POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS

A Teacher’s Guide to Engaging Families for Student Success
This limited capacity on the part of school staff and families served as the impetus for the development of the United States Department of Education (USDOE) Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnership. Karen and the USDOE collaborated to create the framework, and a publication entitled “Partners in Education” was authored by Karen L. Mapp and Paul Kuttner describing the framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). This research-based framework was designed to provide you and your schools with guidance on how to plan successful family engagement events, programs, and initiatives (for more information on and a diagram of the Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships, see http://www.sedi.org/pubs/framework/).

The Dual Capacity Framework identifies five process conditions that align quite nicely with the practices we’ve seen in action at Partnership Schools. These conditions help set the stage for the information, recommendations, and advice we will share with you in the upcoming chapters.

**The Five Process Conditions**

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word *process* as “a series of actions that produce something or that lead to a particular result.” As such, the process conditions articulate what we now know about the actions or steps we need to build into our planning of a family engagement event, program, or initiative to ensure its success.

**Linked to Learning**

The first process condition is that whatever we plan for and with families should be *linked to learning*—in other words, aligned with the learning and developmental goals for the students. Ask yourself the following questions: “Do my families leave the events at our school or in my classroom knowing more about what their children should know and be able to do? Did we provide an opportunity for our families to learn and master a new skill in support of a particular learning goal?” If your answers are “no” to these questions, you are not alone! It's pretty common that many of the traditional family events and initiatives that take place in schools and in classrooms are out of alignment with the teaching and learning goals of the school.
Relational

Our efforts must be intentional about building relationships of trust and respect with families. Families and school staff have to be given an opportunity to learn about each other, to share stories, and to build partnerships that are based on respect. We can't emphasize this enough—without a strong foundation of trust and respect, it is next to impossible to create strong partnerships.

Developmental

The third condition actually speaks to the tenor and tone of attempts to build partnerships with families. When your family engagement practice is developmental, it assumes that families already have strengths and knowledge on which you can build (as opposed to regarding families as empty or damaged vessels in need of services and "fixing"). For many of us who work in communities confronted with the challenges of poverty and adverse conditions, it may be hard, at times, not to regard families through a deficit-based lens. In so doing, we may overlook the fact that those families have knowledge and skills that can help us develop and grow as practitioners.

Collaborative

Initiatives should strive to bring families and staff together so that they can learn from and with each other. By collaborative, we mean that this relationship between families and practitioners is reciprocal and builds on the strengths of both parties. Everyone is viewed through an asset-based lens—teachers, families, community members, and the students. Under collaborative process conditions, everyone is listened to, contributes, and is empowered. This condition means that initiatives must be designed where true sharing among staff and families is valued and cultivated.
Interactive

We adults learn by doing. In fact, active learning is even more important for adults than for children! To master any skill, we all need a chance to practice it; thus, our family engagement events should be interactive (and fun!). We sometimes have a tendency to hand our families lists of activities and instructions of things to do at home to support their children’s learning, but with no opportunity to practice, get support, and discuss the activities, families are often confused about what to do.

RESEARCH BRIEF

Principles of Adult Learning

Here’s what we know from research about the ways that adults learn best:

1. **Adults must want to learn.** (Helping their children is a strong motivator for learners who are parents.)
2. **Adults will learn only what they feel they need to learn.**
3. **Adults learn by doing.**
4. **Adult learning focuses on problems, and the problems must be realistic.**
5. **Experience affects adult learning.**
6. **Adults learn best in an informal situation.**
7. **Adults want guidance.**

For more on the topic of adult learning, check out this website: www.literacy.ca/professionals/professional-development-2/principles-of-adult-learning.