Engaging Parents, Families, and Communities

Parents, families, and the community at large all play an important role in each student's life. While most students spend a large portion of their week in school, whether it is in a building or on a virtual platform, when they leave that environment, they go into the community and back to their homes, both of which can impact their education. Thus, a collaborative approach to address the wellness and success of all students will be more effective if schools, families, and community organizations such as the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) and Mental Health American (MHA) along with unique organizations in each community work together. In this section of the toolkit, we will look at these three critical groups and their roles in student-centered planning. Please note, throughout this chapter, we will use "parents" and "families" interchangeably to include biological, adoptive, foster parents and families, legal guardians, and anyone else the student defines as playing a significant role in their upbringing and education.

The "why" of partnerships with parents, families, and the community has been identified and reinforced by research over the last thirty years. When parents and families are engaged in school, their students do better academically, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially.[1] Parent-teacher organizations have long existed to nurture that involvement. As our understanding of the causes of student struggles and their shifting needs evolves, we are challenged to find new approaches to fully engage families as an active part of the school community.

ACTION STEPS

» Apply a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens to parent and family engagement

» Identify and respond to the needs of parents and families

» Build partnerships with families and community partners

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

» Adjusting Educator Mindsets Toward Parents and Families Reference Sheet

» Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Guiding Questions: Parents and Families

» School Policies, Protocols, Procedures, and Documents Review Tool: Examination of Parent and Family Engagement

» Shared Decision-Making with Parents and Families Activity

» Practicing Responding to Trauma: Parent and Family Scenarios and Directions

» Engaging Parents, Families, and Communities Professional Development Training Slide Decks

  » Partnering with Parents

  » Engaging Community Partners

Apply a Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Lens to Parent and Family Engagement

It is important to remember that trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools involve everyone—students, staff, parents, families, and communities. Traditional approaches may limit family engagement, only involving them when a student is in academic or behavioral trouble or at parent-teacher conferences. However, families are important partners for educators and staff when engaged through a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented approach. Research suggests that students whose parents are involved in their school community are more likely to have higher grades, improved attendance, strong social skills, and improved behavior in the classroom.[2] Prioritizing parent and family engagement can lead to improved student outcomes. For this reason, trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools take this on with intention.

To start the conversation on improved engagement, building and district staff should review the Adjusting Educator Mindsets Toward Parents and Families Reference Sheet. Discuss what assumptions may permeate your school's or district's culture about parents and families. Then, consider the Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Guiding Questions: Parents and Families tool to more concretely identify areas of strength and growth for your building or district.

The National PTA offers six National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. These standards outline the critical building blocks for successful family engagement and district-wide assessments are available to further understand your district's strengths and gaps in this area. The six Standards are:

1. Welcoming All Families into the School Community: Families are active participants in the life of the school and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

2. Communicating Effectively: Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.

3. Supporting Student Success: Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

4. Speaking Up for Every Child: Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

5. Sharing Power: Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families. Together they inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.

🔑 KEY TERMS	
Parental Involvement	It is about enfolding parents. Planning for them and telling them how they can contribute.
Parental Engagement	It is about doing with parents, listening to parents think, dream, and worry.[11]

6. Collaborating with Community: Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.[3]

To engage meaningfully with parents and families, it is important to recognize and honor that they have their own histories of trauma and toxic stress, and may actively continue to experience challenges that school and district staff do not know about. Everything you learned in Section 1: Introducing Trauma and Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools about the impact of trauma and toxic stress on behavioral and emotional responses apply to students' parents and families as well. To practice applying knowledge and skills, utilize the Practicing Responding to Trauma: Parent and Family Scenarios during professional development time.

Assumptions about parents' ability or willingness to engage in school activities are not helpful. Schools must resist urges to label parents or families as "good" or "bad." Research has found that parents and families of color, those living in poverty, and families that do not speak English at home all have lower rates of family engagement.[4] A trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school understands that these families experience additional challenges, including bias in education, and seeks to reduce those challenges to increase and improve opportunities for engagement.

