

Communication Strategies that Support Family Engagement



Family engagement is an intentional, authentic, respectful, and equal partnership between educators and families with the ultimate goal of positive results for children and youth. *How* schools communicate with families is just as important as *what* we communicate. Following are a few tips and resources for strengthening your family communication practices.



DESE Family Portal: www.doe.mass.edu/families

Strengthening Partnerships Family Engagement Framework: doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf

Extend a warm welcome

- **Smile.** Unlike handshakes, hugs, and eye contact, a smile will set families at ease regardless of their cultural, religious, or personal experiences.
- **Visibly celebrate diversity** in your communications and the school environment. Choose images and decorative elements that reflect diverse cultures, communities, generations and family structures.
- **Use inclusive language.** For example, instead of saying "parents," use the term "families" to ensure grandparents, foster parents, and adult siblings will feel included.
- **Communicate to families, not about them.** Underscore your relationship by referring to families as "you" and your school as "we" in your writing.
- **Practice empathy for different perspectives** by seeking out guidance from affinity and advocacy groups.



- **Getting off to a Good Start with Diverse Families:** pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c131.pdf
- **LGBT+ families:** edutopia.org/article/how-make-your-school-more-welcoming-lgbtq-families
- **Grandparents raising grandchildren:** ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/grandunderstandings

Listen as often as you communicate

- **Two-way communication** is vital to building positive relationships with families. Offer opportunities for families to share their insights, hopes and dreams throughout the school year.
- **Home visits** have been shown to strengthen relationships while reducing absenteeism and improving academic performance. Speaking with families in a location of their choice provides greater opportunity for mutual information-sharing and learning.
- **Ask families what questions they have** so that any information you share will be useful to them.
- **Focus groups** are one way to learn about families' questions and concerns. Compensate families for their time by offering a meal, gift card, or stipend.
- **Surveys** allow you to hear from families at a larger scale. To achieve a representative sample work with cultural brokers to actively support diverse participation. Some families may need assistance with computer access, reading, or writing in order to share their input.
- **Show that you are listening** by crediting families for the ways their input influences your decisions. When announcing changes, describe the ways that the change responds to feedback from families. If you receive suggestions that you do not agree with or are not able to implement, plan follow-up conversations where you can seek solutions that will address any underlying concerns.



Impact of home visits: masfec.org/measuring-the-impact-of-home-visits

Using focus groups in schools: us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/7305_book_item_7305.pdf

Overview of cultural brokers: masfec.org/what-is-a-cultural-broker

Plan for Diverse Communication Needs

- **Ask families for their communication preferences at the start of every school year.** This includes preferred language, technology preferences, and need for any disability accommodations.
- **Provide options for non-readers.** Recorded phone messages and videos are two communication vehicles that work well for people with dyslexia, lower literacy, as well as blindness/visual impairment.
- **Offer lower-tech options for staying informed.** Identify which families are not using email or apps and ensure they receive either phone-based or paper-based information. Families of students who have the most to gain from engaging with you may be the least likely to use high-tech methods to communicate.
- **Provide accurate translation and interpretation.** Translation apps can be useful for low-stakes, everyday communication - but beware of the high potential for inaccuracy and confusion. Work with bilingual staff members and professional translators to ensure the written materials you send to families make sense.
- **Partner with cultural brokers.** Whether they are members of your staff, paid a stipend, or recruited as volunteers, leaders from the cultural groups within your community can be a bridge between school and families. They can connect families with resources and information, educate families in support of your goals, and advocate alongside families to promote change and improvement.
- **Create procedures and templates that ensure disability access.** When posting online, add alt-text to images and ensure all PDFs are screen readable. For videos and meetings, offer captioning or sign language interpretation and provide verbal descriptions of visual information. Ensure that braille is used in all signage.



➔ **Creating Language-Inclusive Spaces:** <http://antenaantena.org/language-justice>

Cultural Broker Guide: ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/2021/03/26/the-power-of-culture-brokers-for-building-partnerships-with-all-families/

Accessible Communications: www.section508.gov/create

Follow Principles of Universal Design

- **Avoid jargon, acronyms, and college-level vocabulary.** These types of terms create confusion and alienation, communicating, "you don't belong here." Instead, choose words that are easy for everyone to understand. For example, instead of "literacy," say "reading and writing." Instead of "proficient" say "knows how to." Instead of "assessment" say "test." While some nuance may be lost, your message will get through.
- **Use a plain language editing app to simplify your writing.** These apps can help you write to a 5th-8th grade literacy level while providing clarity to all readers. When you need to teach families specialized or legal terminology, provide a glossary with translations and concise definitions.
- **Make it easy for families to go back and find information that you communicated.** The two most common places families will look for school-related information are the front page of your website and their own refrigerator door. Provide a clear link to family-directed announcements on your website. Continue providing paper copies of key communications to ensure you reach every family.
- **Follow simple design tricks to improve readability.** Use high quality images and icons to communicate information more efficiently than words. Break information into chunks and use headers, bullets, boxes and color to highlight key points. Choose readable fonts and colors that provide enough contrast.



➔ **Color contrast checker:** webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker

Universal design in communication: universaldesign.ie/products-services/customer-communications-toolkit-for-the-public-service-a-universal-design-approach

Plain language editing app: hemingwayapp.com

Federal plain language guide: www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf