

Family Engagement: The Powerful Tool to Increase Student Success

by

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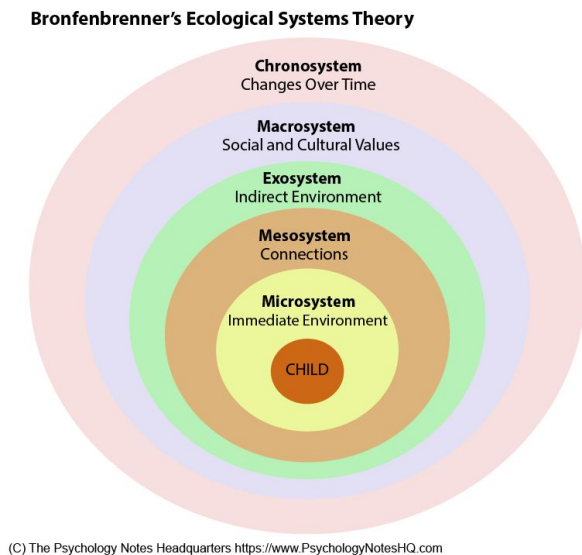
Introduction

The challenge and privilege of being an educator lies in the ability we have to aid in student success. In the elementary grades, and all throughout a child's schooling, success does not just lie in the ability to perform well on academic tasks. A teacher is responsible for helping students grow and succeed in all areas of development. However, the school itself and the teachers are not the only factors that influence a child's development. Many factors go into helping a child grow and be successful in learning. There are many theories on child development that focus on how the child develops and behaves. The ecological model for understanding behavior puts the child as the center focus and looks at all the different aspects the child could interact with that could influence the child's behavior and learning success (Wheeler & Richey, 2014).

The ecological perspective of behavior is focused on the interactions that occur in different environments and the influence they have on behavior and successful learning of the child (Wheeler & Richey, 2014). There are many theorists that support this perspective and have based their own theories around it. Lev Vygotsky used elements from the model such as the importance of environment and social context to support his theory of the zone of proximal development. Nicholas Hobbs used this idea from the ecological perspective to create the Re-ED program which focused on the fact that the child is inseparable from the ecological units they reside in (Wheeler & Richey, 2014).

Uri Bronfenbrenner was another theorist that used this ecological perspective but focused more on the family aspect of the model and how the family environment influences the behavior

and learning of a child. Bronfenbrenner's theory consisted of a series of systems, all with the child in the center as the central focus. These systems include the microsystem, the mesosystems, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The



microsystem consists of the child's immediate environment, a home, family, and friends (Wheeler & Richey, 2014). The mesosystem is composed of the interactions of the people in the microsystem, school (child's teachers) or community the child is in (Wheeler & Richey, 2014). The exosystem encompasses people or things the child does not have direct contact

with on a regular basis, school administrators or parent's employers (Wheeler & Richey, 2014).

The macrosystem refers to the child's culture or subculture that influences their development (Wheeler & Richey, 2014). The chronosystem are changes that occur to the child, or in a child's life over the period of their development. Examples of these events could include, birth of a sibling, divorce, or moving. All of these systems work together around the child, to influence the development, behavior, and learning of a child. If the relationships within these systems are not strong, the child will be the one negatively affected.

Children spend an immense amount of their lifetime in a school setting. Schools have a strong influence on students, especially in the younger grades. Early Childhood teachers should be forming relationships with all students and their families in order to support the students growth. Brofenbrenner's theory puts the school and the school-home relationship in the

mesosystem. He specifically focuses on the relationships and interactions that the child has with the people within this system, which includes the school personnel and the child's parents. The school community and its teachers focus on the child's development as a whole, not just the academic development. This is why it is so important to form that relationship as soon as children enter into the school system (Kocayörük, 2016). Creating a connection between the school and families takes explicit and intentional planning. This connection should be consistent in order to truly make an impact on the child's development and their transition from home to school (Kocayörük, 2016). Overall, schools are adopting many of Bronfenbrenner's ideas which advocate for having a strong connection with their families and involving them in all aspects of the child's learning and development in school.

What is a Home-School Connection?

Having a home-school connection means that families are involved or engaged in their child's learning in some form. Basically, "Parents commit to prioritizing their child's educational goals, and teachers commit to listening and providing a space for collaboration with parents" ("How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success", 2018). This connection makes parents feel like they have a say in their child's education, and it allows teachers to feel supported by the parents. Having a connection between the child's family and the child's school, shows the child that they have a team of adults by their side that only want the best for them. Having this connection allows both parents and teachers to have a more holistic view of one child. Parents will know more about the child's personality, tendencies, and family life, while the teacher will know more about the school culture, the curriculum, and the child's academic tendencies

(“Connecting Home and School”, n.d.). Having both these perspectives in cooperation allows the teacher and families to better understand the child’s strengths and weaknesses as a whole.

The home-school connection can look different for every family in the classroom. Some of the most common ways to have this connection include; having open, two-way communication between the teacher and families, families participating in school activities such as field-trips or math nights, parent volunteers, participating in parent-teacher conferences, and teachers providing resources to families. These are just a few of the ways that this home-school connection can be established and maintained throughout the school year. The extent to which families are encouraging learning at home and being involved in the child’s learning process at school is one of the best predictors of student success (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). However you look at it, having a strong home-school connection is an essential part of a child’s success in school.

Initiating the Family-School Connection

Creating a connection between schools and families builds positive relationships that help students grow. The family is the first support system a child has in their life. The better this system runs, the healthier the child’s overall growth will be (Kocayörük, 2016). This connection with their child’s school helps families feel more comfortable going to the school for help and resources. It also allows the school to feel like the students are able to get the support they need and have continued learning experiences at home as well. Having a strong home-school connection creates consistency for the child as well, which has been shown to have positive impacts on a child’s development (Kocayörük, 2016). Although this connection seems essential

for the child's well-being, the question then arises whose job is it to initiate this connection between families and schools?

Joyce Epstein talks about three very different perspectives on family engagement in the book *Social Interventions*. The first perspective is that the family and school have separate responsibilities. This perspective states that families and schools responsibilities regarding a child's development should be performed independently of each other. Schools have the responsibility of being professional and having universal standards and judgements about a child while the parents have the responsibility of personal connection and judgements about the child at home (Hurrelmann, Kaufmann, & Lösel, 1987). This perspective does not support the idea of family engagement because of the belief that school and families have independent responsibilities.

The next perspective Epstein (1987) mentions is that schools and families have sequential responsibilities. This means that the families and the schools are responsible for different stages of a child's development and education. This perspective has families solely responsible for a child's development up until they enter into formal schooling. During the time before school, the parents are responsible for developing children's essential skills and giving them school experiences, being loosely supported by educational programs. However, once the child enters school, this responsibility for learning is put solely onto the teacher and school (Hurrelmann, Kaufmann, & Lösel, 1987). This perspective is moving towards creating a family-school connection but is not quite there yet. The responsibilities are still too separated. In this perspective the families are passing the teaching responsibility to the school/classroom teacher.

When a home-school connection is made, the responsibility is not passed from one to another it is shared and supported by one another.

The last perspective Epstein talks about is a shared responsibility between the families and the schools. The child's family and the child's school are both responsible for the development of the child and the child's education. If teachers and parents share common goals for the children they can be achieved most effectively when they work cooperatively together (Hurrelmann, Kaufmann, & Lösel, 1987). This perspective encompasses the ideals of having a strong family-school connection. The parents and teachers are equals in this perspective and that makes both parties feel equally important to the child's education and development. This perspective ties into the Bronfenbrenner's model of the microsystem. This idea of shared responsibility emphasizes the importance of a connection between the individual (student) and their groups (school and family) just like Bronfenbrenner's microsystem talks about (Hurrelmann, Kaufmann, & Lösel, 1987).

There is no doubt that this shared responsibility perspective is essential to the child's education and development, but now the question arises, how can this connection be initiated? Epstein showed that there are three ways a connection can be formed, shared responsibility being the most beneficial. The family-school connection is usually initiated first by the schools, specifically the child's teacher. This could look different, depending on the classroom teacher or the school. One way the school can initiate this connection is by going on home visits. Some schools do home visits just for students that are going to be new to the school and other schools do more. Another tradition used in many schools to initiate connections with parents is back to school nights. Families are welcomed into the school, shown around, and students and families

get to meet the principal and classroom teacher. This is when schools focus on welcoming all families and making them feel like they can be a part of the school as well. Many classroom teachers also send home postcards before students arrive to introduce themselves to students and families. Many teachers choose to establish a variety of forms of communication, whether it be an app or folder that gets sent home daily. They are always communicating with their families throughout the school year. Teachers and schools also hold events throughout the year that get families into the school and engaged with learning in some form.

Families can also try to initiate the home-school connection in a number of ways. First they can simply make time for their child and establish a trusting relationship. This will help the child know when they go to school, they know they will be able to succeed and learn because someone believes in them. Another thing families can do is to be open to becoming an active partner in their child's learning. The parent can work with the teacher to find ways to be a part of or contribute to the child's classroom ("Connecting Home and School", n.d.). This will show the student that their parent(s) values their learning and they should too. It also shows that their teacher and their parent(s) are a team.

Parents can also establish open communication with teachers as well. Making teachers aware of any recent changes in a child's life can allow the teacher and parents to come up with the best ways to support the child together ("Connecting Home and School", n.d.). Parents can also just participate in any school event or activity they are able to. This helps parents get to know their child's school, their classroom teacher, and help them feel more comfortable with having a voice in their child's learning. The more exposure parents get to what is going on in their child's schooling, the more understanding they will be of the learning process and will be

more willing to be involved and engaged. When teachers and families work together, it creates endless benefits for the child.

Benefits of a Strong Family-School Connection

Engaging families in learning is essential to the students' success and their development as a whole. Families that are engaged in their child's learning feel like they are equal partners with the school staff. They are able to give students the home support they need in order to further their learning outside of school because they are given the resources they need to do so. When the families understand the importance of learning they can also support the child in developing their own love of learning. Teachers who make family engagement a priority in their classrooms create a more positive learning environment for all their students. The more they can get parents involved in the learning the more motivated and willing the students are to learn in the classroom. ("How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success", 2018). The more that families feel valued in the classroom the more they will be willing to help support their student's learning.

Students benefit the most from having their parents involved in their academic world. Students have better outcomes when they feel like their parents are supportive and engaged in their learning (Wood & Bauman, 2017). Also when a child's parent(s) have high aspirations and expectations and shares them with the student, the student is more likely to have higher self-confidence and high expectations for themselves (Wood & Bauman, 2017). The more students feel supported by the adults in their lives, the more confident they will be in their own ability to succeed.

Family Involvement vs. Family Engagement

Family involvement and family engagement are both beneficial and necessary in schools. However, the two are distinctly different from each other. So, what is the difference between the two, and is one more important than the other? Family involvement is when parents participate in school activities or events and they are given resources by the teacher or school to inform them about their child's performance. With family involvement, the teacher is primarily responsible for setting academic goals for the student (How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success, 2018). Family involvement is good because the parents are still aware of their child's learning, getting to be a part of the school community, and obtaining resources for their child. However, they are only aware of the goals and learning, they are not engaged with it. Parental involvement is what most schools these days lean towards because it is a good first step to get families in the door. They have good intentions when planning these involvement activities but it is not letting parents truly engage and be a part of their child's education.

Family engagement is "parents and teachers sharing a responsibility to help their children learn and meet educational goals" ("How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success", 2018, para 5). Family engagement is what Epstein was talking about in her shared responsibility

perspective. The parents and teacher are working together to create goals for the student and communicate about the best ways to meet those goals. Teachers are not only talking about the students' academic progress, but they are providing parents the resources they need to help

PARENT INVOLVEMENT	PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT
When schools <i>involve</i> parents they are leading with their institutional self-interest and desires.	When schools <i>engage</i> parents they are leading with the parents' self-interests (their wants and dreams) in an effort to develop a genuine partnership.
When we're <i>involving</i> parents, school staff can fall into the role of a social worker who does things for parents, or who tends to tell them what they should be doing with their child.	When we're <i>engaging</i> parents, school staff act more as community organizers who help parents do things for themselves, and who elicit from parents ideas about what parents and school staff could be doing to better help their child and their community.
When we're <i>involving</i> parents, schools tend to focus on supporting students by strengthening and assisting school programs and priorities.	When we're <i>engaging</i> parents, schools support students by developing parent relationships and often working with parents to improve their local communities.
When we're <i>involving</i> parents, the parent is generally directed towards completing tasks selected by the school staff – or the parent may be a <i>client</i> who receives services and information.	When we're <i>engaging</i> parents, they are challenged to do something about what <i>they</i> feel is important to them. Staff learn what parents believe is important through developing a relationship.

the child and partnering with them to strengthen the child's success. Maria Quezada writes in her article "When we're engaging parents, the parent is considered a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals" (Quezada, n.d., para 27). Family engagement is when parents and teachers are equal partners with the same goal; to help their student succeed.

When families feel welcomed and valued, they will be more willing to be engaged in the school and their child's learning. When the schools and classrooms are culturally proficient, all families are able to feel this way in their child's school. Cultural proficiency is simply the values and beliefs an organization has in place to help them effectively engage with groups or people that are different from them (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). In order for schools to ensure cultural proficiency, they must first identify what cultural groups are present in their school (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). If they know what groups are present, they will be able to learn more about those cultures and be better able to meet their specific needs.

Another essential element for ensuring cultural proficiency is valuing diversity (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). When schools are able to develop an appreciation for all the differences among the families in their school, they will truly understand their needs and how to incorporate aspects of their cultures into the school culture. It can be a challenge when many different cultures come together, so being able to manage the dynamics of the differences is a major aspect of cultural proficiency (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). Schools need to know how to respond appropriately and effectively to issues that may arise due to the family differences. When parents feel like their culture is supported by the school, they feel more comfortable and willing to engage. Lastly, in order to really ensure cultural proficiency schools must be willing to adapt to diversity (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). Schools and

teachers must change their engagement strategies or events in order to support and reach the needs of their diverse families. This will help the families feel like they are part of the classroom and have a say in that classroom as well.

Parental involvement is the first step to family engagement (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). Both are useful to the school, parents, and the child but family engagement is more meaningful. Involvement is more of schools telling parents how they can help or contribute to their child’s learning while engagement is having the parent lead and the school is listening to their needs and goals and then they work to create them together (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). Schools usually do a good job of planning and implementing family involvement activities but they must start trying to be more proactive in having stronger family engagement within the school.

Research on the Impact of Family Engagement on Student Success

Family engagement is an area that every school, at every grade level, is trying to improve upon. Over the years, research has shown that parental involvement is always greater in elementary school and decreases significantly as the child moves to higher grade levels. In 2016, around 90 percent of students in Kindergarten through 5th grade had a parent attend a family engagement event such as a parent-teacher conference compared to 58 percent of high school students. Schools have been trying to improve on this for parents of higher grade level students, but so far, nothing has made a major impact. Across 50 different studies on parental engagement, researchers have found a connection between the engagement and student achievement (“How Parental Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). Likewise, the earlier the connection is established, the more effective it will be in raising students’ performance (“How Parent

Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). However, it is important for parents to be engaged at all levels of a child’s schooling.

The chart below shows the percentage of parents involved in different family involvement activities throughout the years. Parental involvement overall has had a steady increase throughout the years. Some parental involvement activities that are shown include parents attending general meetings, attending a school or class event, attending a scheduled parent-teacher conference, and volunteering or serving on a committee. The family involvement rates have been overall steady throughout the years with the rates slightly increasing as the years increase. The highest percentage of parents were involved in general meetings at their child’s school. The lowest percentage of parents were involved in volunteering or serving on a committee at their child’s school. The most consistent rates are found in parents attending a scheduled parent-teacher conference with their child’s teacher (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). These are just a few of the family involvement activities that schools put on, but if the rates continue to rise family engagement will continue to make more of an impact.

Trends in the Percentage of Students Whose Parents Reported Involvement in Their Child’s School: Select Years, 1996-2016



Source: Data for 1996 and 1999: Wirt, J. et al. (2001). The condition of education 2001 (NCES 2001-072) [Table 54-1]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pub2001/2001072.pdf>. Data for 2003: Vaden-Kiernan, N. & Manus, J. (2005). Parent and family involvement in education: 2002-03 (NCES 2005-043) [Table 3]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005043>. Data for 2007: Herrold, K. & O'Donnell, K. (2008). Parent and family involvement in education, 2006-07 school year, from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007 (NCES 2008-050) [Table 3]. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pub2008/2008050.pdf>. Data for 2012: Noel, A., Stark, P., & Redford, J. (2015). Parent and family involvement in education, from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2012 (NCES 2013-028) [Table 2]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pub2013/2013028rev.pdf>. Data for 2016: McGuigan, M. & Megna, M. (2017). Parent and family involvement in education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016. (NCES 2017-102) [Table 2]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pub2017/2017102.pdf>.

childtrends.org

Studies have also found that parents who do not speak English at home have lower rates of attendance in most family engagement activities. This may be because parents who do not

speaking English may feel uncomfortable getting involved or have trouble communicating with the school staff (“Child Trends”, 2013). Research shows that 62 percent of students with two parents that do not speak English participated in a family engagement activity such as parent teacher conferences, compared to 82 percent of students with two parents that speak English (“Child Trends”, 2013). Schools must work harder to make sure that they are meeting the needs of all of their families so every parent can be involved in their child’s education. Also to make sure every child can have the opportunity to have increased success from family engagement. Tracy Ross states that family engagement “can’t be a one-size-fits-all approach” (Mitchell, 2019) and she is correct. Schools must work to eliminate these barriers for families so that all families can be engaged and all students can have resources to be supported and successful.

Family engagement has the most impact on the student. Children with families that are engaged in their learning are more likely to earn higher grades, develop self-confidence and motivation, have better social skills, and graduate from high school and go to college (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018; “Top Benefits of Family and Community Engagement”, 2018). Research has also found that lower levels of absenteeism have been found in schools with a strong family-school connection (“Top Benefits of Family and Community Engagement”, 2018). The more students are at school, the more time and exposure they will have to learning. The more support and motivation students have from their families the more confident they will feel in their abilities. Having a strong support system within the child’s home and their school, can only help the child become even more successful.

The first student area found to be impacted by family engagement is better academic performance which leads to higher grades for the student. In a study by Gonzalez and Jackson,

they found that efforts to increase communications with families lead to positive increases in reading achievement for Kindergarteners. They also found that efforts to increase volunteer opportunities lead to increases in mathematics achievement for Kindergarten students as well (Wood & Bauman, 2017). In this study, they also found that family engagement increased students' GPA in middle school and high school (Wood & Bauman, 2017). There have also been studies that tied family engagement with students academic achievement and furthering their education. Several studies showed positive links between parental aspirations for their child and student outcomes and achievement (Wood & Bauman, 2017). The Mo Singh study showed that when parents had expectations for students related to high school and college graduation, the student was more cognitively and emotionally engaged in school therefore, earning higher grades (Wood & Bauman, 2017). When students feel that they have people supporting them and believing in them, they will perform better.

Another area found to be impacted by family engagement is lower levels of absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism means that a student misses twenty or more days in a school year. Student absences dropped 20% when teachers engaged with parents through some sort of family engagement activity ("How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success", 2018). Students with engaged parents and open two-way communication between parents and teachers, commits students to daily attendance ("How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success", 2018). When teachers are consistently calling parents checking in when students are absent, it makes more accountability for the parents. Also, when there is a strong bond between the school, family, and child, it will make school more of a priority in the eyes of parents and students. The more

students are at school, the more they will be able to learn. So if family engagement can help decrease student absences, then it should be a priority in all schools.

The last major area impacted by family engagement is students' behavior. When teachers partner with parents to tackle behavior problems and motivation, it becomes significantly more successful than if each party were to do it alone. When children have the same expectations for behavior at school and at home, they will be able to be more successful reaching the behavior goals set for them. This consistency allows children to know what is expected of them at all times, not just what is expected at school. When teachers share resources or strategies they are trying at school with the caregivers, they will be better able to support families and work on the behavior at home as well, creating that consistency. In a study from Owens et al. (2008), they found significant improvements in behavior for children with ADHD whose parents and teachers partnered with each other. The students had improved symptoms, such as a decrease in aggression and they enhanced relationships with adults in their lives (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Another study by Wang, Hill, and Hofkens (2014) found that parents discussing the importance of education and their expectations with students was associated with decreased behavior problems (Wood & Bauman, 2017).

Family engagement is not only beneficial to the students but can benefit families as well as the school staff, specifically the classroom teacher. When looking at the benefits for families, it has been shown that families are more willing to participate in family engagement activities and volunteer when they feel welcomed by the school and their child's teacher. When there is a strong family-school connection, parents are more vocal about needing support and teachers are happy to equip them with the tools they need to support the child at home. Parents that are

engaged in the classroom and feel welcomed by the teacher, tend to think more highly of them which increases teacher morale (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). When the teachers know their students and know their families, they are better able to prepare lessons that fit the needs of the students and their families. Teachers can feel certain that they have met the needs of their students when family input is abundant. With parent input, teachers will also know the best way to contact and stay in touch with families to keep the engagement going throughout the school year (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success”, 2018). When teachers and parents work together, it makes the classroom a more successful place for everyone.

How to Increase Family Engagement in Schools

Family engagement is essential for learning, but teachers and families are both very busy so finding ways to communicate and connect can be difficult. Luckily, there are many ways that the bond can be strengthened between schools, families, and communities. The first way to increase family engagement from the very beginning is to welcome everyone (“Home-to-School Connections Guide”, n.d.). This is especially important for the families who do not speak English or speak limited English. Eliminating barriers for all families is most important and makes them feel most welcome in the classroom. A variety of avenues can be utilized to address those barriers such as; using Google translate for work, documents sent home, or presentations, using the language line to communicate on the phone with families to talk about their student, and having interpreters at events to support all families feeling welcome. These simple strategies can make a world of difference for families to feel welcomed and valued in the classroom.

Another way to increase family engagement is to establish open communication with them in ways they can easily access. There are many ways to stay in contact with families. Teachers can use a blog, a google classroom, parent communication apps like Seesaw or Remind, and even social media like Twitter or Facebook. These are all great ways to stay in constant communication with families every day. These are great because they meet parents right where they are and they are easily accessible right on their phone. Nowadays, an increasing number of parents are already on social media so adding that in as a way of communicating helps ensure parents are getting the information (“Home-to-School Connections Guide”, n.d.). However it is important to remember that if parents do not have internet access at home, they will not be able to access the class blog or a google classroom. Teachers must take this into account when they set up standard communication measures with their parents. Although these new ways of communication are great and should be taken advantage of, more traditional ways of communication should not be eliminated. Phone calls, planners, paper calendars and newsletters remain essential tools for the families who cannot access the other forms of communication (ASCD Guest Blogger, 2017). Having multiple ways of communicating with families and finding out what is best for the families in the classroom will lead to better family engagement.

The next way to increase family engagement is to build parent partnerships. Teachers and schools should be intentional about building strong relationships with families. This can be done by creating two-way communication with families, making them feel like they have a voice in the classroom, creating learning goals together with the child’s teacher, and getting parents in the classroom (for more than just making copies). When families feel like partners, they will be

more willing to participate and be engaged. This partnership ties in with knowing that families and teachers are both busy. Scheduling issues may arise when trying to get families engaged in the classroom. Busy parents find it difficult to balance their job, their own education, and being engaged in their child's education (ASCD Guest Blogger, 2017). If schools are trying to get parents engaged, then it is important that they work with them to schedule events at times that are suitable for families and schools. It is important for teachers and schools to have an easy way to communicate with families about scheduling. For families that have internet access, using software such as Doodle, or Google calendar can help make scheduling easier for everyone (ASCD Guest Blogger, 2017).