Everyone has a unique set of strengths and needs to consider when planning for engagement. Some parents will thrive in the classroom with students, planning and implementing school activities, or serving on school committees. Others will seem disinterested or will be unable to participate. Some families and parents could benefit from the school reaching out and supporting them with resources, learning events, mentors, or connections to community resources. Regardless of the level of family engagement, schools and districts should seek to make their systems clearer, easier to navigate, connected to community resources, and approachable for all parents and families. The remainder of this section illustrates how school personnel can provide a safe bridge to support parents and families.

🧠 Alternate Learning Strategy

Videos for understanding parent and family engagement:

» Teacher and Parent Relationships – A Crucial Ingredient by Cecile Carroll (TEDxWellsStreetED)

» Building Relationships Between Parents and Teachers by Megan Olivia Hall (TEDxBurnsvilleED)

» Parent-Teacher Home Visits by Flamboyan Foundation

» Initiating Contact by Learning for Justice

Seek to Improve Bi-Directional Communication Channels

Communication is the foundation for successful parent and family engagement. On a most basic level, all communications from the school should be timely, clear, concise, in the languages spoken by families at the school, and provided through multiple modalities (e.g., email, phone call, social media, take-home handouts). At its most complex, true engagement of families means parents are involved in school and district decision-making.

Communication must be bi-directional; families must have a consistent, easy-to-utilize mechanism to provide feedback to the school and district. Not only is it important to know about families and their approaches to life, but we need to know how they feel about the school that their student attends. Do they feel welcome and included or isolated and misunderstood? In a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school, there are processes in place to ensure that families can provide this feedback at any time, whether it is positive or negative, without fear of retaliation against their students.

Once communication channels are established and regularly utilized in both directions, your building and district can begin to build processes for shared decision-making. Sharing power with parents and families is fundamental to a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented approach to engagement. But what does that mean? Shared decision-making means parents and families are involved on an ongoing basis in:

» Individualized education plans and other Tier II and III supports for their student

» Brainstorming, planning, and execution of school activities

» School committees, taking leadership roles in initiative and task-force work

» Code of conduct committees such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, discipline committees, and trauma-informed resilience-oriented workgroups

» District and building strategic planning and infrastructure changes, such as building a new school, contracting with a new food service, and initiating school-based health care services

Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps

All school communications with parents and families must be responsive to their needs, schedules, and preferred forms of communication, utilizing more than a single method of interaction.

Diversity in work schedules, lifestyles, cultural and religious practices, and language among families require educators to use every form of communication available to them to connect.

Try using social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to reach parents and families in real-time, share video messages in multiple languages, and increase opportunities for them to provide feedback.

Even with the growth of technology, in some communities, traditional methods are most helpful, including phone calls, text message reminders and notifications, and written notes sent home with students.

When scheduling parent-teacher conferences, remember the diversity of your school community. When setting the school calendar, ensure these do not conflict with religious and cultural celebrations and holidays. Set aside extra dates and times for parents who may not be available due to work schedules at the time of conferences. Consider how you can overcome barriers to attendance, such as transportation, timing, technology, and location.

By taking this step, schools move from informing parents to engaging them, then to centering them and their experiences in the school community.

Identify and Respond to Needs of Parents and Families

A trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school seeks to understand the needs of parents and families and work to meet them. It is important for schools not to make assumptions about those needs. This requires proactive outreach and authentic listening and curiosity about their concerns, experiences, and perspectives on what would make the school community more inclusive and supportive.

This is not easy. Educators at all levels are trained to provide solutions to problems. Listening to understand rather than to reply requires patience and time, especially when individuals come from a place of distrust and are reluctant to share to protect themselves. An educator can become easily frustrated by the amount of time it takes to engage in real communication. As difficult as this part of the process is, it is an essential part of planning to deliver the proper services and supports.

