

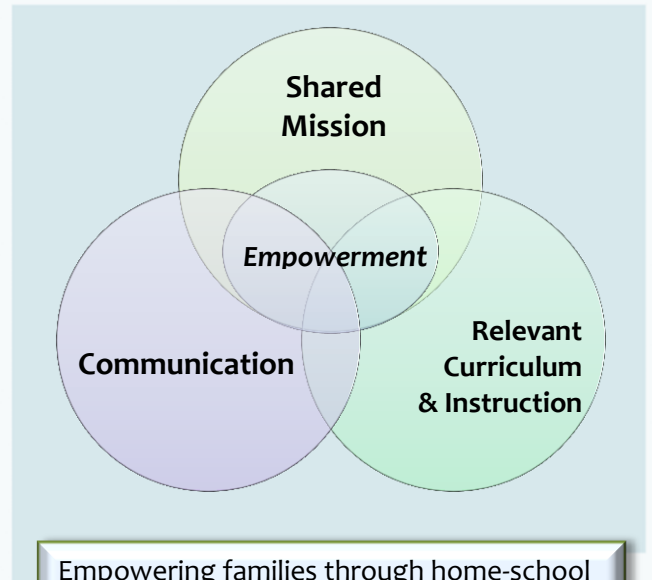
CORNERSTONE

Home-School Partnerships

FirstSchool - Uniting the best of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Special Education in order to improve the school experience for African-American, Latino, and low income children and their families.

Why Home-School Partnerships?

- ❖ Many studies show that creating effective partnerships between schools, families and communities lead to better academic, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes in children, especially for minority and low income children.
- ❖ Through collaboration families and schools are better equipped to face the many challenges of raising and educating children.
- ❖ Learning occurs when teachers are aware of children's background knowledge and use this information to link it to new content. Partnerships with families and communities can help schools have a better understanding of children's knowledge about the world.



Empowering families through home-school partnerships requires the following:

- *Shared Mission*
- *Communication*
- *Relevant Curriculum and Instruction*

Challenges of Current Home-School Partnerships

Despite the many benefits of home-school partnerships, schools often face a series of barriers to achieving a culture of true collaboration:

- Schools focus on "teaching" parents (uni-directionality) with schools perceiving families from a deficit perspective
- Lack of understanding of families' cultural practices and knowledge limits teachers' ability to use children's background knowledge for learning
- Lack of integration of home-school partnership and collaboration within the school structure, culture, and practices
- Lack of identification of the unique needs and strengths of families (one size fits all mentality)
- Lack of data to guide strategies and practices
- Schools' current use of time does not see home-school partnership as a priority and it is always relegated to "when there is enough time"
- Parents' distrust of schools or doubts about meeting schools' expectations, especially historically disenfranchised or underserved parents

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FirstSchool Approach to Reciprocal Home School Partnerships (RHSP)

Considering the challenges that schools often face when promoting home-school partnerships, part of FirstSchool's reform effort is to create a school culture that deeply and authentically partners with families with the goal of improving Latino, African American and low-income children's school experiences, academic success and socio-emotional development.

Core Beliefs of the FirstSchool Approach

Core beliefs guiding FirstSchool's approach to reciprocal home-school partnerships are:

- Schools and families have the collective responsibility of raising children. Schools recognize the challenges that families face today in the task of raising their children, especially the unique experiences and challenges of African American, Latino and low income families.
- Schools create multiple, varied opportunities for two-way communications to promote mutual exchanges and challenge misconceptions between families and school.
- Schools demonstrate in multiple ways that partnering with families is essential to meet children's needs.
- Schools demonstrate a genuine interest in children's well-being and growth.
- Schools recognize families and the community as important resources for achieving the schools' goals.

Core Components

To ensure that families are empowered to establish a genuine home-school partnership, schools need to:

Develop a Shared Mission

Often, ethnic and language minority and low-income families have different views about their roles and the role of schools in helping children learn and be academically successful. Thus, it is paramount that families and schools establish a vision of collective responsibility to provide support in the development and education of young children. Schools and families need to work as partners to promote and support the academic, cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development of children. As part of this mission schools and families use and welcome a variety of approaches that not only include parents' participation in school events and classroom activities, but also families' engagement at home or in the community. Furthermore, since schools are the hub in which children and families often come together, it is an ideal setting for building the social capital of families through promoting social network opportunities, providing access to information and resources, among other things.

