

Building Partnerships for the Future: Engaging Parents of Students with Special Needs

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Education, supports the belief that positive parent involvement leads to student success. Actively engaging parents of students with special needs increases opportunities to plan effectively for the student, creates successful pathways for academic success, and builds upon the community links and partnerships necessary for that child and his or her family. Setting the stage for parent engagement begins when the child enters school. Building a trusting relationship between the home and the school is cultivated and reinforced at every juncture and transition in the child's school career.

The key elements listed in the framework – Student Achievement, Leadership, Relationships and Communication, School System Climate and The Whole Child – have been chosen as areas of focus for discussion to assist in refining and fine tuning what we know about parent engagement, what we believe, and what we practise. When we embrace these key elements throughout our districts and in our schools, it is our belief that we will experience stronger and more engaging partnerships with parents and hence, observe improved educational outcomes for students with special needs.

Using this document, educational leaders are asked to consider and discuss what they know, believe, and practise in each key element of parent engagement. There may be information specific to their system or school that they might wish to add to the chart. Leaders will also reflect upon how these practices are routinely demonstrated throughout their system or within each school setting. Follow-up or subsequent discussions will allow educators to collectively contemplate system and school practices regarding parent engagement which require refinement in the context of students with special needs.



Partnerships Matrix

Key Elements	Knowledge (What)	Ethos (So What)	Practice (Now What)
<p>Student Achievement</p>	<p>Research indicates that student achievement improves when parents are meaningfully involved in the life of the school. (The School Effectiveness Framework 2008).</p> <p>Parent engagement and involvement has been associated with a range of indicators of school success, including regular school attendance, better social skills, improved behaviour, better adaptation to school and efficacy for learning, greater engagement in school work, and a stronger belief in the importance of education (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Hoover and Dempsey, 2005; Keith, 1999).</p> <p>There is evidence that when parents become involved in their child's daily school work and spend quality time adding to their learning objectives (e.g., reading), the results will be expressed in the form of improved achievement.</p>	<p>Closing the gap. Engaging families in schools has the potential to serve as one means of reducing the achievement gap between discrepant student populations.</p> <p>Teachers and parents working together to understand the achievement data and hence the needs of the learner can support and implement specific strategies at home and school that will lead to greater student success.</p> <p>The system and the schools provide parents with the tools and strategies to help support their child's learning. These strategies may include suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level.</p>	<p>The system and schools sponsor parent education workshops and other courses or training for parents in areas such as child development, learning difficulties, home conditions that support learning, etc.</p> <p>Parents are encouraged to meet regularly with teachers to review and share information about student achievement data, work samples, and strategies /interventions for success.</p> <p>Teachers provide information for parents regarding the curriculum, parent workshops and local community networks that support their child's learning.</p> <p>Strategies are in place to promote inclusiveness and to meet the needs of students from diverse communities.</p>
<p>Leadership</p>	<p>Principals foster greater engagement of parents by creating a welcoming environment in the school for parents and by demonstrating the type of leadership which parents trust-leadership which is confident, systemic and attentive to the details of the school's functioning. (Leithwood and Jantzi, January 2007).</p> <p>School systems must respect the intent of the Education Act, the Regulations, and locally developed board policies that support the services for students with special needs (e.g., IEP, IPRC, board Special Education Plans and parent guides).</p> <p>Education is a shared responsibility. It is important to build coalitions and alliances to support student learning.</p> <p>Principals play a pivotal role in creating a welcoming environment and building relationships within a school community (Education Today, Summer 2008, Vol. 30).</p>	<p>School and system leaders ensure that all staff welcome parents to the school district and to individual schools. There are visible objects, signs, and tools to ensure this welcoming climate is created.</p> <p>The school system personnel meet all timelines and expectations associated with the procedures and practices established for students with special needs.</p> <p>The principal uses a collaborative approach that brings all stakeholders together to find the shared solutions that enhance outcomes for students with special needs.</p>	<p>Parents are aware of and able to access the resources available to promote their child's success.</p> <p>Parents have many daily responsibilities that the school team and system considers when scheduling meetings, communications and events that impact their children.</p> <p>The school council has a meaningful role in supporting student achievement and in creating policies and practices that support parent involvement.</p> <p>SEAC is a legislated committee of the board, and the role of SEAC is to enable parent associations with the mandate to provide advice to boards about their Special Education programs, services and budgets.</p>
