

School–Family Partnering to Enhance Learning: Essential Elements and Responsibilities

NASP is committed to enhancing the mental health and the academic, behavioral, and social competence of all students across the span of schooling from early childhood through postsecondary settings. The goal of enhancing student competence cannot be accomplished by schools or educators alone and requires partnering between families and educators. Unlike traditional parent involvement activities that emphasize passive support roles for families (e.g., volunteer, fundraiser), partnerships involve families and educators working together as active, equal partners who share responsibility for the learning and success of all students. Using a partnership-centered orientation, schools create equitable systems of support that all families can access where family diversity is celebrated and family culture is embedded throughout school policies and practices. Such an approach has as a core belief that all families want the best for their children and are working tirelessly toward that goal (Mapp & Hong, 2010).

Evidence from multiple research studies over decades indicates that when families and schools collaborate to support children, there are significant benefits for parents, teachers, and students (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Sheridan, Smith, Kim, Beretvas, & Park, 2019). For the purposes of this statement, we define a parent or family member as someone who is acting as a parent (e.g., natural or adoptive parent, grandparent, stepparent, foster parent) to provide care and support or someone who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, sec. 602). We use the term educator throughout to refer to individuals who support students from a school or related educational setting (e.g., school psychologist, teacher, administrator). Resources are available at the end of the statement to provide options for additional study about the topics presented herein.

BENEFITS OF SCHOOL–FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

There are numerous benefits of school–family partnerships for students, families, and educators, which have been documented across families from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Students demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher achievement and test scores, improved behavior, increased homework completion, greater participation in academic activities, improved school attendance, and a reduced need for more intensive services such as special education. Educators report greater job satisfaction, higher evaluation ratings from parents and administrators, and more positive associations with families. Families experience enhanced self-efficacy, better understanding and more positive experiences with educators and schools, improved communication with their children, and better appreciation of the important role they have in their children’s education.

KEY COMPONENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Successful partnerships focus on establishing intentional coordination, consistency, and continuity across families and educators. These conditions are accomplished through joint problem solving, two-way communication, and shared decision-making. Partnerships are integrated into school routines and elevated as a priority for student success and school improvement. Similarly, partnerships are most effective when they are customized for each school, comprehensively integrated into school activities, and continually improved (Epstein et al., 2019). Some families and educators accomplish consistency and continuity with little effort or formal coordination; yet in other cases there are differences in expectations, goals, and communication patterns. These differences across home and school may lead to frustration and misunderstanding among students, families, and educators and may undermine efforts to support students. If left unaddressed, the differences and inadequate communication can further divide and separate families and educators.

Underlying successful partnerships are positive relationships. To build positive relationships, there must be opportunities for families and educators to share positive interactions, which in turn promote engaged school–family relationships. Reschly (2019) identified the following as relational elements necessary for school–family partnerships: sensitivity, trust, equality, commitment, respect, positiveness, and responsiveness. Families are more likely to trust educators and enter into a partnership defined by a shared commitment to mutual goals when schools are sensitive and responsive to families’ needs, treat families as equals, respect families, believe the best about families, and are responsive to family needs. Indeed, a dual capacity-building framework (i.e., building capacity of schools and families for partnerships) suggests that by focusing on relational, interactive, and organizational conditions, families and educators are better positioned to support students through school–family partnerships (Institute for Educational Leadership, n.d.; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Although school–family partnerships effectively occur from preschool through high school, evidence suggests the nature of partnerships may change as children develop (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Specifically, students may take a more active role in the partnership as they develop more independence in their learning and social–emotional development. In addition, families may modify how they engage with educators and their child based on their child’s development. Thus, child and adolescent development should be considered during partnership-centered activities. For example, whereas a student in first grade may be able to provide input about plan components (e.g., acknowledgements), a student in seventh grade can be involved in the plan’s development and implementation.

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

NASP is committed to a multitiered systems of support framework for students and the use of evidence-based instruction and interventions. A tiered framework matched to the student’s level of need is a useful heuristic for conceptualizing communication and partnerships among families and educators (see also NASP position statement on Integrated Model of Academic and Behavioral Supports, 2016). A tiered approach to school-based service delivery matches support for students with their need. A graded level of intensity characterizes supports for students at Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3.

All students have access to Tier 1 supports, which are designed to promote competencies and prevent problems. At Tier 1, families might have access to parenting resources with opportunities to work with educators to extend behavior support systems at school to the home setting. In addition, there might be communication mechanisms in place for families and school personnel to communicate back-and-forth about student academic performance, behavior, and social competencies. Students who are at risk for developing academic, behavior, social, or mental health problems receive Tier 2 supports. At Tier 2, families and school personnel might define a behavior change plan that they implement together and monitor over time. Students for whom Tier 2 supports are not sufficient or who are exhibiting academic, behavior, social, or mental health problems receive Tier 3 supports. At Tier 3, families and school personnel might collaborate over a series of meetings to analyze the nature of the problem, collect data and set goals, develop an intervention to be implemented at home and school, coordinate implementation, and evaluate the intervention's effectiveness and progress toward goals. Just as some students require more intensive interventions to enhance progress, some partnerships between families and educators require more explicit effort and time. Partnering becomes more, rather than less, important as students encounter difficulty at school.

Although additional research is needed, there are evidence-based family and school–family collaborative interventions to enhance students' mental health, behavior, and achievement. Notably, key components of these interventions include communication, collaboration, parent–teacher relationship, home-based educational involvement, and behavioral supports (Sheridan et al., 2019). Also promising are family interventions that focus on specific, measurable outcomes; those that train parents as tutors; and conjoint (school–family) consultation (Christenson & Carlson, 2005). Educators and families have important roles and responsibilities in establishing partnerships to support and enhance outcomes for students.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Partnerships among families and educators require ongoing planning, development, and evaluation. Partnerships also require the allocation of adequate resources (including time) to assist families and educators in fulfilling their partnership roles. Schools must take the lead in providing opportunities for partnerships to be developed and sustained through the following methods.

Providing a Positive Environment

It is the school's responsibility to create the conditions that welcome all families. Central to this responsibility is for schools to seek and integrate input from a representative spectrum of families about how to best communicate and promote partnerships. Educators and administrators must send consistent messages to families that their contributions towards forming effective partnerships are valued. This process begins by clearly defining and communicating the school's and family's role in the partnership. Central to this definition is a focus on families as equal partners in their children's education. Too often schools and families attempt to initiate dialogue during high stress, critical times. Creating a positive environment where partnerships are emphasized is important in creating a safe, positive space where families and educators can engage in positive interactions. Efforts need to be made to work collaboratively with all families, including those whose primary language is not English,

those with limited literacy skills, those who might be seen as overly involved, and those who are, for a variety of reasons, generally hesitant or uncomfortable in schools or with educators. To work collaboratively with all families, schools must use a continuum of approaches and seek out and use feedback from families. For example, a town hall style meeting might be held wherein feedback is invited from families, followed by different ways for families to provide input (e.g., an online survey). In addition, school outreach to families may include evening events at the school, but must also include events at different times in different locations (e.g., a community center).

Supporting the Efforts of Families

Family participation increases when such participation is promoted and valued by the school. Educators can encourage collaboration by eliciting and understanding families' perspectives and expectations. Multiple options for participation should be made available so that all families have equitable opportunities to engage in a manner that is consistent with their circumstances, beliefs, and expectations (e.g., culture, financial circumstances). For example, it is likely unreasonable for all families to attend school or community functions. Schools should make information conveyed during functions available to families and support family engagement with the content. Educators should foster an open dialogue between home and school and provide opportunities for families to develop partnership roles in their children's education, including having decision-making roles in school governance. For example, family members should be equal members on school teams. Such engagement will likely require different participation avenues, such as virtual participation in meetings and holding meetings at different times. In addition, many family members may be unaccustomed to participating on school teams. Families should be supported prior to and throughout their participation on teams to facilitate their equal participation. Resources must be provided by the school to support the collaborative efforts of families and educators (e.g., flexibility for teachers to meet with families in the community or at alternative times during the week, encouraging family-to-family sharing/support, partnership training for educators and families).

Working With All Families

Educators recognize that families come in a variety of configurations and have diverse perspectives, expectations, and communication styles. Educators must have a diversity-minded orientation that encourages understanding and celebration of diverse family forms, cultures, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. To achieve a diversity-minded orientation, educators may need training, mentoring, and dedicated time. When families and schools educate one another about their unique cultures, students see their worlds aligning and working together in supporting their success (Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2010). Partnering is based on the assumption that families, children, and educators are doing the best they can. Efforts are made to understand others' behavior and intentions rather than judge them as right or wrong, as well as address unconscious or implicit associations about some racial/ethnic groups. Increasingly, school–family partnerships are seen as an essential component of efforts to address disparities in educational outcomes. Schools can also actively collaborate with community resources (e.g., neighborhood associations, cultural leaders) in coordinating partnering efforts with families when appropriate and available.

Promoting a View of Education as a Shared Responsibility

School–family partnerships are not an activity. Rather, partnering is an ongoing process that guides the development of goals and sustained implementation. When school–family interactions are characterized by open communication, mutually agreed upon goals, and joint decision-making, education becomes a shared responsibility. Together, families, students, and educators can discuss expectations for student achievement and their respective roles in helping students meet these expectations.

School–family partners can engage in efforts to increase mutual respect, understanding, caring, and flexibility among families and the school community. One important issue to address is perspective taking. Holding a town hall style meeting with educators and families may be a supportive environment wherein individuals can share their beliefs and expectations, which can help increase mutual respect and understanding. In addition, increasing positive communications from schools to families is critical. Too often schools and families share interactions that are focused on a problem. A persistent focus on problems can risk damaging relationships. However, when problems arise, the mutual respect and history of positive interactions can promote families and educators to jointly address problems in a respectful, collaborative, solution-focused manner. In sum, the more continuity between home and school, the greater academic, behavior, and social success children are likely to experience.