Mercer Elementary Develops a Shared Mission with Families - Mercer Elementary decided to focus on promoting social capital/network support for the families in the school. The major strategy adopted by the school was to create a Parent Center. The center is always open to parents and members of the community and staffed with parent volunteers and an existing parent coordinator. The school social worker and counselor work with the parent volunteers to provide orientation sessions and home visits for parents new to the school. Monthly social events give the opportunity to family members to socialize and develop friendships.

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Use Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

The impact of an effective reciprocal home-school partnership is evident not only in homes and families' activities, but also in the school and classroom. Home-school partnerships allow us to identify the relevant aspects of children's lives that can be integrated into a more meaningful curriculum and instruction. Through effective home-school partnerships schools can learn about the families' cultural practices and make explicit connections between the knowledge learned in school and at home. For Latino, African American and low-income children, whose lives and culture are often not represented, and seldom represented positively or realistically, this is critically important. Families have a wealth of knowledge that can inform schools about how children have to navigate dual worlds -- the school and mainstream society (i.e., white middle-class societal norms), and about their own family cultural practices. Ethnic and language minority and low-income children and families have experiences with stereotypes, disparities, discrimination, and racism that may impact their ability to function and communicate like their white, middle-class peers. Schools have to be aware of these societal pressures as they interact with children and families. In addition to taking the duality, and at times the plurality, of children's and families' lives into consideration, schools need to be intentional in their integration of this knowledge in the curriculum and instruction.

Promote Effective Communication

A close and trusting relationship is one crucial part of creating a sustainable reciprocal home-school partnership, which is likely to occur when there is open and two-way communication across the two settings. To sustain this partnership, the communication between the partners should adhere to these principles:

- ✓ There is a system in place characterized by two-way communication (mutual exchange), frequent contacts in a variety of forms with a coherent message and in a language that is accessible to both partners.
- ✓ Communication promotes effective relationships that are respectful, additive, meaningful and culturally-aware and responsive, which can best occur when school staff have personal knowledge of and relationship with the families.
- ✓ Communication has the purpose of promoting the shared mission and the aim of improving curriculum and instruction.

Communicating Student Test Results at Clinton Elementary – Clinton Elementary collected data from parents about their experiences with the school. From these data, the school learned that the parents wanted to know more about student test results, what the school was doing to improve the results and how they could help. In order to address these findings the Family-School Team suggested the following strategies:

- **Lunch to Learn** - This strategy requires that the school host a series of luncheons for parents to review student data and what the school is doing to improve the scores. These meetings also gave the teachers an opportunity to review specific strategies that the parents could use at home. The Family-School Team felt that involving the parents in the solution would increase parent attendance.
- **Standards and Dinner** - Each month, dinner is served and a different State Standard is reviewed along with the implications for children and parents. Some of the dinners took place at the school and others at community centers. A huge draw for these meetings was dinner, child care services, transportation to the school, and security in some neighborhoods where the parents were afraid to venture out at night.

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FirstSchool Home-School Partnership Process

FirstSchool works with schools in order to promote family empowerment through effective home-school partnerships. FirstSchool supports schools through the following process:

Sharing a Vision for Home-School Partnerships

Our work with schools begins with identifying the school's vision for home-school partnerships. What are the school members' views about parents' participation in their child's education? Schools usually recognize the importance of having families and schools working together, but have different perspectives on the reasons why parents should partner and the characteristics of this partnership. In general, schools recognize that children learn best when families are involved in children's learning. However, schools and families might have different perspectives when it comes to the best way to support children's learning.

Creating a Family-School Team

Schools need to develop a structure in which issues related to home-school partnerships are discussed and planned. Schools create a team formed by the principal, teacher representatives of each grade level, and family members. This team meets regularly to discuss data related to home-school partnerships and plan events and strategies to promote effective home-school partnerships.

Multiple Sources of Data

Schools collect and review multiple sources of data that can inform what will be the most effective strategies to partner with families. These sources of data can come from parent and teacher questionnaires, focus groups with parents that do not regularly attend school events, data on parents' attendance at school events, and home visits. The Family-School Team reviews these data and identifies the families' and schools' strengths, resources and needs.

Action Plan, Implementation and Evaluation

Based on the data, the Family-School Team develops an action plan. The action plan includes strategies that respond to the school's vision of effective home-school partnership. The plan is communicated to other teachers, members of the staff and families. Families and educators collaborate to implement the action plan. Benchmarks are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used.

The FirstSchool Home-School Partnership Implementation Model