<p>Relationships and Communication</p>	<p>Educators recognize that that trust is a key factor in parent engagement. Building trust is a long-term process (Boethel, 2003)</p> <p>Communication about school programs and student progress means a two-way, three-way or multi-channel format that connects schools, families, students and the community (Epstein, 1996).</p> <p>Combining the elements of trust and open, honest communication ensures mutual advocacy on behalf of the child and affords the sharing of common goals and outcomes.</p> <p>"Communication ought to be a two way street. It also needs to be frequent, take multiple forms, and arise at least in part from a careful assessment of what it is that parents want information about" (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2007).</p>	<p>Regular and ongoing communication from both the family and school will increase parents' opportunities to be aware of and to monitor the progress of their child.</p> <p>Improved communications and enhanced relationships encourage interactions with teachers and hence, expedite effective response to student needs, issues and concerns.</p> <p>Schools should utilize parent knowledge and experience as a resource for student learning.</p> <p>It is important to consider the context in which students and their families live and to begin from their reality when planning to engage them.</p>	<p>School system leaders model positive and proactive relationships with parents.</p> <p>Educators demonstrate that they honour and respect parents' hopes and concerns for their children.</p> <p>Trust, respect and mutual regard are inherent in key communications prepared by the school or the district. These include vision and mission statements, codes of conduct, and school improvement plans.</p> <p>The school system recognizes that we exist in communities where families' first language may not be English or French; therefore, every effort is made to ensure that decisions and plans are shared in an inclusive manner.</p> <p>In addition to formal reports, samples of student work and or anecdotal reports are sent home often for review and parent comment.</p> <p>There is a regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communication to inform parents.</p> <p>Clear information about all school and system policies, programs, Special Education Guides, reforms and transitions are easily accessible for parents.</p>
<p>School and System Climate</p>	<p>A welcoming and inviting school climate that conveys trust, respect and mutual regard facilitates positive interactions with parents. Removing barriers that hinder parent engagement ensures greater opportunity for shared decision making and planning for students with special needs.</p> <p>Research shows that parents participate more freely in a welcoming environment (Ontario Education Excellence for All - Developing Partners in Education, Dec. 01, 2005 Vol. 2).</p> <p>Environment is not merely the physical aspects of the school building but rather the feeling parents experience when entering the school.</p> <p>A positive, caring environment that is perceived by parents to be safe and empowering greatly increases the chances of meaningful parental involvement (Leithwood and Jantzi, January 2007).</p>	<p>Parents are more apt to feel that their input in decision making and planning for their child is valued when there is an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual respect.</p> <p>The school system believes and demonstrates that the outcomes for all students are enhanced when parents and school staff collaboratively build and reinforce individual student goals and specific strategies.</p> <p>The respectful climate benefits the student, the parent and the teacher.</p> <p>Regular contact is encouraged by an open-door policy and flexible teacher time for meeting with parents.</p>	<p>The invitational climate of the system and the school is reflected in greetings, school events, activities, routines, signage etc.</p> <p>Staff greets parents and ensures parents feel welcome in the school.</p> <p>Information for parents is posted in areas that are readily accessible. This information includes community agency information, notices about support groups, parenting courses, brochures about the IPRC and IEP process, etc.</p> <p>Every effort is made to make meetings accessible and convenient for parents.</p> <p>Resources and opportunities for parents are made available so that they may interact and access information on a variety of topics.</p>
<p>The Whole Child</p>	<p>Effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points and in many venues over the course of the schooling years (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004).</p> <p>Children with special needs have many transitions throughout the course of their schooling. Each transition requires that discussion take place in an honest and transparent manner that ensures confidentiality and ultimately generates a learning pathway embraced by all.</p> <p>"It takes a whole village to raise a child." Community agencies, families and schools are most effective when their efforts on behalf of the child are comprehensive, focused and coherent. This is teamwork.</p>	<p>Schools can support students more effectively in developing their full potential when they work together with parents and community organizations that support the health and well-being of the child.</p> <p>School and system leaders must be cognizant that connections to community groups can expand the scope of resources available to the school for both staff and students.</p> <p>Parents understand that information shared in confidence will be respected by school staff. The quality of the information shared regarding the student's strengths, needs, and interests will generate personal and precise learning plans for the child.</p>	<p>Parents and their advocates share information in a timely fashion with the school.</p> <p>Schools provide parents with opportunities to share views and actions towards shared goals.</p> <p>The practices of the school and the system staff offer opportunities for parents, advocates and agencies to disclose information in a manner that is understood to be secure and confidential.</p> <p>We convey a belief that home, school and community are intrinsically connected and aspire to provide a learning environment and program that benefits the whole child.</p>



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See this document in a live matrix online at
<http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parentengagement>.
You can access additional resources, links to videos
and dive deeper into what each element of the matrix means.