NATIONAL INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS WEEK

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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FOSTERING EFFECTIVE FAMILY-SCHOOL LINKAGES FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS



IDEAs that Work

U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Good for Kids, Families & Communities



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
URBAN SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, funds the National Institute for Urban School Improvement to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. The National Institute's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.

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Introduction

"Fostering Effective Family-School Linkages for Inclusive Schools" is a resource for educators and family members as they move toward developing a more inclusive community that embraces the practice of family-school-community connections. *National Inclusive Schools Week* is an ideal time for schools and community organizations to reach out to families and, in turn, for families to become more acquainted with and involved in the school and community. Throughout the following pages, you will find ideas that will help foster the important relationships that contribute to a more inclusive environment for all.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes a national movement toward building meaningful family-school partnerships. Schools receiving Title I funds are required to work with local families to develop parent involvement statements. School districts and families should view these statements as the foundation on which to support a culture of acceptance and involvement of families within the school community. Resources can be found throughout the kit to assist schools and families in this endeavor.

On the next page, you will find the National PTA's Standards for Family Involvement. Using these standards as a framework, we encourage family, school, and community leaders to reflect on their own practice and to develop a collaborative plan toward becoming a more inclusive community.

The ideas outlined in this resource can serve as a springboard into a renewed approach to welcoming families into the school and community. Family, school, and community leaders can also collaborate to develop their own sets of activities and ideas that reflect the culture of their community.



National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs

Standard I: Communicating—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

Standard II: Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.



Standard III: Student Learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

Standard IV: Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

Standard V: School Decision Making and Advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

Standard VI: Collaborating with Community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

For more information, please visit the National PTA Web site: http://www.pta.org.

District-Wide Celebrations

Administrators and central office staff can be the driving force behind important initiatives throughout the district. District-wide events and activities send a message of commitment and unity throughout the community. The more that district leaders become actively involved in the local activities and celebrations of *National Inclusive Schools Week*, the more the community will take notice of the message being sent. District leaders can use the following ideas to promote the involvement of families during *National Inclusive Schools Week* and throughout the school year.

- **Family Involvement Policy/Statement.** Districts, particularly those receiving Title I money, may want to revisit their family involvement statements. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 states that all schools receiving Title I money must work with families to create a policy on family involvement.

    - Is your current statement written in friendly, jargon-free language?

    - Does it convey a strong message that families are valued, welcomed, and respected?

    - Is it available in the various languages spoken in your community?

If not, consider releasing a revised statement during your *National Inclusive Schools Week* celebration. The PTA has a great page on its Web site that is designed to support this effort: http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/helpchild/hc_piandlaw.asp

- **Community Assets Map.** Research and develop a community assets map outlining where families go and what services and opportunities they access. Finding out this information can be done through family surveys, interviews with local community leaders, and community discussion forums. This information can then help guide individual schools about where to disseminate relevant information and how to get outside their own doors and into the community.

- **Family Appreciation Day.** Host a Family Appreciation Day during *National Inclusive Schools Week* at the local schools and district offices. Have students perform a short play, display artwork, read poetry, or sing songs that highlight the inclusive environments of the schools. Make sure invitations are sent in the families' native language and activities occur at convenient times for families. Have school personnel on hand to greet families in their native language. Provide transportation and necessary accommodations for family members with a disability.

- **Mentors.** Ask district administrators and/or family leaders to commit to being a mentor to a family member who shares a similar cultural and/or language background. Offer to attend a PTA meeting or another school function with the family member to introduce him/her to school personnel and other families. Help the family member become active and involved in the school community. That family member later can become a mentor to a new family or family member.

- **Family Training.** Offer evening workshops and information sessions to families in the district on topics of interest to them. Ideas may include IEP development, funding for college, vocational school options, community resources, finding summer employment for their children, and securing child care in the community. Offer this training in the several languages that meet the needs of your community.



School-Wide Celebrations

Schools often have a unique status of being a community within a community. Some families may see the school as a link to the local community while other families may rely on a local church, temple, or other affiliation as their entrance into the community. In either scenario, there are steps that local districts can take to reach out to families in the environment with which they are most comfortable and familiar. The following activities can be implemented during *National Inclusive Schools Week* or at any time during the year to encourage people to meet each other and get involved in the activities that the school has to offer.

