

Fostering Family-School Partnerships

Working with others, whether one-on-one or within a group, offers many benefits that go beyond working alone. These partnerships yield heightened effectiveness, efficiency, resource-sharing, diverse perspectives, enhanced problem-solving capabilities, and avenues for learning and development.

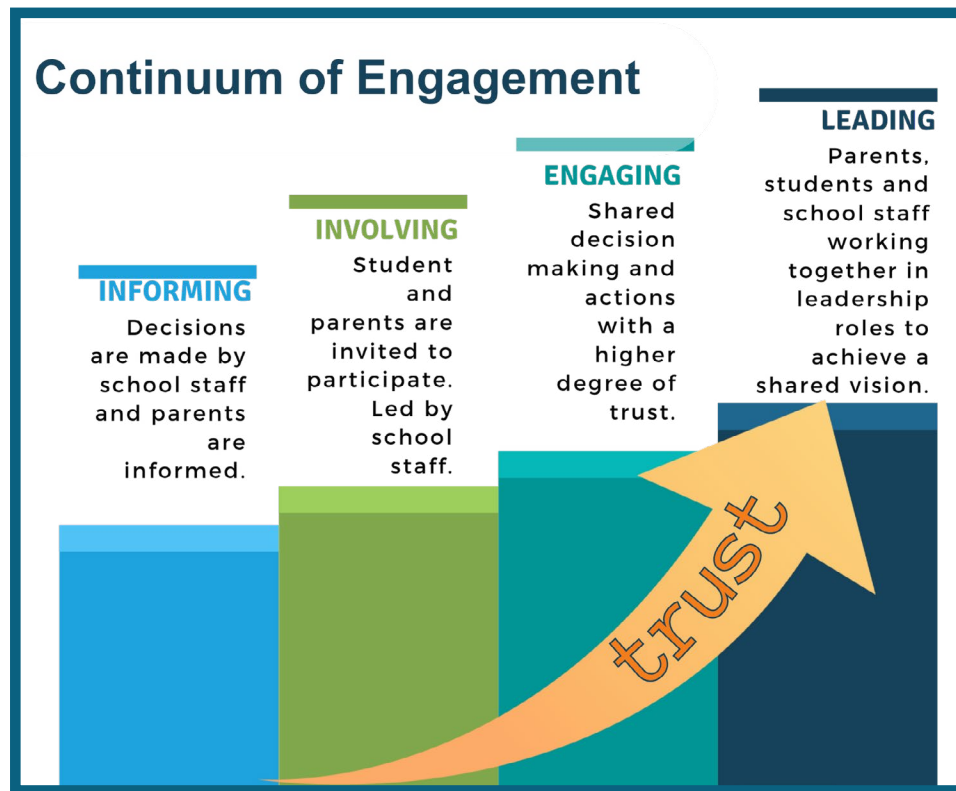
Family-school partnerships are no exception. Research confirms that [meaningful family involvement](#) positively impacts academic achievement across racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and supports smoother transitions into higher education and careers (For more information, consult the CDE Family Engagement Toolkit). Likewise, the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) mandates parental and guardian involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Beyond legal requirements, authentic family engagement is essential in improving student learning and outcomes—and trust is at the heart of this engagement.

Building meaningful collaboration with families from diverse backgrounds requires intentionality, cultural humility, and a commitment to inclusivity. It means addressing barriers, fostering open communication, and honoring cultural differences. When families feel valued and empowered as equal partners in the IEP process, the team becomes stronger, and special education services become more effective for each child.

Trust grows through shared experiences. As we engage with one another, we deepen our understanding, strengthen relationships, and create a foundation for true collaboration.



The graphic below demonstrates a continuum of engagement. Notice that as partnerships build between parents and educators, so does the opportunity to strengthen the relationship and trust.



The following pages offer ideas to cultivate meaningful participation through a variety of important principles. As you read, imagine how these principles can come to life when working with parents and students. Not all families or cultures look the same, so educators are encouraged to keep an open mind, maintain a curious stance, and actively seek to understand the individuality of the families they serve.

II PAUSE AND REFLECT

After reviewing the document, what ideas will you implement, and how will you support them to create meaningful engagement?

Cultivating Meaningful Participation



COMMUNICATION

Communication refers to the process of exchanging information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings between individuals or groups. Communication can take place verbally, through written text, or by means of gestures, facial expressions, and body language.

Communication, or lack of communication, can strengthen or hinder how a relationship develops over time. Meaningful communication requires frequent contact, active listening, and shared understanding of what is being communicated.

