

# Engage and Collaborate with Families

## Introduction

Education is increasingly viewed as a shared responsibility of schools and families. Families are integral in the cultivation of mental health promotion and can provide crucial reinforcements by extending learning opportunities into the home. Additionally, creating opportunities for caregivers to co-create and uphold mental health support for their children helps nurture a trusting relationship between home and school. This provides an opportunity to honor the unique cultural strengths and styles of communication in order to engage families. Family collaboration can be achieved through the creation of education structures, teams, and communication channels that enable schools and families to set and support shared goals for students.

## Guidance to Get You Started

Despite a compelling rationale for and robust research the details the benefits of partnerships between schools and families—policymakers, researchers, educators, and families have yet to reach consensus on a universal definition of, or the best recipe for, creating a successful school-family partnership. However, research does suggest using some or all of the following strategies:

- **Create multiple avenues for two-way communication with families** regarding their childrens' mental health and overall well-being. For this to be successful, it is important to identify potential barriers to communication and develop strategies to overcome them; these barriers could include language, access to technology, schedules, beliefs about mental health, and more. Successfully navigating communication barriers with respect has the added benefit of building trusting relationships between home and school. Some examples of communication channels include newsletters with child-centered information, a two-way folder passing important information, inviting families into the school to observe or discuss their childrens' progress, student-led conferences, and sharing progress reports.
- **Involve family members in the core team** responsible for decision making and implementation of tiered supports for their child. Families can help to identify students' strengths and needs, participate in developing individualized learning and well-being plans, and act as key implementers of these plans. Although it is important that families are involved at all stages of school-based mental health, it is especially important at the introduction of Tier 2 and 3 interventions. This requires that the school community holds the shared belief that all families can contribute in meaningful ways to children's learning and development and that parents and teachers share responsibility for nurturing and educating children.

## A Look at Some Benefits

### Environment Within and Beyond School

Like school, home is a critical developmental environment for students; when school and families collaborate to promote mental health, it can provide consistency and continuity.

### Individual Factors

Families play a critical role in helping students develop individual factors that support mental health, such as self-awareness, physical health, relationship skills, and more; collaboration between schools and families can provide powerful reinforcement of learning happening in both contexts.

### Relationships with Others

Our most foundational attachments are often formed with family, so collaborating with families to understand what makes relationships developmentally supportive and learning about young people through the deep knowledge their families have can build stronger relationships at home and at school, in turn supporting mental health.

Research suggests that meaningful engagement of youth and families can have positive results:

- Improved children's health outcomes (IMPACT, 2018).
- Additional, authentic learning opportunities beyond the classroom (Albright & Weissberg, 2010).
- Increased access to culturally and linguistically competent, community-based care through referrals and coordination (IMPACT, 2018).
- Increased efficacy in the way children are served through treatment and recovery itself (Virginia Commission on Youth, 2003).
- Enhanced relationship between the school community and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- Decreased likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997).
- Increased self esteem and more positive attitudes toward school (Christenson & Havsy, 2004; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding & Walberg, 2005).

- **Develop opportunities for families to inform and support general school operations.** This enables families to have a direct and meaningful impact on systems and services that impact their children and the community. This could mean having town hall meetings with families to discuss school decision making, creating formal roles for family members such as a parent coordinator role, or inviting families to volunteer their time or expertise in order to lead a club or plan an event.
- **Provide opportunities for families to learn** about the importance of mental health, mental health promotion, mental health screening, and the initiatives being implemented at school. In addition to sharing basic information about school-based mental health supports, consider providing training or workshops for parents on how to support their child's (and their own) mental health. Provide specific strategies, tips, and resources about how families can reinforce mental health promotion at home.

## Additional Resources to Explore

### ***Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships***

This paper presents a new framework for designing family engagement initiatives that build capacity among educators and families to partner with one another around student success. Based on existing research and best practices, the paper is designed to act as a scaffold for the development of family engagement strategies, policies, and programs.

### ***School-Family Partnership Strategies to Enhance Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth***

This brief from CASEL provides educators with strategies to promote children's social, emotional, and academic development using school-family partnerships.

### ***What School District Leaders Should Know When Creating School and Mental Health Partnerships***

This document is intended to assist schools interested in school-mental health partnerships in understanding the structure and issues that impact the mental health system when entering into such partnerships. It is specific to New York State but has implications and insights that are transferable across many different contexts.

### ***SEL Toolkit: Family Engagement***

This SEL Toolkit covers 4 strategies mapped out by Move This World to help you engage families in your social-emotional learning initiatives: Teach, Communicate, Volunteer, and Support.

### ***Issaquah School District Family Partnerships***

An example of how one diverse district engages and encourages all families to become integral members of the school community.