- **Family Night.** Host a monthly Family Night, consisting of a potluck dinner, time to socialize with the families of other children, time to view children's work in progress and/or on display, and participatory activity (e.g., math games or the use of art to teach math concepts). Participatory activities, which can be tied to classroom and curricular activities, are a way to share with families not only what children are learning, but also how they are learning it, and how the games and art activities can be used at home to support student learning.

- **Meetings in the Community.** Host some family meetings outside of the school building in a place where families tend to gather. There may be a community center, meeting hall, local coffee house, or other local venue that may be more convenient and more comfortable for family members to attend. Also, consider having some meetings in more remote locations where families living in that area may feel isolated or have difficulty traveling to a more central location. For ideas, use the findings of the Community Asset Map described in the District-Wide Celebrations section. Many communities have found that Friday nights may be a convenient time for families.

- **Family Coffee Mornings.** Once or twice during *National Inclusive Schools Week*—and as often as you can thereafter—host Family Coffee Mornings. Set up coffee makers and ask school staff or PTA members to bring in breakfast pastries. Choose a location where family members who drop off their relatives can gather and chat—for instance, in a family resource room if the school has one, a teachers' lounge, an alcove at the end of a hallway, or a section of the hall near a front door. If the location is not really close to where families normally enter, make sure to have signs and arrows directing families to the coffee and goodies. Once family members gather, teacher facilitators can use the opportunity to get to know families, collect information about their ideas and perspectives about education and the school, or learn more about what families of their school need and what resources they could benefit from accessing.

- **Interviewing.** Interview a family about their own educational experiences, their ideas about the school, and their contributions to their own relative's education. Once several teachers/administrators have interviewed at least one family member, get together over an impromptu breakfast or lunch to share what you learned.

- **Mini Surveys**. Lots of schools try to survey family members but have very low return rates. Learning what families think about the school and their children's progress is important information for school personnel, and we need to work harder to gather it! So, instead of sending home a long survey, use opportunities when family members are already present in the school to collect their responses on a couple of survey questions that they can complete quickly and move on. There are two ways to do this.

    - ***Wall and Marker Surveys*** are good for large events when lots of family members come anyway. Put large sheets of paper on the walls that contain one or two survey questions. Leave a bucket of markers nearby, and as family members pass, encourage them to read and respond. If you have multi-languages represented among the families, use different sections of the wall for the questions in each language.

    - ***Card Mini Surveys*** can be used at large events or just set up on a table near the entrance where family members might pass. Put one or two questions on 4"x 6" cards and pass them out with a pencil to everyone who enters for a holiday concert or open house. Leave two baskets near the door—one to collect the finished cards and pencils, and one with chocolates to thank the responders. The same idea works for schools where lots of family members drop off their children/youth. You could even have three different questions on different cards, and family members could fill out different ones on differents days in the same week. Don't forget the basket of chocolates as "thank yous."

School-Wide Celebrations continued

- **Office Greeters.** Organize volunteers you already have to be available during arrival and dismissal times at the school during *National Inclusive Schools Week* and as often as you can after that. When family members enter the office, make sure there is always another family member to greet them, find out what they might need, and make sure they get to the right place or connect with the correct people.

- **Family Fad Classes.** Lots of schools have special classes or times during the year when teachers get to offer a class or a series of classes on favorite topics like gardening, dancing, stargazing, photography, or knitting, to name a few. During *National Inclusive Schools Week*, and periodically thereafter, encourage family members to offer Family Fad Classes on topics they treasure and enjoy. The list could be endless and tailored to every age level. The classes could be a single session or a series. This is a good way for students to have a range of teachers and engage in some highly-preferred learning from other adults.



- **Pajama Party.** Host a pajama party for elementary school students and families in the evening. Everyone is invited to come in their pajamas to hear bedtime stories and have cookies and milk (and a non-dairy alternative). Families are encouraged to bring their favorite storybook or offer a favorite oral story in their native language. Books and story ideas are placed in a bin and one or two are selected. Family members can read the book or engage in storytelling. A teacher may also be selected to read the story. Stories and books should be translated into all languages represented.

- **Welcome Protocol.** Develop a school protocol to welcome families when they enter the building. Provide training to all staff, especially front office staff, on the procedures for greeting families to make them feel comfortable and welcome.

- **Shadowing.** This is an activity designed to both help family members learn more about the school and gather information from families about the school. Someone in the school—a family coordinator, teacher, or administrator—establishes a schedule for family members who are free during the day to visit the school and "shadow" or follow around a randomly chosen student. In most cases it's best if it is not the family member's own relative. After spending all or part of a day shadowing a student, the family member hosts a potluck "coffee" or "coffee and dessert" evening at their home, or some other convenient community location, where other family members can come and learn "What it's like to be a student in this school" from the person who shadowed. School personnel can also use these gatherings to collect information from the families in a group interview format.