Another way to engage families is to have student-led activities that parents enjoy and can help with. Some of these activities would include, readers theatre presentations, math nights, literacy nights, class recipe book, or thanksgiving around the world. These are all student centered activities but allow families to be engaged in the process. The families can help students practice their readers theatre and create one on their own. The families can create recipes with their student and have the student share it with the class and talk about why their family loves it so much. For thanksgiving around the world, families can work with their students to actually cook their favorite dish and bring it in to share with the class.

These approaches to engagement allow students and their families to share their culture and talk about why it is important to them. This also gives teachers a better idea of students and families background which helps the teacher tailor lessons to fit the needs of the students. In the article, "Home-to-School Connection Guide", the authors talk about another way to increase family engagement through parent-teacher conferences. They suggest having student-led parent

conferences (“Home-to-School Connections Guide”, n.d.). One positive impact this can have is that parent attendance improves because they want to hear what their child thinks and they do not have to find alternative care for them. The students can work with the teacher to select their best work to show to their parents to talk about. The excitement of student-centered and student created celebrations is something children can proudly share and provides the parents with a product that they can keep and celebrate forever. This creates a great environment for parents, teachers, and students to all have a voice in creating shared goals and visions for the student’s school year.

One of the simplest ways to help with family engagement is to encourage, and give parents the resources, to read with their child. Reading together is such a great way for families to help improve their child’s literacy development and to help them begin to love learning (“Home-to-School Connections Guide”, n.d.). It is something families can do together at home and even at school. Parents can come in and do a mini lesson with the whole class on their favorite book and talk about why they love it. This gets the families in the classroom, engaged in the learning process. There are many online resources parents can use to read at home such as Read Across America, First Book, Reading A to Z, and many more. If some families do not have internet access at home, teachers can also send home small group books and allow children to take home books from their own classroom library. Students can also check out their favorite books from the school library to take home and share with their families. When parents read with their children, they are teaching them without even realizing the impact it has on their child’s language development. This simple family engagement activity is such a powerful way for

children to get exposed to literature, develop strong language and vocabulary skills, and engage families in student's learning.

Maryland Schools Family Engagement Framework

Many school systems have created a framework for what family engagement should look like in their state. They have a number of principles that the teachers and schools must follow as guidelines in order to engage and involve families in the learning process. Looking specifically at the Maryland family engagement framework, the first principle for the schools is to welcome all families. This principle talks about making all stakeholders, families, students, and school staff, feel like they are valued and welcomed. In order to welcome all stakeholders successfully, everyone involved must have “a mindset that values cultural proficiency, the importance of diversity, and individual abilities” (Shaffer, Leone, & Geiser, 2016). Schools need to remove or eliminate all barriers possible so that all families and students have access to the family involvement resources and welcoming techniques. Some ways that schools can welcome families is by having welcome signs up in different languages, conducting neighborhood walkthroughs, and hosting back to school nights. These all get families in the school and get them familiar with the teacher and the school's administration.

The next way to initiate this connection is by encouraging partnerships among schools, families, and communities (Shaffer, Leone, & Geiser, 2016). These teams work together to support student success and create support for students. If there is a strong partnership between these units, they will better be able to support and make decisions for the needs of the students. Schools can support this partnership by creating opportunities for families to be involved in the

student's learning, sharing knowledge of child development, and giving support resources to enhance learning at home.

Another principle is having parents involved in student success and decision making. This allows parents to feel like they have a voice in their child's development and learning. When families feel like they are equal partners, they will be more willing to work with the school to make the right decisions for the student. Schools can initiate this by holding parent-teacher conferences to talk about student success, ensuring that parents are involved in decisions related to their child, and providing parents with resources to support their child's development (Shaffer, Leone, & Geiser, 2016).

Something else schools can do to create this connection is to be intentional about planning and implementing activities that involve the families. Schools can engage in professional developments on the best strategies and activities to implement in order to create a strong connection with their families. Schools must change the plans they are given to meet the needs of the families in their school. Schools can initiate this by planning before or after school family activities, develop a parent involvement plan with input from the parents, or by creating parent organizations (Shaffer, Leone, & Geiser, 2016).

One of the last principles used to initiate this connection is having strong communication between the school and the families. This communication should not just be the school reaching out to families or classroom teachers sending home information. This should be strong two-way communication. The communication should be on-going throughout the year, with simple vocabulary, sent in multiple formats and in multiple languages. The parents should feel comfortable initiating communication with teachers as well through notes, phone calls, or emails.

Having respectful, honest, and two-way communication between parents and teachers is more likely to create effective and sustainable connections to support students (Shaffer, Leone, & Geiser, 2016).

There are many different ways that schools and parents can initiate a connection to support the success of the students. Maryland focuses on the five previously mentioned in order to support their schools and families. All schools are different, so family engagement naturally looks a little different in every school. However, they all follow the same guidelines and are always student focused. No matter what principles they follow, schools cannot deny that family engagement is essential to the success of the students and an important aspect of their development. Having school and families share the responsibilities and be equal partners in supporting students makes the family-school connection the most successful.

Maryland Family Engagement Programs

Judy Centers

Along with the Maryland family engagement framework, Maryland also has many programs in place to help initiate family engagement in schools. One of these important programs are the Judy Centers which focus on preparing children (birth to age five) for school readiness. The centers main goals are to create opportunities for and address the needs of children, parents, and families. There are many groups of people that go into ensuring that children are ready to start school but in low-income areas, the connections between these groups is often a challenge. Judy Centers help bridge that gap by creating and supporting those connections. There are currently 54 Judy Centers located in Title I schools across Maryland. Two of those fifty-four are located in Frederick County. Since not every Title I school can host a Judy

Center, they are strategically placed in schools throughout the county. The Judy Centers work with many other partners to provide their variety of services. They provide adult education, case management, child care assistance, developmental and health screenings, parenting classes, play groups, and family engagement activities (MSDE, 2020). When looking at family engagement, the Judy Center focuses on the family's ability to participate in and support their child's learning (MSDE, 2020).

The Judy Centers partner with schools to support a variety of family engagement events. They host parent information events and webinars to teach parents about different aspects of child development. They support engagement initiatives in schools like play groups which help young children get exposure to a school setting and learn skills to prepare them while also connecting families to the school and one another. Once a month, Judy Centers have a family night that they host in their Title I school. Often the Judy Center will partner with schools or other different community organizations to put these events on but sometimes these nights will be just for Judy Center families (Kreimer, 2020). They will do different themed events every night.

A Judy Center in Carroll County partnered with the Westminster library to put on a Bedtime in a Box program for Judy Center families and all Preschool students. They taught students and families how to create a great bedtime routine and put many resources (toothbrush, toothpaste, bath toys, alarm clock, bedtime schedule, books, pajamas, etc) in the box for the students and families to take home with them to start their own routine (Kreimer, 2020). This was a great way to engage families while also providing them with the necessary resources they needed to accomplish and engage in the task at home. They also provide parents with resources

for furthering education at home. PAT, or parents as teachers, is a program the Judy Center has to support parents teaching their children at home. The Judy Center staff go into the families homes and work with them to develop activities to help the parent engage the child at home (Kreimer, 2020). The goal of the Judy Center is to make sure that the students and parents are given the basic resources they need to help the child be safe, supported, and ready for school.

Raising a Reader

The next program is the Raising a Reader program. This program targets families with children ages 0-8 years old. The program aims to help families understand why sharing books consistently matters. Programs like this one, excite children and families with great new books each week and establish connections to librarians to help build literacy skills at home (“Raising A Reader”, 2015). Their mission is to engage families in a book sharing routine to help “foster healthy brain development, healthy relationships, a love of reading, and the literacy skills critical for school success” (“Raising A Reader”, 2015). The program works in three simple steps. First, families get trained in read aloud strategies and how to create a reading routine at home so they are able to share it with their child. The children then get to bring home high quality, hardcover books each week and share them with their families. Each bag of books is carefully selected to include a variety of genres including: multicultural, spanish translated, and picture books. Then families get to connect with local librarians to continue the book sharing, continue to learn new strategies, and get new books and resources. Families are able to engage in their child’s learning through this program. Teachers can even have parents come into the classroom and read their favorite story to the class to become even more engaged in the classroom environment. This

program is so beneficial because it allows all families to get engaged, especially families that would not have access to these resources without the support of the program.

