

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PERCEPTIONS / BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR  
EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The following are reported barriers to parental involvement cited in various educational studies and strategies educators can use for effective engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Perception is Paramount to Intention....

- Some of the **indicators parents deem evidence of lack of trust and education officials' authenticity to engage them** include:
  - No follow up after an event or meeting takes place. Parents may have attended a meeting but there is no mechanism to provide feedback or no next steps are planned.
  - Perception that little or nothing happens as a result of raising concerns.
  - Scheduling meetings at times when it is not convenient for parents because, in addition to other competing priorities, parents work multiple jobs.
  - Not providing basic resources needed by parents to attend meetings such as interpretation, childcare, transportation, and refreshments.
  - Observation that only some parents are welcome, but not all.
  
- Some **strategies to increase parents' trust** in school efforts:
  - **Provide classes and training** that will help parents and staff improve communication between schools and parents.
  - Provide parents information about school decisions, school meetings and student success in a timely manner. Furthermore, **designate a person to provide more information or explanation on communications the school sends home** and include their contact information on communications.
  - **Invest in parent outreach.** Learn what days, times and methods of communication are preferred by parents at your school. For many communities of color, the best strategy is person to person communication. Designating a staff person or volunteer to call parents is time-consuming, but effective in yielding higher turnout for meetings.
  - Develop processes and systems where any and all parents' voices are heard. **Do not just provide information in meetings**, but mail the notes taken, make them available via website or send a message about the results of a meeting through an automated phone service.

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<sup>1</sup> MALDEF and NEA. June 2010. *Minority Parent and Community Engagement: Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Closing the Gaps in Student Achievement.*

- **Host community-school meetings** where constructive dialogue happens between parents, teachers and administrators on issues affecting their children and the schools they attend (i.e. budget cuts, safety problems, evaluation of after-school programs or other services). Include parents as full partners in decision making about these issues. **Be transparent about the decision making process** and do not over-promise positive results.
- Themes that emerged from the Ethnic Minority Parent Engagement Summit in 2009:
  - Best practices include valuing the parental/family voice, hiring culturally competent staff and providing in-service so that school staff can become skilled and culturally competent in working effectively with diverse parent/families. \*\*Also, developing parents into trainers can help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between schools and parents.
  - **Barriers hindering engagement include parents and school officials failing to acknowledge how their assumptions and negative experiences impact interaction with each other**; lack of training for parents/families and school staff, not making parental engagement a priority and limited funding.
  - **Successful strategies include building a genuine sense of community, improving two-way communication**, focusing time and attention on family engagement and providing training to develop parents' leadership skills.
  - Recommendations for improved parental/family engagement policies include **increasing accountability for the implementation of parent engagement plans and policies, increasing cultural competency**, overcoming language barriers and introducing legislation to reframe the concept of parent/family engagement.
- "Today's parental involvement is much more than volunteering or fundraising for the school; it is about engaging in meaningful partnerships, responsible leadership and capacity building and abiding by the law." Westmoreland, H. Rosenberg, H.M., Lopez, M.E., & Weiss, H. July 2009. *Seeing is believing: Promising practices for how school districts promote family engagement.*
- Most community-based organizations reported using similar practices to successfully engage parents, including:
  - Valuing the parent voice and listening to their opinions and helping in various ways to address their concerns.
  - **Hiring or training staff who are culturally competent** and preferable from within the community where they will be working with parents.
  - Providing **specific strategies** for parents to monitor their child's academics and identifying ways to help their child with homework.
  - **Providing training to develop parents' leadership skills** so they can engage more fully in their child's school governance.

- Developing **parent trainers** that can help recruit and inform other parents.
- Practices and strategies from organizations serving various minority communities:
  - **African-American/Black**
    - Parent engagement is **about empowering parents by building their capacity and knowledge base around leadership and advocacy skills**, and by leveraging partnerships to increase student educational attainment.
  - **American Indian and Alaska Native**
    - Parent engagement is **grounded in knowing and understanding their unique languages, cultures and issues related to the tribal or Native identity**. Parental engagement for this community is rooted in understanding the educational and historical experiences, and the political struggles faced by AIAN parents.
  - **Asian and Pacific Islander**
    - The value of parent engagement is **a new concept** for some API communities. Many API **parents operate under the notion that because their child is in a “good” school, they do not have to become involved** in their education. Many come from a cultural background where classroom education is not the norm, therefore, parent outreach organizations face the task of address the experiences of immigrant parents in educating them about how to navigate the education system in the U.S. and adapting their efforts in culturally sensitive and relevant ways that take into account the diversity of the API community.
  - **Hispanic/Latino**
    - Parent engagement programs that work within the Hispanic/Latino community **focus their efforts on building parents’ capacity to understand their child’s rights, their rights and what their responsibilities are as parents in the American public education system** to advocate for their child’s educational attainment.
  - **Multiple Racial or Ethnic Minority Groups**
    - These organizations achieve their goals by **building the capacity of parents by developing parents’ leadership and advocacy skills**; by increasing their knowledge of the public educational system; and by equipping them with the courage and ability to work in partnership with schools.
- **Unintended Cycle**
  - Parents do not feel their opinion, knowledge or person is valued, and consequently, they do not return to the school or meetings unless absolutely necessary, resulting in low parent turn out at events. In turn, school officials interpret the low attendance as parents’ disinterest in their child’s education and adopt the belief that it is solely up to them to plan and decide all school matters.
- The following are ways in which school officials are **seen to send unwelcoming messages** to parents and the community:

