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Family Engagement in Rural Schools

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Family Engagement in Rural Schools

The importance of family-school partnerships for student success is unequivocal. Given the limited resources evident in many rural communities, family-school partnerships can be especially beneficial for students in rural schools. Decades of research has documented the positive effects of parent participation in children's academic endeavors for diverse populations (for reviews see Fan & Chen, 2001; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005) and research investigating family-school partnerships specifically in rural communities yields similar results. For example, in a study of high-performing, high-needs rural schools, supportive relationships with families were among the most important factors for rural school success (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Rural schools are uniquely positioned to foster and benefit from family-school partnerships. Because of their centrality within the community, rural schools routinely connect with families in multiple capacities as part of typical daily routines. Rural schools provide opportunities for community communication and participation. In many rural communities, the local school building is a point of pride for the community and houses sporting and cultural events, civic activities, and shelter during severe weather. Teachers serve as coaches and club sponsors which means that they have frequent and varied contact with students at multiple age and academic levels and their families. Administrators are often highly accessible, active members of the community, allowing them to connect with families in a variety of ways.

Rural schools have many strengths, which can be leveraged as they face hardships such as high teacher turnover, newly credentialed teachers, and inadequate resources (Monk, 2007). Additionally, school closures and school consolidation paired with increased pressure on student achievement in core subject areas means that rural schools are expected to do more with less (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Families in rural communities struggle with similar challenges. Poverty rates in rural America are on the rise (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008) and social and behavioral services for these families are either non-existent or impractical (DeLeon, Wakefield, & Hagglund, 2003). The geographic isolation of rural communities means that many rural families are forced to travel a great distance to access necessary parenting and behavioral health services. Furthermore, there is often stigma associated with seeking outside help for mental health or parenting problems and rural culture often encourages families to deal with problems internally rather than pursue professional help. Schools on the other hand tend to be more easily accessible to families. Often rural communities depend on schools to serve many functions in addition to their primary mission of education (National Education Association, 2008).

Because the educational and behavioral need in rural communities is so great and the demand placed on rural schools to meet the educational, behavioral, and social needs of students is high, rural communities must tap all available resources. One natural and abundant resource is the family. Despite the centrality of rural schools and the relatively small student populations, some studies indicate that rural schools are failing to connect effectively with families. For example, Prater, Bermudez, and Owens (1997) found that

even though rural parents attend school events more often than their suburban and urban counterparts, they talk with their children about school programs and interact with teachers less frequently than other parents. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) found only 54% of rural parents reported being satisfied with the way that school staff interacted with them. Some rural cultures instill distrust of “outsiders” and fear of being judged by others which may inhibit families from closely collaborating with teachers, especially in tight-knit rural communities where privacy can be difficult to maintain (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jagelewski, & Rossi, 2007). Similarly, teachers in rural schools report that they lack the training needed to communicate effectively with parents especially if they are not from the community in which they teach (Agbo, 2007). Teachers and administrators without adequate training may only welcome parent involvement when it occurs under conditions tightly controlled by the school (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996).

Despite the challenges, it is time for rural schools to enact policies and practices to partner with parents in a way that will reinforce and extend students’ learning. Schools must set high expectations for home-school partnerships and share responsibility for student success with families. Indeed, the very idea of family-school partnerships must be embraced by rural schools. The partnership concept implies shared roles and responsibilities among families and schools and an environment where collaboration and cooperation between individuals across home and school settings is established (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). In an environment where family-school partnerships are established, families and school staff are committed to constructive connections and relationships (Semke & Sheridan, 2011). Once the importance of partnerships is established it becomes apparent that meaningful collaboration between home and school is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Fortunately, many rural schools have mechanisms already in place which can be extended to promote family-school partnerships. Specifically, teachers and administrators at rural schools often use creative methods to meet the needs of their students with existing resources. They often have a “do what it takes” attitude when it comes to serving their students, which provides a prerequisite openness to effectively partnering with parents. Additionally, the isolated nature of rural communities often means that teachers and administrators frequently have overlapping relationships with families. They may interact with parents at school and community events providing opportunities to establish trust through frequent contact and communication. Additionally, teachers in rural schools see their roles in students’ lives extending beyond the classroom to support the educational, social, and behavioral needs of their students (Roeser & Midgley, 1997). To maximize these advantages, rural schools must establish policies and procedures that promote power-sharing and decision-making with families. Teachers in rural schools should be trained in culturally sensitive parent communication, especially in districts wherein a majority of teachers are recruited from outside the community. Schools can also invite families to help establish policies and share in communicating the partnership goals to all parents.

Action Principles

For State Education Agencies

- 1) Establish policies requiring family-school partnerships.
- 2) Allocate resources for two-way family-school communication including funds to cover travel expenses and distance communication technology in homes and schools.
- 3) Mandate the incorporation of culturally sensitive family-school partnership training in administrator and teacher education programs.
- 4) Establish a system for reviewing the availability, accessibility, and flexibility of family-school roles in diverse school districts, including rural, suburban, and urban districts.
- 5) Create programs to recruit and retain local community members as teachers and administrators in local schools.

For Local Education Agencies

- 1) Include family-school partnership in mission statements.
- 2) Create paid positions to promote family engagement in rural schools.
- 3) Identify existing human resources such as translators, parent volunteers, and bus drivers. Train them to promote family-school partnerships that engage all families.
- 4) Provide training to parents on family-school partnerships.
- 5) Ensure that the practices of specialists, such as school psychologists, counselors, and social workers, engage families in all direct student services.

For Schools

- 1) Set high partnership expectations for *all* families. Identify and evaluate existing biases as well as existing partnerships.
- 2) Establish a “family space” within the school, with resources for families, a schedule of events, and open times for parent-parent and parent-teacher interactions.
- 3) Establish regular, bidirectional communication mechanisms between home and school, such as two-way home-school notes.
- 4) Identify ways to extend educational goals through existing events frequented by families, such as athletic events. Eliminate the separation between academics and extracurricular activities.
- 5) Create a structure for parent-teacher meetings that allows for sharing of information, goals, plans, and solutions for all children, and especially those developing learning or behavioral challenges.

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