ReadyRosie

The next program Maryland uses to promote active family engagement is the ReadyRosie program. This program is aimed at children birth to age five but can be used for early elementary students as well. This program uses play-based activities to support children's development and school readiness skills. ReadyRosie provides parents with instructional videos on how to turn every day activities and conversations into teachable moments. The program encourages talking, singing, reading, exploring, and of course play activities. The program instructs parents on how to turn everyday conversations with their child into ways to develop their subject specific vocabulary, talk about their experiences, and answer open-ended questions (Howard County Public School System, 2020). They also instruct parents on play. ReadyRosie activities encourage parents to allow children to choose what they want to play with, use materials in many different and creative ways, and play with them (Howard County Public School System, 2020). Singing and reading is also a major part of the ReadyRosie program. They give parents resources on educational songs, great reading books to promote learning, and making the most of the environment by reading signs or labels (Howard County Public School System, 2020).

The last aspect the program focuses on is exploring the environment around them. They encourage parents to take children on walks or scavenger hunts to look for bugs, plants, shapes, and colors. They encourage parents to have a conversation with their children about what they find using specific vocabulary (Howard County Public School System, 2020). The program engages parents in students learning even before they come to school. It also supports parents in

teaching their children at home through one of the most important times in their life. The parents can access the program right from their phone by text messages and emails. The program can be translated to a variety of languages as well so it is great for all families to engage in.

Ready at Five

Ready at Five is another family engagement program in Maryland that allows parents to teach children school readiness skills. Ready at Five has programs for parents, teachers, librarians, and other service providers. They have the institute for early educators which is aimed at educating teachers on building their skills and knowledge. Another program is VIOLETS which is a program aimed at vocabulary and oral development. They also have a STEM program and a cultural and linguistic competence program.

Ready at Five has many programs but one of their most well known parent programs is their Learning Parties program. Learning Parties are hands-on, interactive parties that involve the parent and the child. These parties teach parents how to turn every day experiences and activities into learning moments for children (“The Early Years Matter!”, 2020). Just like the ReadyRosie program, the Learning Parties focus on playing, singing, reading, talking, and fun activities. The learning parties have five components. The parties start with parent skills development where a trainer gives parents a variety of techniques and strategies to help their children. While the parents are learning these skills, children get a play session focused on child-directed play. After these sessions, parents and children come back together and the parents practice the strategies they learned while getting feedback from the trainer. The learning parties also have a time where families can network with each other. Families can talk, get to know each other, and support each other throughout the process. Lastly, the parents are given a challenge to do at home until

the next learning party. What parents like most about this program is that they get to leave each event with a bag of resources and supplies to help support their child at home. All the items and books they get to keep as a reward for committing to the process. This program is great for supporting families and arming them with the resources and knowledge they need to be able to prepare their children for school. When parents have the resources they need, they will be more engaged and willing to teach their child the necessary skills they need to be ready for school.

FAST: Families and Schools Together

Another program that helps bring families and schools together is called the FAST program. FAST stands for families and schools together. This is an after school program that brings different families together to teach them evidence based activities to support parenting skills, reduce stress, and encourage family bonding. There are different sessions that are available to families of elementary, middle, and high school students. Each session has the same goals, but the activities and strategies taught vary depending on the age of the student. All of the sessions have a group activity, one-on-one parent and child time, and then a parents only time (FAST, 2020). The FAST program is run by a parent partner, two-three FAST parent graduates, one school partner (usually a classroom teacher), and two community partners. At the middle and high school level, one to two youth partners (students) are included (FAST, 2020). Having a wide variety of people involved in this program is great for connecting families to other families, people in their community, and to their child's school. When families have others to lean on, engagement does not seem as scary. This program really focuses on creating that family bond between the caregiver and the child. It also focuses on building positive connections between families and schools and also between families and communities (FAST, 2020). This program is

a great way for schools to initiate the school/community and family bond and also between the parent and child. This family engagement program can give parents the confidence and support they need to become actively engaged in their child's learning at all levels of their schooling. The program states that "80% of families who attend one FAST Session will successfully complete the program – one of the highest retention rates among parent empowerment programs" (FAST, 2020). This shows that if schools can take advantage of this program and get families connected with the school, community, and one another, great things can come out of it for the students.

Challenges of Family Engagement in Schools

Although research shows that family engagement is nothing but beneficial to students, families, and schools, it still comes with its share of challenges. Families have identified a number of barriers that keep them from becoming engaged in their child's school. The number one barrier that over half of families identified with is how busy their schedule is (Breese, 2017). It should come as no surprise that parents have busy schedules. Between most parents working full-time and caring for multiple children at home, it can be very difficult to find time to participate in engaging activities or events at their child's school. Some parents simply do not have enough time in their day to really engage at their child's school even if they feel it is important or have a strong desire to engage. Schools need to take this into consideration when planning and scheduling events. Getting feedback from parents for best days and times will increase the chances of more families attending.

Another barrier identified by a quarter of the families was child care needs (Breese, 2017). Many families identified the fact that they had no one to watch their children while they

attended parent/guardian events after school. This kept them from engaging in the events because they were not supposed to bring their child and they could not afford, or could not find someone to watch their children. Schools can eliminate this barrier in a variety of ways. One way is by providing child care at the school while the parents participate in the event or activity. This would allow the parents to get the most out of the event without having to worry about finding care for their child. Something else schools can do is plan events that involve both the parent and the child together, like student driven conferences. This way, they do not have to find care at all because the children are welcome at events as well. Schools can also plan some events during the school day so that children are already at school and no care is needed.

The next two barriers are closely related, parents saying the school staff seem too busy and they are worried if they become engaged and raise concerns their children will be treated differently (Breese, 2017). When parents do not feel welcome in the school or the classroom, they will be very hesitant to engage. Likewise, if they do not have a strong relationship with their child's teacher, they will not feel like an equal partner in their learning. "Parents are most likely to be motivated to be involved when they have confidence that they have some degree of control and influence over their child's learning" (Baker, et al., 2016, p. 165). Teachers and schools need to create a strong bond with families that make them feel like equal partners in the child's learning so they feel they can be engaged and that it will make a difference in their child's success. Teachers and school staff can easily eliminate these barriers by making an effort to consciously greet families when they come into the school and make them feel welcome. When school personnel exhibit positive attitudes towards families and make an effort to engage with

them, they develop an increase in families feeling welcome in the school community (Baker, et al., 2016, 165).

Some other barriers families identified are transportation challenges, language barriers, poor communication by the school about family engagement events, and parents' own negative views and experiences towards school. All of these barriers can be eliminated by schools being very intentional when planning their events. Schools need to not only know their families and acknowledge that the barriers exist, but they need to actually work with families to find solutions to those barriers. If schools identify the barriers, but do nothing about them, there will be no progress on increasing family engagement. When schools are intentional about getting to know the families at their schools and eliminating the barriers they are facing, family engagement will be more beneficial for students, families, and schools.

Family Engagement from the School Perspective: Monocacy Elementary, Frederick MD

The research on the benefits of family engagement on student success is clear. So, how are schools using this data to drive family engagement in their own school? Monocacy Elementary School is a Title I school in Frederick County, Maryland that is known to have strong and intentional family engagement. Troy Barnes has been the principal at Monocacy Elementary for the past four years. Since he became principal, he has been working hard to make family engagement a priority in Monocacy. In an interview with Mr. Barnes, he states that Monocacy is a TEAM, with the families and the surrounding community that has a shared vision of doing whatever it takes for the students to be successful (Barnes, 2020). He feels that Monocacy has a strong family-school connection that has been growing in these past four years (Barnes, 2020). The school has tried many different approaches to family engagement over the

years, but has always had the same outcome: to make Monocacy the best place for all of it's students.