Classroom Celebrations

The sense of community developed within a classroom is often the most secure and comfortable for family members. The classroom teacher is frequently entrusted with private family information and an in-depth knowledge of the needs of students and family members. Activities that take place in the classroom can have a direct impact on the level of comfort that a family has within the larger school and district community. The following ideas promote the appreciation of the family unit while actively engaging family members in a variety of settings.

- **Literature about Families.** Read stories about non-traditional families, families of different cultures, and families who have a member with a disability. Have classroom discussions about what makes up a family and how families may differ as well as share certain qualities.

- **Family Awards.** Present awards to family volunteers who contribute something special to the class or family members that open their businesses or homes to learning events or activities for kids. Use your imagination to include those families who may not typically be recognized for their generosity.

- **Student/Family Interviews.** Assign students to interview members of their families about their experiences as a young person attending school: What was the school building like? What clothes were worn at that time? What famous or traditional events were celebrated at the school? Students can be encouraged to learn about the educational systems in foreign countries and the history of the educational system in the United States through the experiences of their family members.



- **Movie Day.** Show an age-appropriate movie that highlights a particular family or families. Discuss the apparent stereotypes that are attached to the family in the movie and how the director portrays the role of the family. Allow students to borrow the movie to watch and discuss at home with their families.

- **Comfortable Chair.** Have a comfortable adult chair and writing space available in the classroom for family members to use when they are visiting. Encourage family members to observe lessons and special events.

- **Idea Box.** Place an Idea Box in the classroom for family members to anonymously write ideas and suggestions for the classroom.

- **Individual Family Celebrations.** Each week a family name is picked out of a box. Students in the class can write a short note or draw a picture for the chosen family highlighting why their child is a special member of the class. Family members can be invited to the classroom to pick up the special package or the package can be sent home to the family at the end of the week.

- **Family Welcome Action Team.** Form a task force of students and faculty members to assess how "family friendly" the school is. The task force can develop an action plan aimed at making the school more welcoming to family members when they visit the school. The task force can be responsible for giving a tour and familiarizing visitors with the array of resources that are available through the school.

- **Teacher Phone Hours.** Lots of teachers have trouble getting in touch with family members to talk about students' learning. Many family members work during the day when teachers might have a chance to call, and many teachers are understandably reluctant to open up their evenings and weekends to calls from family members. So, consider setting up "phone hours" like many university faculty set up "office hours." Select a couple of hours one late afternoon/early evening each week when you would be able to welcome family members to call. Stay late at school if you do not want to share your home number, or use a cell phone number. Be willing to be available during the times you select, and feel free to redirect a family member who might call at another time.

- **Family Resource Guide.** High school and middle school students can research and develop a Family Resource Guide for people in their community. Through investigation and research, students can compile descriptions and contact information for a variety of services that would be helpful to families. The guide can be made available throughout the school.

Resources

Books and Articles

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Web Sites

Alabama PTA: http://www.alabamapta.org/members/bsp.htm

Family Friendly Schools: http://www.familyfriendlyschools.org

Family Support and Schools: http://www.familysupportamerica.org

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (Harvard Family Research Project): http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html

Family Voices: http://www.familyvoices.org

The National Network of Partnership Schools: http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/default.htm

The National PTA's Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs: http://www.pta.org/programs/pfistand.htm

The Parent Institute's Forty-four Proven Ideas Parents Can Use to Help Their Children Do Better in School: http://www.par-inst.com/educator/resources/44ideas/44ideas.php

The Parent Institute's Seventy-five Ideas to Build Parent Involvement and Support: http://www.par-inst.com/educator/resources/75ideas/75-ideas.php

The Parent Institute's Selected Parent Involvement Research: http://www.par-inst.com/educator/resources/research/research.php

The Parent Institute's Sixty-eight Parent Involvement Ideas that Really Work: http://www.par-inst.com/educator/resources/68ideas/68ideas.php

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education's Team Up for Kids! How Schools Can Support Family involvement in Education: http://www.ed.gov/pubs/PFIE/schools.html

Project PODEMOS. (Parents Only Deepen Education, Making Our Students Successful): http://dmc.utep.edu/test/podemos/site2/parent.html



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