- Failing to learn about the history of the school site community where they work; of the students they serve; and the socio-cultural background of the parents and their extended families.
- Failing to take into account that a parents' experience of having a history of poor treatment by a school may cause them to not want to engage with school officials. It may be recent negative experiences from the parent's own educational journey.
- Having unfriendly staff in the main office that ignore parents when they come in, ridicule parents for their lack of information, do not provide parents with the information requested, or intentionally mislead parents or students.
- Requiring a state-issued identification from all parents in order to enter the school when some parents do not have the proper documentation and cannot provide the specific type of identification required by school personnel.
- Having security guards escort parents at all times during their visits.
- Having staff that are not culturally competent and aware of differences between ethnic groups.
- Having staff that are unaware of the history of the communities they serve.
- **Some strategies to overcome these barriers:**
  - **Develop welcoming environments.**
    - Post visible signs in multiple languages for visitors to easily access.
    - Provide customer service training to staff in the main office.
    - Having administrators send a strong message that staff are to provide quality service to parents and students to the best of their abilities, this should include setting the example of how parents and community representatives are to be treated when they visit the school.
  - **Increase cultural competency.**
    - Allow parents to coordinate cultural festivals or celebration of cultural traditions.
    - Host a movie night for students and staff twice a year, where an educational movie or documentary that is age appropriate for students and families depicts the culture of a group.
    - Celebrate cultural heritage months. Have teachers adapt lessons related to important historic figures or events from various racial/ethnic minority groups, especially those groups represented by the school's population.
  - **Investigate and take complaints seriously** from ethnic minority parents or students. Be aware of staff making inappropriate statements about a person's race or ethnicity, sex, legal status, etc.
  - **Overcome the language barrier.** Parents who speak languages other than English need access to interpreters to participate in any school meeting or activity. Since many parents are not familiar with the educational jargon, they do not fully comprehend the messages school officials try to convey, school officials could assist by:
    - Providing simultaneous interpretation with various languages when requested, and especially during meetings.

- Providing workshops at least once per year on education jargon for parents to be able to understand translated documents and interpretations.
- Developing an evaluation process for parents to rate the quality of the service they received from the interpreter. This can help the school or district determine if they should continue to hire the interpreters/translators.
- Forming a parent committee or task force that can help staff translate documents, or provide feedback on the content of a document being sent home.
- Sharing with teachers the specific resources or supports available at the school or district level to communicate with parents when there is a language barrier.
- Schools that are most successful in establishing strong relationships with parents, often also **provide information and referrals to families to get help for non-education related issues** affecting them such as, unemployment, homelessness, low-income housing, divorce, hunger, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, health problems or an illness, etc.
- **Lack of funding is cited as a barrier** to parental involvement. Participants in the summit felt that even though there were funds, they were either:
  - Allocated to improve parenting skills but do not offer enough advocacy or leadership development.
  - Were being used to cover other expenses not related to Title I.
  - Or not trickling down to community based organizations to provide services to parents.
- **Some strategies that schools can utilize to overcome these barriers are:**
  - Applying for grants to increase the amount of unrestricted resources to fund special projects.
  - Designate a school representative who works with families to create a resource directory to be able to refer parents to a myriad of social services and community based organizations. Or better yet, help to develop a parent to do this.
  - Vary the work hours for those who work with families. Assign some to work during the day and others to work during the evening or weekend.
  - Partner with local government agencies and community based organizations to provide monthly workshops or services at the school or host a local resource fair for the community.
  - Partner with a community based organization and other local schools to operate a joint parent center to maximize resources.
- **Strategies to support importance of parent engagement:**
  - **Obtain data** about how parents would like to stay informed, and involved in their child's education. Having this type of information would greatly improve how schools should proceed with parent engagement policies and successful outreach efforts.
  - Assign community liaisons to **conduct focus groups**, or talk to parents about what is happening in the community, and what is preventing them from connecting with the school.

- **Allow third party organizations**, including community based organizations, **to conduct focus groups, administer surveys**, form an evaluation task force and conduct randomized calls to help the school determine the level of parent engagement and the effectiveness of the school's efforts.
- **Set realistic expectations and gradual goals to increase parent engagement.** If the outreach consistently fails or if parents have never been involved, it will take time for school staff and parents to change their behaviors and to achieve higher levels of parent engagement in the school.
- **Make planning a priority.** There needs to be a change in the mindset that parental involvement is about the parents, because it is really about the student success. Knowing that, principals need to approach parent and community involvement the same way they do curriculum, professional development and other areas critical to school life.