As previously stated, initiating the home-school connection can be a challenge for both schools and families. The Monocacy staff members however, make it a priority to reach every family and to create this connection with each one. The school staff partners with the surrounding communities to really reach every family in the school. One of the ways Monocacy initiates this connection is through their Evenings in the Park event. Teachers, administrators, and other school staff go into the school's neighborhoods and have a fun evening in the community park available. This is a time for the families to meet the school staff and just talk and have fun together before the school year starts. It is a great way for students and families to reconnect with past teachers and get to know their new ones. This is also great for first time families at Monocacy to get to know the staff in a low stress environment. When the school goes into the community and goes where the families are, they are eliminating some of those barriers that were previously mentioned. When these barriers are eliminated, families feel more willing and welcome to engage with the school.

Mr. Barnes states that at Monocacy, this home-school connection is "jointly wanted and needed" (Barnes, 2020). Since Monocacy is a Title I school, they have many families that may not have the resources they need to fully engage in their child's learning. Having this connection allows families to get the supports they need while also allowing the school to get to know the child and family in order to support them better. All families care about their child's education, but sometimes they are not sure what their role really is or how they are best able to support their

child (Barnes, 2020). Having this connection with the school has allowed many families to find a role within their child's education.

Monocacy plans a number of different events throughout the school year that they have found to be very successful in engaging families in their child's learning. Monocacy has three events that happen every school year that have always been strong ways of engaging families with the school. The starting event is their Block Party. At Monocacy, the Block Party is like the traditional back-to-school night at other schools. During the Block Party, families and students get to visit classrooms, meet and talk with their child's teacher, get resources to help support their child's learning, and also engage in fun activities and have some snacks. This event is something that families enjoy going to because it is low pressure and tailored to meet the needs of the families. It is also great because the children are welcome to attend with the families so they do not have to find any sort of child care. This is a great way for the staff to welcome families and for families to feel that they are an immediate part of the school family from their first step in the building. Students and families who have been at Monocacy before can visit past teachers and catch up with them and keep those connections strong even if they will be in a new class that school year. This night really establishes the ideals Mr. Barnes holds of Monocacy being a TEAM.

Another event that has been really engaging for families at Monocacy is their STEAM night. Since STEAM education has been growing within the past few years, Mr. Barnes felt that it would be a great idea to educate families on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math topics through hands-on and explorative activities. During these STEAM nights, community partners are brought in to expose and teach families about the importance of STEAM work.

Families are encouraged to participate in these activities with their children to learn through doing. The families get STEAM resources, tools, and extracurricular activities the student can participate in. Mr. Barnes says that the STEAM nights are great ways to engage families in their child's education by actually having them do what the children do at school (Barnes, 2020). It is also a great way to connect families with other community members and organizations.

The last main event offered by the school is the Transition Night. During the transition night, families and students get to "move up to the next grade" in a sense. They get to meet with the teachers they could have the next year, get to know them and learn about the curriculum and expectations for the next grade. This event usually occurs near the end of the school year and is a great way to keep families engaged throughout the summer. When they hear about the expectations and curriculum for the next school year and get resources from the team, they will be able to work with the children throughout the summer preparing them for the move up. All of these family engagement activities are great for engaging parents in learning and help them feel comfortable in the school. Monocacy does a great job at supporting the families needs and giving them lots of information so parents can feel like an equal partner in their child's learning.

There was one family engagement event that Mr. Barnes mentioned as not being as successful as the school would have hoped. That event was their Math Nights. He mentioned that they tried multiple times to have these Math Nights at the school to give families resources, math examples, manipulatives, and teach them about the changing Common Core math curriculum. However, it just never caught on with the families. He mentioned the time of year the events were held seemed to have a lot of conflict with sporting events. He also mentioned that even though they offered multiple Math Nights throughout the year, they would always be stronger

the first time and then attendance would die out as they went on throughout the year. So even though they were offering new material at each Math Night, families may have felt like they already got all the information the first time around. They decided to instead incorporate some of these Math Night ideas into their STEAM night so families were still able to access these important resources. Not all efforts at family engagement are going to be successful, it does take some trial and error. However, once schools find what works for their families, the students will reap the benefits.

Monocacy makes it a priority to engage all families in their family engagement activities. Monocacy has a very large number of English Language Learners in their school (19.10%). Many of these students' families speak solely Spanish at home, or a combination of Spanish and English. Language is one of the barriers families identified as being a reason for not engaging at their child's school. In order to combat this, Monocacy first gets to know the unique needs of all their families. They seek input from families through surveys and questionnaires about what support they need in order to help them engage. They also go into the neighborhoods and physically invite the families to events. This makes the families feel special and even more welcomed to the school. Due to the fact that Monocacy has a large number of Spanish speaking families, the staff translates all the documents they send home to families so that all the families are accessing the information and are aware of what is going on at the school (Barnes, 2020). Monocacy also offers translators and interpreters at all school events so all families can engage with the information (Barnes, 2020). This eliminates that language barrier for families and allows them all to engage in all the events.

It is important to make sure that family engagement events are actually meeting the needs of families and that the families have input as to what those events are. At Monocacy, Mr. Barnes makes sure to take parent input into consideration when planning events and evaluates all events for their effectiveness after they are complete. Near the middle of the school year, each family at Monocacy is asked to complete a Title I Family Engagement survey. This survey has families rate the effectiveness of the current events and add comments on any additional events they would like to see or different supports they need at the events (Barnes, 2020). This helps Monocacy to see how well they are meeting the needs of their families and what else they need to do to support them. The family engagement events at Monocacy are always evaluated for their effectiveness after they are complete. In order to do this, each family is asked to complete a short survey as an exit slip as they leave each event. The information from these surveys is analyzed by the assistant principal and shared with staff. These surveys are great resources for the school to see what changes they need to make to their events and what is beneficial to families.

Monocacy also makes sure to track and monitor family engagement and use that data to inform future events, along with the parent input. Monocacy has made family engagement part of their School Improvement Plan the past few years. Their SIP goal is to have no more than a 10% difference between the participation in events and the neighborhood families are from (Barnes, 2020). So far, 100% of the events have met or exceeded this goal for the past 2 years at Monocacy (Barnes, 2020). This shows that Monocacy is truly reaching their families and doing it in a way that supports their individual needs. It also maintains the schools focus on this critical part of education as it is always a constant discussion topic in meetings and being reflected on by the staff monthly.

Overall, Monocacy Elementary School and Mr. Barnes have worked extremely hard to put family engagement at the forefront of the school. They plan fun, engaging, and educational events for their families to learn new ways to support their children. They plan their events based on family input and need. They have succeeded in eliminating barriers that would have normally caused families to be disengaged. This school is a great example of family engagement.

Family Engagement from a Teacher's Perspective

Kindergarten Perspective

When families feel welcome in their child's school, they will be more willing to engage in the classroom as well. Charis Loomer is a Kindergarten teacher at Monocacy Elementary School. She has previously taught Pre-K and First grade and has been teaching at Monocacy for the past 14 years. Charis has always made family engagement a priority in her classroom. She has planned many events throughout the years that have been successful in engaging all families. She has always believed that family engagement is an essential piece to the classroom. It is imperative, as a Pre-K or Kindergarten teacher, to engage families because for most of them, it is their first experience in a school setting. If this relationship is established when the child first enters school, it will be natural for parents to keep establishing this relationship with all of their child's teachers.

Ms. Loomer reaches out to build her relationships with families before the school year even begins. Once she gets her class list, she sends a letter of introduction to the families home in a cute and personal way. Over the years she has sent home postcards, pictures, and handwritten cards (Loomer, 2020). This helps the families get to know her and feel welcomed into the classroom before they even step foot in the school. She also immediately invites all families to

follow the class' social media accounts so she can keep in touch about back to school events and get them familiar with using the apps before the year begins (Loomer, 2020). She has a class twitter account that she posts fun activities the students have done and encouraging messages to families.