Here are some ideas to cultivate communication:

- Utilize [active listening strategies](#).
- Engage in quality [strategies for effective communication](#) with team members.
- Utilize [family centered practices](#) to cultivate strong family relationships.
- Use interpreters and translated documents to ensure language is not a barrier for parent(s) who speak other languages. This provides all families with access to the same information so they may participate fully in their child's educational planning.
- Model ways team members can [encourage communication](#) amongst each other.
- Support parent/students in completing the [Building on My Strengths Protocol](#).
- Utilize the [Family Communication Preference Survey](#) or other method to learn this important information.
- Include teacher newsletters with weekly or monthly updates on skills or themes being taught, as well as activities, assignments, and other classroom information.
- Create a business or digital contact card and provide to parent(s) and student(s).
- Share classroom schedule and school site calendar/site events in a timely manner.
- Share school site and community resources.
- Balance frequent communication with positive updates and areas of concern.
- Use an easy to complete tool (e.g., "How was my day/week?") to communicate with parent(s) whose students are not able to share about their school experiences (e.g., preschoolers, students with significant communication needs, etc.).
- Provide skilled interpreters for all meetings and communications.
- Make resources accessible and culturally relevant, using formats that are clear and considerate of each family's unique needs.
- [Survey parent\(s\)/student\(s\)](#) to get input on their experiences, preferences, and needs.



**PAUSE
AND REFLECT**

What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?



EMPATHY

Empathy refers to understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.

Having empathy helps us to understand and relate to one another. It can help us validate what another person might be experiencing, which helps to build connection.

Here are some ideas to cultivate empathy:

- Listen.
- Ask questions.
- Be aware of events/times that might be extra stressful for parent(s) (i.e., initial IEP meetings, reviewing assessment data, discussing transitions to new sites or programs).
- Slow down—avoid making assumptions and ask yourself, “What else might be going on here?”
- Consider other perspectives.
- Dive deeper into the [difference between empathy and sympathy](#).
- Consider these [sentence starters](#) to speak with empathy.
- Practice cultural humility by acknowledging and learning from cultural differences. This demonstrates to families that their values are respected and their input matters to the team.



RESPECT

Respect refers to a feeling of admiration toward someone or something that is good, valuable, important, etc.

Here are some ideas to cultivate respect:

- Be kind and courteous.
- Avoid interrupting.
- Foster cross-cultural learning by asking parent(s) and student(s) about what is important to them, including aspects of their family, culture, and/or family interests they'd like to share. Watch this [video](#) to explore how one high school strengthened relationships with students from diverse backgrounds. These strategies can be equally effective with parents from similar backgrounds.
- Listen to others and respect differences in beliefs and opinions.
- Be aware of body language—yours and others.
- Think before you speak (this includes language and tone).
- Understand that everyone has their own experiences and [beliefs](#).
- Be willing to evolve and learn.



What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?



Time refers to a particular duration (e.g., minutes, hours, days) during which an action has occurred, or the duration required for an action.

Time is a precious commodity and how we make time for one another can allow for shared experiences and make a big impact in any relationship. Showing respect for each other's time encourages meaningful participation.

Here are ideas to consider when managing your time with families:

- Be punctual. Start and end meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and other scheduled events on time.
- Offer flexible meeting options. Recognize that parent(s) may have busy schedules and competing priorities.
- Avoid scheduling last minute meetings. This can cause disruption and not allow others to properly prepare.
- Communicate with others if you're running late, allowing them to reschedule or manage their time while waiting.
- Be responsive, replying promptly to emails, phone calls, and other forms of communication from parent(s).
- Maximize efficiency. Make the most of face-to-face interactions by being well-prepared and organized.
- Share resources proactively. Provide parent(s) with resources and information in advance to help them prepare for meetings or events.
- Always ask team members, parent(s), and student(s) if they are available to be considerate of their time.



Accessibility means being easily reached or obtained, being usable by everyone including people with disabilities, and being easy to understand or enjoy.

Ensuring accessibility provides everyone the opportunity to acquire information and engage in interactions and activities equally. Barriers that prevent access are addressed so that participation is assured to the maximum extent possible.

Here are some ideas to create accessibility (e.g., through our communication, environments, etc.) for parent(s) and students:

- Use parent-friendly language and avoid jargon.
- Provide interpretation and translation services, as appropriate.
- Consider classroom/meeting room layout, ensuring access for people with physical disabilities.
- Provide documents in a format preferred by team members (e.g., digital, print).
- Provide assistive technology to accommodate communication needs.
- Employ cultural sensitivity.
- Provide clear and concise communication.
- Make resources and other supports available to parent(s).
- Account for learner variability. Each person learns uniquely, requiring us to adapt our approach to address this natural diversity.



