at home and school.

1. THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT

When parents are engaged and involved, everyone benefits, and our schools become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn and grow. There are many ways parents make a difference in their children’s success at school. Parents who talk with their children about their day at school; meet with teachers; make sure there is a quiet place to do homework; help with homework; serve on school councils or Parent Involvement Committees; or volunteer in the school and on school trips are all examples of engaged parents.

Parent involvement that is focused on student learning has the greatest impact on student achievement compared to other forms of involvement. In particular, programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher grades and graduation rates, better social skills, improved behaviour and regular attendance. (Henderson and Mapp, 2002)

To view promising practices in Ontario schools visit <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/videos.html>. This video series features successful parent engagement projects funded through the Ministry of Education’s Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grants.

2. ENCOURAGE PROVEN STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools, 2010 formally recognizes and supports a vision of parents as both valued partners and active participants in their children’s education. It acknowledges the positive impact of parent engagement on student achievement and well-being. Students are supported and inspired to learn in a culture of high expectations in which parents:

- are welcomed, respected and valued by the school community as partners in their children’s learning
- have opportunities to be involved, and a range of choices on how to be involved, in the educational community to support student success
- are engaged through ongoing communication and dialogue with other educational partners to support a positive learning environment at home and at school, and
- are supported with the information and tools necessary to participate in school life.

Research shows that learning at home is one of the most beneficial ways for parents to support their children’s success. Schools that successfully engage parents have followed these tips:

1. Find a balance – one that supports parent engagement in their children’s learning, while respecting families’ busy schedules. There are some basic ways parents can help their children meet their full potential regardless of grade level, language and culture. Design school plans to deepen understanding and to engender shared high expectations for student success.
2. Make it meaningful – relevant, meaningful and authentic – worthy of their time. Parenting styles and family circumstances may differ, but all parents can help.
3. Keep it going – reinforce the importance of ongoing communication and dialogue with parents as partners in their children’s education.
4. Make it inclusive – reach out to all parents, including those who may not feel included, and parents of children who may experience challenges in their progress to achieve.
5. Build positive relationships – a positive, welcoming school climate inspires confidence in parents for themselves, their children and their school.



“...half of the achievement we’re responsible for as educators happens out there, so if we can do something out there to encourage more productive learning conditions, we can hit some home runs!”

K. Leithwood, 2012: Co-Producing Learning: the family path, webcast

3. IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOP SOLUTIONS

How educators enhance parent engagement in their children’s learning differs from school to school, depending on the needs of the school community.

Strong and effective parent engagement often involves parents supporting other parents at the local and regional levels. The ministry’s Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grant program, available to school councils, helps parents identify barriers to parent engagement in their own community and find local solutions to help more parents get involved. In 2010, Ontario’s PRO grants program received international recognition through a McKinsey & Company report analyzing high-achieving school systems around the world. Information, including a list of successful applications, a printable PRO grant flyer available in 28 languages, and video clips of PRO initiatives in action, is posted on the ministry’s website:
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/reaching.html>.

4. ASK PARENTS WHAT THEY NEED

Experience and research tell us that parents who have confidence in themselves, in their children and in their school can make a difference in their children’s learning and achievement. When parents hold high expectations for their children – and have concrete information on how to help them – everyone benefits. (Mary Jean Gallagher, Assistant Deputy Minister, 2012: Co-Producing Learning: the family path, webcast)

Parent and caregiver opinions are critical sources for decision-making. One way that school staff and school councils can better understand the needs of their community is through surveys. Sample survey menus can be found in *Building Parent Engagement* at http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent_Engagement/Parent_Engagement.html. School personnel may wish to select survey questions based on a school’s current priorities. The school council can also play an important role in promoting parent engagement in their children’s learning, and can provide further insight into parent needs.

Newsletters and school websites promote open communication and can be an effective component to building strong partnerships with parents. Some schools have used them to form parent focus groups, to invite parents to join their school’s parent engagement/school improvement planning team, or to advertize coffee chats to hear parent opinions.

5. PROVIDE TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO SUPPORT PARENT ENGAGEMENT AT HOME AND SCHOOL

Parents need to hold high aspirations and expectations for their children, and schools need to work in partnership with parents so that the home and the school can share in these expectations and support learning. (J. Hattie, 2009)

Look For:

School Administrator’s Guide to Parent Engagement (Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario [CPCO]): This guide is designed to support school leaders in their implementation of the parent engagement policy and the equity strategy.
http://www.cp.co.on.ca/PL_Site/PE.pdf

Planning Parent Engagement (Ontario Public Supervisory Officers’ Association [OPSOA]): Tool Kits (Parent Tool Kit, and Parent Tool Kit – Teen Edition) and Guide to support their use, including a survey that boards and schools can use to gauge parent satisfaction.
http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/Parent_Engagement/Parent_Engagement.html

The Capsule Family Gets Involved (Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions [COPA]): A series of short original animated film vignettes about the Capsule Family, with accompanying discussion guides designed to jumpstart parent engagement and home and school collaboration. This resource was developed with all parents, including newcomers, in mind. <http://www.infocopa.com/english/>

Co-producing Learning: The Family Path explores the potential of home-community-school collaboration to improve student learning. It features an overview by Ken Leithwood of the extensive research on the importance of engaging families and communities in education, and discussion and commentary of a leadership team involved in a pilot family engagement project.
<http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/coproducing/>

REFERENCES

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Epstein, J.L. (2011). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators, and Improving Schools*, 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