Ms. Loomer also builds relationships with her families through Monocacy's school events mentioned by Mr. Barnes. At back to school night, Ms. Loomer welcomes all her families into the classroom. She makes sure to introduce herself personally to each family and get to know them a little bit. At back to school night, she gives out a brochure to every family and develops a personal powerpoint that shares a little bit about her family and what to expect for the upcoming school year. In the brochure, she also has an all about me section where she puts information about herself so the families can get to know her more, she also puts in the class schedule and classroom expectations. Along with the back to school nights, Ms. Loomer also holds monthly or quarterly classroom family engagement events. These events get families into the classroom but also engage them in their child's learning. Whether it be working with their child to create a recipe and share it with the class or come in to share their favorite book. She also welcomes families in for author celebrations, attendance celebrations, holiday parties, and volunteering (Loomer, 2020). All of her family engagement activities are very hands-on and engage the families in the process of learning, not just the product.

Ms. Loomer uses multiple forms of communication to stay in contact with her families throughout the school year. She uses a combination of phone calls, newsletters, written letters, social media, and a parent communication app called Seesaw. She encourages all parents to sign up for the Seesaw app because it is a safe and easy way for her to communicate with her families

every single day. She takes pictures of the students working during the day and she can send them directly and privately to the families on the Seesaw app (Loomer, 2020). This maintains a connection with families and keeps families engaged in what their child is learning and doing at school. She also gives parents resources and assigns fun online learning activities the parents can do with their children at home to practice what they are doing at school. She knows some families may not have the technology to engage in this app, so for those families she sticks to phone calls or sends home printed out pictures of the students working so they can still engage even without the technology.

Although Ms. Loomer tries to engage all families and form a relationship with each and every one of them, there have been times when families would not reciprocate. When this happens, she first continues to try to reach out electronically. If these continued efforts do not elicit a response from the family, she focuses on sending home handwritten notes to the families. She also makes sure to tell the students she is sending home these notes so the student can act as another reminder that the note is there. Having a consistent form of communication helps the families know what to expect and know where to look to find the information. However, changing the form of communication to best fit families needs is the best way to reach every family in the classroom.

Ms. Loomer also makes sure that families that speak another language other than English can also engage in all the activities. She utilizes the language line when she needs to make phone calls home to families. She also translates all the documents she sends home to make the information accessible to all families. During school events, she makes sure to schedule interpreters in advance and make the families aware of that to eliminate that language barrier for

them (Loomer, 2020). Making families aware of ways you have tried to eliminate barriers for them can make them feel more valued and welcome at events.

Seeking input from families about the events being put on is an easy way to make sure their needs are being met. Ms. Loomer seeks family input in a number of ways. At the beginning of the year, she sends out a survey to her classroom families to identify what topics such as content areas, behavior, family time, nutrition, etc. families need support in. In that survey she also asks families about what type of communication is best for them and what time of day is best for planning activities and events (Loomer, 2020). This allows her to meet the needs of her family and plan events that families will be able to engage in. After every classroom event, she has the parents fill out an evaluation to gather data about how the event went and how much it helped/engaged families. She also sends out a survey at the end of the year to have the classroom families evaluate their school experience throughout the year. She asks questions about how they have seen their child grow throughout the year and if they felt supported or not throughout the year (Loomer, 2020).

Another very important time to gather parent feedback is during parent-teacher conferences. Ms. Loomer sends out a pre and post conference survey. The pre conference survey is sent home for families to fill out to give Ms. Loomer an idea of what they want covered during the conference. The survey asks questions about the child's strengths, what they are most concerned about, any comments they have, or anything else they really want to discuss. This helps Ms. Loomer plan out the conference to best support the family and answer their questions, putting the family's needs before her own agenda. She also has families fill out a post conference survey after the parent-teacher conference is complete. In this survey she asks questions about

the effectiveness of the conference, if the parents got all the information they needed, what could have been changed to better meet their needs, and any other comments they had (Loomer, 2020). Getting family input is the best way to ensure the activities and events being planned are meeting their needs.

Ms. Loomer believes there are so many benefits of engaging families in the classroom. When there is a strong connection being made, parents feel more valued and welcome in the classroom and in turn, will participate more in events and just overall be more present in the classroom and for their student. Families are also more willing to trust teachers with information about themselves and their student when there is a strong relationship being built. Ms. Loomer also stated that “a positive parent attitude leads to a stronger and more positive language while learning and engaging with their children” (Loomer, 2020). Parents are more willing to support their child at home, helping them with work and playing games, when they are given resources to do just that. When asked what advice she would give new teachers about engaging families she said to be open and inviting from day one. This shows families that their opinion is collected, valued, and used and it shows them that this school year is a partnership- not a job (Loomer, 2020). When teachers make families feel valued, the engagement will quickly follow.

4th Grade Perspective

Families need to feel welcome to engage in their child’s learning throughout all grade levels. ALonna Soward is a first year 4th grade teacher at Monocacy Elementary School. She knows that as the child moves up in grades, family engagement tends to drop off. This is why she makes it a priority to engage families in their child’s learning in her classroom in many different ways. Due to the fact that family engagement tends to be stronger in the lower grades, it is

important for teachers of higher grade levels to do what they can to encourage families to engage. Through being a part of the school family engagement events and communicating in a positive way with all her families, Ms. Soward is able to create a strong environment for family engagement.

Ms. Soward begins building these relationships with her families first by going to the before school events that Monocacy puts on. She attends all the evenings in the park events Monocacy organizes. This is a great way for her to make connections with her families and get to know them a little better in a setting that they are comfortable in. She also is active in planning and participating in the block party back to school night (Soward, 2020). She feels that these events are low pressure and a great time to make families feel welcome in the school and in her classroom from the very first day. These events are also a great time for her to get to know her families a little bit better and find out some of their needs and expectations for the upcoming school year.

Ms. Soward believes communication is another important way to build relationships with families. She makes it a point to keep communication with all of her families throughout the year, whether it be through phone calls, emails, or written notes (Soward, 2020). This constant communication makes families feel like they are a partner in the child's learning. It also makes it easier for families to communicate with the teacher when there is a problem because they feel comfortable talking to them. Ms. Soward believes that one of the best ways to build relationships with families is positivity (Soward, 2020). This approach is a great way to boost the child's confidence and make the families feel more open to what the teacher has to say. Ms. Soward states that "even when I am calling about a behavior or concern with grades I always try to make

them feel that the call is to help make progress and move towards a positive direction” (Soward, 2020). This is extremely important because it is hard for families to hear just the negative about their child every time a teacher calls. However, when they feel like the goal is to work on a preventative solution together, they will be more willing and open to creating a plan with the teacher.

Ms. Soward is also aware that as the child gets older, the families tend to not be as responsive as when they were younger. She is challenged many times throughout the year with trying to communicate with families that seem unresponsive. She uses many forms of communication, letters, emails, phone calls, class dojo, but some families still do not respond. If they are not responsive to her initial communication strategies she tries to find out what the best form of communication is for them. She has found that a lot of families respond best to phone calls because it is more personal and easier to build relationships (Soward, 2020). As stated before, Monocacy also has a high number of English Language Learners. Ms. Soward does a number of things to try to eliminate the language barrier in her classroom to make sure all families are engaged. She uses the language line when she wants to call home to families to talk with them about their student. She also translates all the papers she sends home so that every family is able to access the information she is giving them. Since her students are older, she sometimes even has the student help translate if she is having a conversation celebrating something the student did well or a fun event happening at the school with the families.