What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?



FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility refers to the ability to change or be changed according to the situation.

Demonstrating flexibility can help us be both effective and responsive in how we meet the individual needs of students and families. Flexibility fosters a collaborative mindset, enabling teachers and families to work together to identify goals, address challenges, and develop solutions collaboratively.

Here are ideas to cultivate flexibility:

- Reflect on the flexibility of your personal mindset.
- Build cultural competency in yourself and within the IEP team.
- Recognize that parent(s) have different needs, and what works for one parent may not work for another.
- Be responsive to the evolving needs and circumstances of parent(s) over time.
- Incorporate [feedback](#) from parent(s), teachers, and students.
- Encourage student involvement.
- Have a contingency plan ready.



What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?



ASSUME GOODWILL

Assumption of goodwill is a default expectation that others are acting with good intention unless they demonstrate otherwise.

Assuming goodwill demonstrates that educators respect and value the families and students they work with. This helps build trust, which is essential for effective collaboration in supporting student learning and development.

Here are some ideas to enhance the practice of assuming goodwill:

- Approach each interaction with an open mind and a willingness to listen and understand. Provide interpretation and translation services, as appropriate.
- Take time to [reflect on your own biases and assumptions](#), and how they may impact your interactions with others.
- Demonstrate goodwill in your own words and actions by being kind, respectful, and compassionate in your interactions with others, serving as a positive role model for students, parent(s), and colleagues.
- Interpret communication from others in the most positive light possible, and avoid jumping to conclusions or assuming negative intentions without sufficient evidence. Watch this video on the [Ladder of Inference](#) to understand how our assumptions affect our actions.
- When faced with ambiguous situations or misunderstandings, give others the benefit of the doubt.



EQUITY

Equity refers to the fair treatment of all according to their needs, circumstances, and challenges.

Equity calls for creating space where families and students have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to succeed, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances.

Here are some ideas to cultivate equity:

- Provide supports and resources to [enhance parental participation](#) as full team members throughout the IEP process.
- Strive for equitable outcomes for students with disabilities by presuming competence.
- Acknowledge and address barriers that create disparities for different groups of students.
- Seek curriculum, instructional materials, and teaching practices that reflect the diversity of students' and families' identities and heritages.
- Promote inclusive practices that create welcoming, affirming, and accessible learning environments for all students and families.
- Commit to equitable practices that recognize and respond to cultural differences.



OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity refers to the circumstances and chance needed to achieve something beneficial. We increase the opportunity to connect with both parents and students by creating space and circumstances for meaningful communication. In so doing, we build relationships by getting to know each other over time.

Here are some ideas to enhance opportunities:

- Refer to and utilize the continuum of engagement.
- Create opportunities for frequent contact with parent(s), ensuring the parent(s) are not hearing from you only to schedule the annual IEP meeting or when there are concerns about their child.
- Make a plan to connect with a few parent(s) each week.
- Explore communication routines such as having students identify one thing they are proud of from that week, and then share with the parent(s).
- Consider ways to model effective [communication strategies](#) with team members.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?





CURIOSITY

Curiosity is a strong desire to learn, explore, and understand new things or phenomena.

Being curious involves a natural inclination to seek knowledge, ask questions, and engage in inquiry about the world. Curiosity often drives us to investigate, discover, and make connections between different ideas or concepts.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

What do you notice in this section? What strategies would you add to your practice?

Here are some ideas to cultivate curiosity:

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Seek to know more and to understand more fully.
- View mistakes as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than setbacks.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions and making assumptions by applying the concept of the [Ladder of Inference](#).
- Explore your “[mental models](#),” or the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences, which often reveal our underlying values and beliefs. They may differ from those of your students and their parents.

Nurturing relationships with our families and students creates trusting partnerships that often last many years.

With trust, our IEP teams can create a space of belonging and value so all participants have opportunity to co-create and work toward a shared vision centered on the student.

For additional support, [Family Empowerment Centers \(FECs\)](#) provide services to families of children with disabilities ages three to 22, including parents of students with IEPs.

FECs help parents better understand their child's educational and developmental needs, communicate effectively with service providers, navigate the IEP process, participate in school improvement efforts, access alternative dispute resolution, and build positive relationships with professionals. Services available vary for each FEC based on the needs of the community. Learn more about FECs at [Seeds of Partnership](#).

**Your feedback is vital as the user of this handout.
Please share your feedback on this [survey](#).**