There are several ways to gather information from parents and families about their needs:

» **Surveys and assessments:** Using written tools like surveys and assessments can provide a glimpse of parents' and families' experiences and show through quantitative data where your school may want to focus its efforts. One tool to consider is the U.S. Department of Education School Climate Survey to understand family and student feelings of emotional and physical safety in the school. The School Policies, Protocols, Procedures, and Documents Review Tool: Examination of Parent and Family Engagement can also help you understand how well a specific policy or procedure aligns with the Six Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools.

» **Parent-teacher organizations and committees:** Bringing parents and families together in conversation with school leadership and educators can be a powerful way to build bridges and improve collaboration between the two. The National PTA Local Leader Kit can help each parent-teacher organization form and flourish. Ensure parents and families are included in district committees. Utilize the resources on shared decision-making to create a meaningful role for them in these activities.

» **Home visits:** Home visits are a new trend but are becoming more common nationwide. Conferencing in a family's home or at a local community center or library may reduce tangible barriers to engagement like transportation and can provide a more emotionally safe place for parents to meet. In these settings, parents may be more willing to share information about themselves, their concerns, hopes, and dreams for their children.

After gathering information about needs, trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools work to meet them. Report back to those who participated in your information-gathering initiatives on what the data shows and how the school or district plans to act on this information. In meeting these identified needs, trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools have an opportunity to increase engagement with families through the planning and execution of new projects, policies, and procedures. For example, if surveys found a desire among parents to be more involved in high school classrooms, the school can work with the local parent-teacher organization to create a plan for parents to share about their careers. Or, perhaps the assessments point to struggles accessing online materials to monitor grades. And so, your school counselor may offer training sessions for parents upon student enrollment to show them all the online tools available and how to access them.
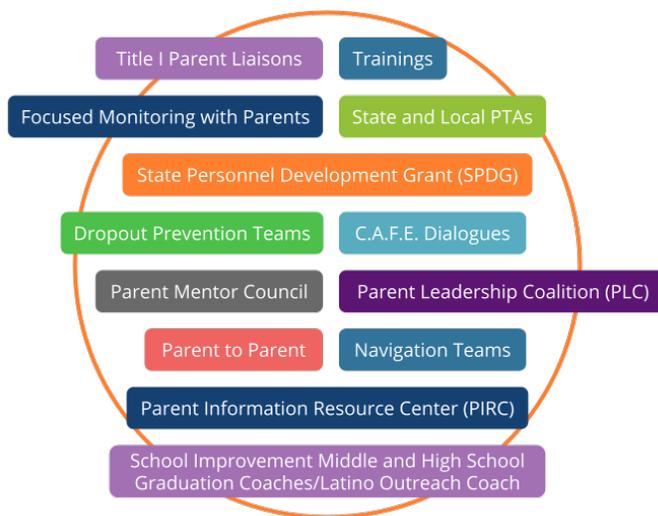
Schools may not be able to meet all parent needs, but they can foster parent groups, such as PTA or parent mentorship programs. Primarily emerging to support families with students who receive special education services, parent mentorship programs are a new way to provide parent-to-parent

support in the school community. In some areas, these networks have expanded to include parents of any student in the district. A trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school is the perfect location for a parent mentorship network connecting parents to parents, parents to educators, and parents to resources, both in and out of the building. Given the proactive and universal nature of trauma-informed, resilience-oriented programs and schools, mentoring is extended to all families and parents in all grades and is primarily proactive in its approach. Emphasizing parent strengths and building on those from the very beginning has the potential of keeping many students out of special education programs and engaged 100% of the time with their general education peers.

In 2002, the Georgia Department of Education initiated improve family engagement statewide.[5] This diagram from their toolkit outlines the key components of the program.[6] It weaves together a variety of resources into a structure to provide professional and peer support to parents, and the toolkit offers guidance for building this type of partnership in your district.

Finally, this is not a process that should be done once and assumed to be comprehensive. Trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools are committed to continually gathering feedback about needs and initiatives put in place to meet them to ensure they continue to be relevant and responsive.

Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership[12]

Title I Parent Liaisons — Trainings
Focused Monitoring with Parents — State and Local PTAs
State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG)
Dropout Prevention Teams — C.A.F.E. Dialogues
Parent Mentor Council — Parent Leadership Coalition (PLC)
Parent to Parent — Navigation Teams
Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC)
School Improvement Middle and High School Graduation Coaches/Latino Outreach Coach

Build Partnerships with Families and Community Partners

Schools exist as part of communities—communities where individuals and organizations can be mobilized to support schools and have skills and expertise not available within the district. By connecting and creating partnerships with these individuals and organizations, it becomes possible for schools to provide rich experiences beyond the classroom and receive support or assistance from experts in their field. Some partnerships may benefit all students, and others may specifically target the students who have needs beyond the school's expertise. As with parent partnerships, actively exploring community partnerships is a relatively new phenomenon in education. Community partnerships have emerged out of schools' need to have more skilled professionals to support Tier II and III interventions and offer clinical mental health services.

At the foundation of any partnership should be the Six Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools. Schools should practice these principles with community partners and support them to understand and adopt the principles in their organization. Utilizing this approach can help reduce common barriers, such as insufficient involvement of leadership, misunderstandings of the different systems, questioning the ability of the partners to meet the current needs, funding, time, and other competing initiatives.

One strategy to beginning a new community partnership is to start with small, concrete tasks. Taking on smaller, visible projects helps the staff, students, families, and community members to understand what is happening and what to expect in the future. As the partnership grows, engage in

shared decision-making with the partner about their vision for new activities, supports, and events they would like to contribute to in the school community. For example, a local bank may begin its partnership by having its employees volunteer at graduation each year. Over time, they may develop a young professionals training program to allow students the opportunity to learn about working in the financial sector.
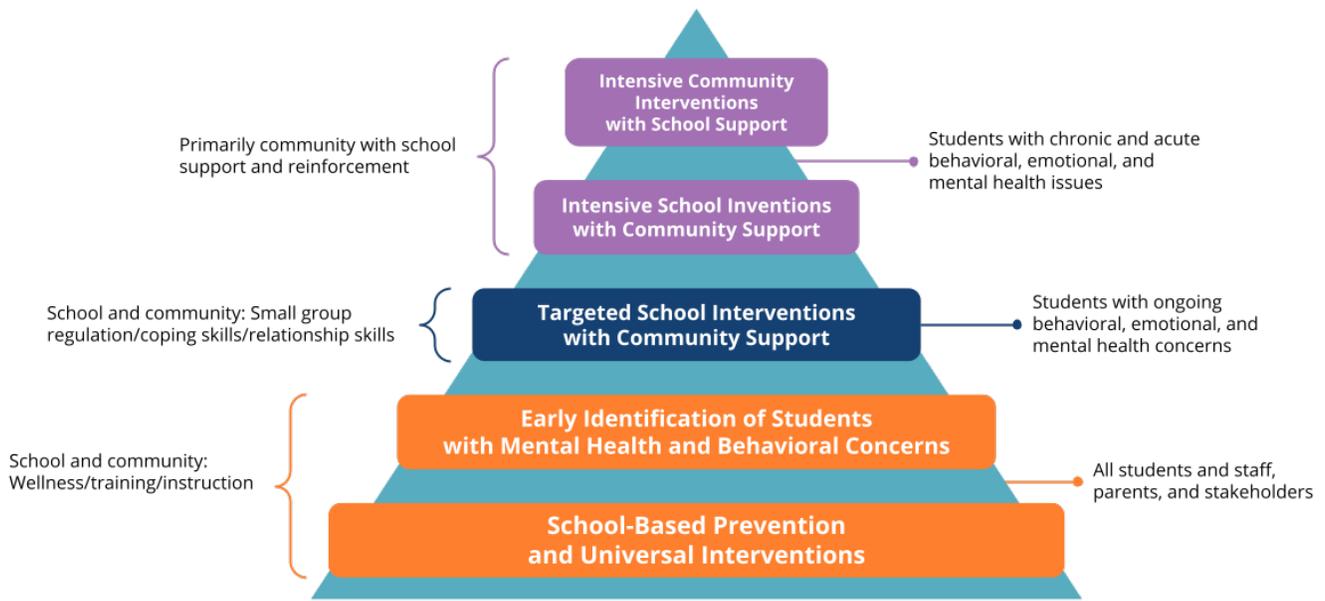
Mental Health Services Partnerships