THE ROLE OF FAMILIES

Child-rearing is both complex and difficult. Individual families face multiple challenges with unique sets of resources, skills, and preferences. Therefore, it is unrealistic and potentially damaging to family–school relationships to take a “one size fits all” approach. Roles for families should be broadly conceived but individually applied. That is, educators and families should work together to develop an array of opportunities for families to participate meaningfully in their children’s education. Such opportunities should be offered with the knowledge that families will differ in their choices; these differences must be understood to reflect and respect individual families’ needs and preferences. Roles for families are typically grouped into three areas: coordinating learning at home, supporting learning at school, and partnering with educators (Christenson & Reschly, 2009).

Coordinating Learning at Home

There are many ways families support student learning at home, from emphasizing the importance of effort and modeling problem-solving behaviors to reading with their children, limiting time on electronic media (e.g., television, video games, computers) and social media, and ensuring a time and place for homework completion. In addition, families support student learning by providing their basic needs, such as adequate sleep, nutrition, and medical care.

Supporting Learning at School

Across various conceptualizations of roles for families in education, each includes parent support for learning at school. Families support student learning at school in many ways. They may engage in

school activities such as assisting teachers in the classroom or office, serving on school committees, attending school events, and fundraising.

Engaging With Educators

Families interact with school personnel at various functions, athletic events, student performances, and other extracurricular activities. Contact between educators and families is required to establish two-way communication and build positive relationships between home and school.

Actively Partnering With School Personnel

Partnering requires active roles and contributions of both families and schools. Families engage in dialogue with educators about academic and behavioral expectations and progress. Families are empowered to ask questions, provide feedback, and seek support from educators, as appropriate; communicate about their child (e.g., progress, difficulties), including knowledge, cultural beliefs, and observations; and participate as active decision-making members of problem-solving teams (e.g., student assistance, response to intervention, Individualized Education Program). Families and educators are on the same team with a shared focus on promoting their child's/student's success. This team mentality is facilitated by putting trust in the other party with a belief that they have the best interests of their child/student in mind.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

NASP encourages school psychologists to take part in local, state, and national education efforts in forming true and lasting partnerships among families and other educators. School psychologists build and sustain school–family partnerships and improve family–school collaboration (NASP, 2010) and identify strategies to provide opportunities for families and educators to form and maintain partnerships by:

- Recognizing and promoting the need to address concerns across the different contexts within which a child exists;
- Implementing systematic, evidence-based models for school–family consultation and family interventions in a congruent manner across home, school, and community settings, such as Teachers and Parents as Partners, also referred to as Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008);
- Establishing or participating in current school-based teams consisting of parents, educators, and community members that assess needs, develop priorities and plans, and implement joint efforts to improve educational outcomes for students;
- Serving as liaisons to support two-way communication and coordination among homes, schools, and communities;
- Facilitating the involvement of all educators as well as support personnel (e.g., counselors) and administrators in the school–family partnership process;
- Establishing partnerships between families and educators throughout screening, early intervention, and special education by effectively including families in their student's assessment, interventions,

and progress monitoring through school-wide and tiered frameworks, such as the Ecological Approach to Family Intervention and Treatment (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007);

- Providing professional development opportunities for families and educators on the positive effects of partnering and current research on the most effective collaborative processes and on evidence-based programs in academic, behavioral, and mental health interventions and programs; and
- Supporting the sustainability of partnering practices with educators through ongoing monitoring and accountability for efforts.

SUMMARY

The benefits of partnering across home and school are well supported in the scientific literature. School–family partnerships focus on coordination, consistency, and continuity across families and educators through effective communication, joint problem-solving, active involvement, and shared decision-making. School psychologists have a vital role in building and sustaining school–family partnerships. NASP is committed to creating and enhancing partnerships between all families and educators to promote positive outcomes for all children and youth.

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Bear, G. G., & Minke, K. M. (Eds.). (2019). *Helping handouts: Supporting students at school and home*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. <http://www.nasponline.org/HHportal>
- Teaching and Parents as Partners Online Training Portal: <http://cyfs.unl.edu/TAPP/online-training/>
- Future of School Psychology Task Force on Family–School Partnerships: <http://cyfs.unl.edu/futures>
- Global Family Research Project. Retrieval from <https://globalfrp.org>
- National Association of School Psychologists, Information for Families & Educators: <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/families-and-educators>
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Approved by the NASP Leadership Assembly June 2019.

Acknowledgement of position statement writing group members: Andy Garbacz (Writing Team Chair), Amy L. Reschly, and Darcy J. Hutchins.

Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2019). *School–family partnering to enhance learning: essential elements and responsibilities* [Position Statement]. Bethesda, MD: Author.