There is no denying that the way family engagement looks changes as the student gets older. Ms. Loomer showed that family engagement for younger students is really about getting families involved in their child’s development and encouraging learning at home. Ms. Soward

states that there is definitely a shift in the purpose of family engagement in the classroom as the child gets older. Although it still reaps the same benefits when it comes to student success, family engagement helps to teach the students about diversity and make them knowledgeable about other cultures (Soward, 2020). Ms. Soward planned a number of family engagement events in her classroom this year that did just that for the students. For Hispanic Heritage month she had different guest readers (family members of students) come in to read about and share their culture with the class. This was a great way to get families into the classroom while also allowing the other students to learn about the culture in an authentic way. She said that it was “so cool” getting to see the different families share about their backgrounds and traditions with the class (Soward, 2020). During black history month, Ms. Soward had her father, an African American, come to her class and they co-taught a lesson on technology to her class (Soward, 2020). She said that it was so special to share her own culture with her class and being able to get her own family involved as a teacher got the students excited and got the families excited about coming into the classroom (Soward, 2020). Teachers getting their own families engaged is a great example for the students’ families to show them how easy and fun family engagement can be.

It has been proven that family engagement leads to numerous benefits for students, families, and teachers at every grade level. Ms. Soward identified a few benefits that make her classroom a better place because of family engagement. The first is the fact that it makes such a positive impact on the students. When they see their families in the classroom, engaged in the learning along with them, it shows the students that they truly care about how they do in school and are there to support them (Soward, 2020). She also states that family engagement makes her

feel like a team with the families. She states “I love the feeling of being on the same team with my families” (Soward, 2020). It makes everything run smoothly when the teacher and families are on the same page with expectations for students’ behavior, goals, and success. Monocacy’s school motto is “One Team, One Goal” and that is what Ms. Soward likes to think of when it comes to her relationships with her families. When everyone is on the same team the child knows the expectations and knows that there is a team of adults supporting them always.

Ms. Soward gave a few recommendations for new teachers as they prepare to engage families in their own classroom. The best advice she gave was to not be afraid to invite families into your classroom. At the beginning of the year, she was nervous to have families come in because she thought the students would not enjoy it like she wanted them to because they were older. However, as she tried it out more and more she realized she was wrong. The students love when their families are in the classroom learning alongside them. The families are always supportive and excited to get to see their child learning. She says that they are always thankful to get the invitation to join in. She also realized that she really enjoyed having the families come in and she was always learning a lot from them as well (Soward, 2020). Having an open and welcoming classroom is the best way to promote family engagement.

Family Engagement from a Family’s Perspective

Families have a major impact on the success of family engagement on students. It is important for these families to feel welcomed, valued, and like they are equals in their child’s learning. Many families face barriers when it comes to family engagement, whether it be language barriers or their own family matters. Ms. Williams is the grandmother of a Kindergarten student in Ms. Loomer’s class at Monocacy. Her granddaughter has been at

Monocacy for two years now, previously in Pre-K, and Ms. Williams has tried to get involved in a number of different ways in the classroom. Ms. Williams was interviewed about her experience at Monocacy during these past two years.

Ms. Williams stated in her interview that she feels very welcome at Monocacy, both in the school and in her student's classroom. She said the front office staff are always very friendly when she comes in and the staff always talk to her and smile when they see her (Williams, 2020). This is very important because if families feel welcome from the moment they walk in the door, they will be more comfortable while they are at the school and more willing to come back again. She also feels welcome and valued by her student's teacher Ms. Loomer. Ms. Loomer is always sending home pictures and work that her student has done in the class. She also is very supportive and helps send resources home so that Ms. Williams can reinforce the skills learned in the classroom at home. She also loves that Ms. Loomer knows the families in her classroom. She gives this student two folders and copies of all the work and information that gets sent home because she knows the parents are in separate households. This allows each parent to get all the information and makes them feel valued.

Ms. Williams was also asked in her interview about the communication at Monocacy and in the classroom. She felt like Monocacy did a good job communicating with families in a variety of ways. They always send home information in the students' folders to let the families know what events are coming up or resources they can access (Williams, 2020). They even send home reminders about the events so if you miss the first one there is always another! This is great because families have a lot going on, so having a paper to hang up and reminders about the events helps families stay on top of the school events schedules. Ms. Williams also said that Ms.

Loomer is good at communicating with families as well. She uses a variety of forms of communication with the families. She emails, texts, and sometimes through written correspondence (Williams, 2020). Ms. Williams has a great relationship with Ms. Loomer so she likes when she sends quick texts so she can quickly respond. However, she does like getting written notes from Ms. Loomer as well. At Monocacy, Ms. Loomer and the other Kindergarten teachers put stickers on the students before they go home to remind families about really important events such as field trips or events in the classroom. Ms. Williams really likes this form of communication because it is such a great reminder to have the day before and she cannot miss it when it is right on the students' shirt or jacket (Williams, 2020). Communicating with families is one of the most efficient ways to increase family engagement.

Monocacy has a number of events that they host throughout the year to try to get families into the school and connect with students learning. One of Ms. Williams' favorite events is Monocacy's field day. She loves getting to go outside and see her student and her student's friends compete in different events. She loves getting to eat lunch with her student, cheer for her, play different games with her, and even run some of the events. This event is a great time to get to know the teachers, students, and even get connected with other families in the class. Ms. Williams said that another event her student and her student's dad love to attend is the winter dance. Her student loves getting dressed up and getting to share a fun night with her dad. These fun types of events are a great way to get families into the school and get them comfortable with the staff and other families. Having positive experiences at these events can lead the families to wanting to come to the more educational family engagement events as well.

Ms. Williams was also asked about barriers that she felt kept her from participating in family engagement events. She did not identify any language barriers or schedule barriers but she did state a family dynamic related barrier. Since she is the grandmother, she says she always tries to give her student's mother the option to attend events first. When her student's mother is not able to attend, then Ms. Williams will attend the events (Williams, 2020). This limits the number of events she can attend at the school but feels it is important to give her student's mother that time in the school/classroom. This is an important barrier to consider that sometimes may be looked over. Allowing multiple family members to attend events or holding more than one event throughout the year can help eliminate this barrier for families.

Ms. Williams also gets involved in the classroom by volunteering every week in Ms. Loomer's room. She comes in to help Ms. Loomer make copies or laminate activities for the week. She also volunteers to help during class parties or different classroom events (Williams, 2020). Ms. Williams feels that this is a great way to make a connection with the classroom teacher, meet some of her student's friends, see what her student is learning throughout the year, and just feel connected with her student in the classroom. Volunteering in the classroom is also a great way to show children that learning is valued and school is a great place to be. Getting engaged can look different for different families but student benefits stay the same.

Conclusion

Family engagement is a powerful tool that all schools should be using to help students succeed. When there is a connection between families and schools, everyone feels like an equal partner and feel that their opinions and values are welcome. There are many ways schools can initiate this connection with families. They can make families feel welcome in their school,

communicate with them, and let them get to know the school and the staff in the school. Families can initiate the connection by creating positive relationships with their children, getting involved in the classroom, and participating in school events. Families should be engaged, not just involved in their child's learning. They should share the responsibility with schools and have an equal say in all aspects of the child's learning process.

Research shows that family engagement can lead to increased student success. Having strong, meaningful family engagement can lead to higher grades for students, lower levels of absenteeism, increased self-confidence for students, and decreased behavior problems. All these things help students to become more successful and develop a lifelong love of learning. Maryland has developed plans to help increase family engagement so students can reap the benefits. Through the Maryland family engagement framework, all Maryland schools are able to develop a plan on how they will encourage family engagement in their school. Maryland has also set programs like Judy Centers, Ready at Five, ReadyRosie, and FAST into place to help give schools family engagement resources to support their families, in the school and at home. However, these programs cannot be successful if schools are not identifying the barriers that keep their families from attending and accessing these resources. When schools eliminate language, communication, transportations, and other barriers, they are opening up the increased success to all families.

Schools, families, and communities must all work together to create a partnership that is nothing but beneficial and supportive of students. As shown by Monocacy Elementary School, when these partnerships work successfully together, families feel more welcome in the school and classroom and feel better prepared to help their student at home. Engaging all families can

be a challenge for some schools, but using the resources and programs already set in place is a great start to family engagement in all schools. When that connection is working to make all stakeholders feel welcome, valued, and connected, family engagement can blossom and most importantly, the students can thrive.

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