A common partnership across districts is with community mental health providers to bring services inside the school building. Using the multi-tiered system of supports framework, these providers come into the schools to work with individuals and small groups of students at both the Tier II and Tier III levels. These groups can be co-facilitated by school and community professionals, but, in most cases, the providers work individually with students with the greatest needs while school counselors, social workers, and nurses handle small groups. Reasons for moving mental health services into the school buildings are numerous:

1. Schools are a natural setting because it is where students already are.

2. Onsite services give families convenient access with less system navigation.

3. It will support school-wide efforts to address toxic stress and trauma.

4. Staff knowledge of signs and symptoms of distress will improve.

5. Teachers will develop tools and techniques to promote emotional support and well-being.

6. Introducing mental health providers in school can help destigmatize mental health.

7. It increases access to mental health services for students regardless of socioeconomic status.

8. Services play a major role in early childhood intervention, mitigating impacts later in life.

9. Intensive, individualized support can be provided to small groups of students with high emotional and/or behavioral needs.

10. It can help families navigate the mental health system.[7]

In the exploratory conversations regarding these services, complete a needs assessment within the school or district and a resource map or scan to narrow the scope of a potential partnership. Once a provider is identified and selected, it is recommended that schools and community mental health providers utilize a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to lay out the specific goals, funding, roles, and responsibilities of each player. Committees creating these agreements should include teachers, school counselors, and social workers, as well as the administrators responsible for the financial wellbeing of the school. This will help to counter any staff resistance stemming from a concern among student support staff that outside providers pose a threat to their job.

Continuum of School-Community Partnerships to Provide Services with/in the Schools[13]

Intensive Community
Interventions
with School Support

Intensive School Inventions
with Community Support

Primarily community with school
support and reinforcement

Students with chronic and acute
behavioral, emotional, and
mental health issues

Targeted School Interventions
with Community Support

School and community: Small group
regulation/coping skills/relationship skills

Students with ongoing
behavioral, emotional, and
mental health concerns

Early Identification of Students
with Mental Health and Behavioral Concerns

School and community:
Wellness/training/instruction

All students and staff,
parents, and stakeholders

School-Based Prevention
and Universal Interventions

Wrap-Around Services for Tier III Services

Tier III services, whether they are in or out of the school building, are the most intensive trauma and mental health interventions provided through a school-community partnership, and are often implemented as a wrap-around service. In this partnership type, schools and providers create a process for making referrals from the school to the provider for individual students whose needs greatly exceed services provided on-site.[8] Throughout that process, parents and families are engaged, and the student's voice is centered.[9] Schools that use the multi-tiered system of supports framework, especially those that use a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens, view wrap-around services as another part of the process of supporting students and families to gain the skills, confidence and support they need to manage their own futures and needs.

Wrap-around services support both the family and the individual student. Community mental health providers and others in a student's support network, such as family, teachers, religious leaders, employers, peers, and mentors operate as one team, not separate school and community teams. Together, they help the family and student develop a plan to achieve their vision. That individualized plan is student-centered and relies on family involvement to ensure it reflects the strength, needs, and culture of the student and family.

Community Schools

One of the strongest partnerships between schools and communities is a community school.[10] This encompasses both the physical location and the set of partnerships between the school and community organizations to help provide students with the full range of services and opportunities they need to thrive. The model and services should vary based on the needs of each school and community, but the general structure embeds community organizations in the school so that students can easily access them, and families can find everything they need for their student's well-being in one place. In this form of partnership, the school becomes the hub of the community.

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