

High-Quality Prekindergarten Programs Family Engagement Plan – Strategies in Action

The Commissioner’s Rule 102.1003 (f) established the following family engagement strategies that are based on empirical research and are proven to demonstrate positive short-term and long-term outcomes for early childhood education. This documents expresses what is contained in the Commissioner’s Rule in addition to highlighted examples of how each of the family engagement strategies could be carried out in a high-quality prekindergarten program. School districts and charters are encouraged to use this document to develop and implement a Family Engagement Plan and to expand their current activities and support given to families in order to increase child outcomes.

The Office of Early Childhood Education team is available to provide guidance on implementation of high-quality PreK. Please do not hesitate to contact anyone on the team.

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Family—These are the adults responsible for the child’s care and children in the child’s life who support the early learning and development of the child.

Family engagement--The mutual responsibility of families, schools, and communities is to build relationships that support student learning and achievement, family well-being, and the continuous learning and development of children, families, and educators. Family engagement is fully integrated into the child’s educational experience, supports the whole child, and is both culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate.

Family Engagement Plan—An effective family engagement plan creates a foundation for the collaboration of mutual partners, embraces the individuality and uniqueness of families, and promotes a culture of learning that is child-centered, age-appropriate, and family-driven.

The family engagement plan shall:

A. Facilitate family-to-family support using strategies such as:

- i. Creating a safe and respectful environment where families can learn from each other as individuals and in groups;
- ii. Inviting former program participants, including families and community volunteers, to share their education and career experiences with current families;
- iii. Ensuring opportunities for continuous participation in events designed for families by families such as training on family leadership.

Strategies in Action: (A) Facilitating Family-to-Family Support

- Encouraging bi-lingual family members to translate for new parents, thus enhancing better communication;
- Having a “Meet and Greet” time during the first week of school to give parents the opportunity to get to know one another on an informal basis at the beginning of the school year;
- Providing a welcoming space for parents to gather and talk informally with one another before and/or after the school day. Make this space family-friendly with culturally diverse pictures and materials that welcome all families;

- Creating a Family Directory for program participants to encourage families to connect with each other outside of school;
- Promoting families' understanding of different cultures and backgrounds;
- Encouraging parents to set up mutual support mechanisms (i.e. phone trees, car pools, babysitting co-ops, play groups);
- Matching families with other families who have similar interests, goals or challenges and providing opportunities for families to have ongoing connections;
- Hosting events that bring families together such as potlucks, sing-alongs, family fun nights and open houses.
- Organizing field trips and other activities that include families.

B. Establish a network of community resources using strategies such as:

- i. Building strategic partnerships;
- ii. Leveraging community resources;
- iii. Monitoring and evaluating policies and practices to stimulate innovation and create learning pathways;
- iv. Establishing and maintaining partnerships with businesses, faith-based organizations, and community agencies;
- v. Identifying support from various agencies, including mental and physical health providers;
- vi. Partnering with local community-based organizations to create a family-friendly transition plan for students arriving from early childhood settings;
- vii. Providing and facilitating referrals to family support or educational groups based on family interests and needs;
- viii. Communicating short- and long-term program goals to all stakeholders;
- ix. Identifying partners to provide translators and culturally relevant resources reflective of home language.

Strategies in Action: (B) Establishing a Network of Community Resources

- Providing up-to-date written information on community resources (e.g. adult schools that offer GED coursework, community health organizations, recreational options, resale shops, social service organizations, etc.) on a regular basis to parents (e.g. once a week, once a month, etc.). Make sure the information is in the family's home language;
- Having a different community resource visit the prekindergarten program once a month, giving family members the opportunity to interact with community resources more conveniently;
- Maintaining a Community Resource Handbook that identifies where services such as housing, health services, legal assistance, domestic violence services, etc. can be found;
- Assisting families in getting and using a library card;
- Providing families with a list of free/low-cost recreational options in the community in which they reside;
- Encouraging staff to build relationships with workers in community programs to enhance the effectiveness of referrals;
- Making active referrals with families (e.g. calling with the family, bringing intake workers from other programs to meet with families) that include making a personal connection between families and service providers;
- Following up with families on referrals to see if services were received and parents were satisfied;
- Providing staff with time to participate in community events/meetings that enhance the program's ability to meet family needs.

C. Increase family participation in decision-making using strategies such as:

- i. Developing and supporting a family advisory council;
- ii. Developing, adopting, and implementing identified goals within the annual campus/school improvement plan targeting family engagement;
- iii. Developing and supporting leadership skills for family members and providing opportunities for families to advocate for their children/families;
- iv. Collaborating with families to develop strategies to solve problems and serve as problem solvers;
- v. Engaging families in shaping program activities and cultivating the expectation that information must flow in both directions to reflect two-way communication;
- vi. Developing, in collaboration with families, clearly defined goals, outcomes, timelines, and strategies for assessing progress;
- vii. Providing each family with an opportunity to review and provide input on program practices, policies, communications, and events in order to ensure the program is responsive to the needs of families;
- viii. Using appropriate tools such as surveys or focus groups to gather family feedback on the family engagement plan.

Strategies in Action: (C) Increasing Family Participation in Decision-Making

- Providing training for families on how to advocate for themselves and their children;
- Encouraging legislative representatives to meet with parents to discuss ideas, issues and problems in their community;
- Educating families about their rights under State and Federal law regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA);
- Creating an environment in the program that affirms parent leadership;
- Providing opportunities for families to provide input on key decisions happening in the program (i.e. family surveys, focus groups);
- Giving the advisory council the lead decision-maker role in specific items each year (ex: how to celebrate special events at school, field trip destinations, purchases of major items, etc.)
- Using an intake questionnaire at the beginning of the school year so that teachers can learn about the children in their classroom from their parents' perspective and begin some mutual goal setting with each individual family;
- Identifying a parent to represent the prekindergarten program at elementary school functions.
- Using parents as equal partners with staff in reviewing family engagement survey results and making decisions regarding plans for continuous improvement.

D. Equip families with tools to enhance and extend learning using strategies such as:

- i. Designing or implementing existing home educational resources to support learning at home while strengthening the family/school partnership;
- ii. Providing families with information and/or training on creating a home learning environment connected to formal learning opportunities;
- iii. Equipping families with resources and skills to support their children through the transition to school and offering opportunities for families and children to visit the school in advance of the prekindergarten school year;
- iv. Providing complementary home learning activities for families to engage in at home with children through information presented in newsletters, online technology, social media, parent/family-teacher conferences, or other school- or center-related events;
- v. Providing families with information, best practices, and training related to age-appropriate developmental expectations;
- vi. Emphasizing benefits of positive family practices such as attachment and nurturing that complement the stages of children's development;
- vii. Collaborating with families to appropriately respond to children's behavior in a non-punitive, positive, and supportive way;

- viii. Encouraging families to reflect on family experiences and practices in helping children;
- ix. Assisting families to implement best practices that will help achieve the goals and objectives identified to meet the needs of the child and family.

Strategies in Action: (D) Equipping Families with Tools to Enhance and Extend Learning

- Conferencing with families at least twice during the school year and collaborating with them in setting goals for their children while at the prekindergarten program;
- Encouraging family members to volunteer in the classroom, using the time to foster enhanced communication regarding their child's development;
- Doing an annual survey at the beginning of the school year to identify parents' talents, skills and cultural traditions that they would be willing to share with the classroom;
- Having kindergarten staff visit each prekindergarten classrooms giving parents the opportunity to meet teachers, administrators and have their questions answered regarding the transition to kindergarten;
- Sending home a monthly calendar of activities that can be done at home for little or no cost that correspond with the activities done in the classroom;
- Utilizing a "Parent Lending Library" where parents can check out items (books, games, art supplies, puzzles, etc.) to be used at their homes to assist their children in learning;
- Providing workshops for parents that focus on common child development topics (health, child guidance, how the young child learns, etc.);
- Utilizing a parent bulletin board to share information on upcoming school and community events and to focus on a monthly child development topic;
- Using families.naeyc.org as a resource for research-based, family-friendly, written information on child development topics;
- Hosting a Family Night centered around a topic that interests everyone. Plan activities for both adults and children of varying ages (siblings will want to participate too);
- Using technology that is family-friendly to enhance parents' knowledge on child development topics (Ex: ReadyRosie, Daily Vroom, etc.).

E. Develop staff skills in evidence-based practices that support families in meeting their children's learning benchmarks using strategies such as:

- i. Providing essential professional development for educators in understanding communication and engagement with families, including training on communicating with families in crisis;
- ii. Promoting and developing family engagement as a core strategy to improve teaching and learning among all educators and staff;
- iii. Developing staff skills to support and use culturally diverse, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive family engagement strategies;

Strategies in Action: (E) Developing Staff Skills in Evidence-Based Practices that Support Families in Meeting their Children's Learning Benchmarks

- Role playing ways to interact with parents on a daily basis at a staff meeting to brainstorm new ideas in enhancing communication with parents;
- Brainstorming areas where parents can play the leading role in decision-making within the classroom;
- Training children to greet and say good-bye to parents and their classmates as a means to show respect for all program participants;
- Using developmentally appropriate activities to help children understand differences in families, cultures and traditions;
- Providing training for educators on how to respond to families that are in a crisis;
- Making space available for staff to meet with parents privately;
- Training educators about the resources that are available in the community that support families' interests and needs (ex: safety, housing stability, employment, job skills, financial literacy, health, etc.);

- Providing professional development opportunities that are grounded in a strengths-based approach to family engagement;
- Providing professional development opportunities focused on professional ethics as it relates to family engagement (ex: boundaries, confidentiality, etc.);
- Providing professional development that is effective in developing skills in working with families. Topics could include: engaging fathers, communication styles, parenting practices, understanding and responding to your child's behavior, etc.;
- Providing professional development that focuses on how culture can influence perspectives on child-rearing, such as: communication styles, role of professionals, caregiving (sleeping, eating, toileting), discipline, language and learning;
- Committing to hiring staff that reflect the diversity of the community in which the program resides.

F. Evaluate family engagement efforts and use evaluations for continuous improvement using strategies such as:

- i. Conducting goal-oriented home visits to identify strengths, interests, and needs;
- ii. Developing data collection systems to monitor family engagement and focusing on engagement of families from specific populations to narrow the achievement gap;
- iii. Using data to ensure alignment between family engagement activities and district/school teaching and learning goals and to promote continuous family engagement;
- iv. Ensuring an evaluation plan is an initial component that guides action;
- v. Using a cyclical process to ensure evaluation results are used for continuous improvement and adjustment;
- vi. Ensuring teachers play a role in the family engagement evaluation process.

Strategies in Action: (F) Evaluating Family Engagement Efforts and Using Evaluation for Continuous Improvement

- Setting child-centered goals with parents at the beginning of the school year. Check in with them several times during school year to discuss the progress that has been made in achieving the mutually-developed goals;
- Surveying parents at least annually on the effectiveness of the prekindergarten experience for their child and their family;
- Incorporating goals related to family engagement into the program's strategic planning initiatives;
- Using one of the following tools annually to evaluate the program's effectiveness in family engagement: 1.) the Office of Head Start's *Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-Based Competencies: Professional Development Assessment for Staff Who Work with Families* or 2.) the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Program Self-Assessment Checklist* or 3.) the Parent Teacher Association's *National Standards, Goals & Indicators for Family-School Partnerships* or 4.) the Center for the Study of Social Policy's *Strengthening Families Self-Assessment Tool for Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs*. Data gathered is used for continuous improvement goal setting;
- Using the Office of Head Start's *Program Preparedness Checklist, Version 5* to gather data on how the program could improve its services to dual-language families. Data gathered is used for continuous improvement goal setting;
- Using NAEYC's *Family Checklist* to gather data on how families view the program's effectiveness in family engagement. Data gathered is used for continuous improvement goal setting.