

Division of Early Childhood Education
Family Engagement Guidance

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Division of Early Childhood Education would like to thank the following individuals for their collaboration, commitment, time and expertise in the development of this guidance document:

Iris Martinez-Campbell, Perth Amboy Public Schools
Cheryl Chavis, Camden Public Schools
Regina Genovesi, Burlington City Public Schools
Iris Ramos, Orange Public Schools
Michelle Thomas, Jersey City Public Schools
Monica Townsend, Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey

Division of Early Childhood Education Family Engagement Guidance

This guidance was designed to assist school districts with developing a comprehensive plan that identifies steps, strategies and activities for engaging, serving and supporting all families. The role and responsibilities of families, district staff and the community in terms of collaboration, transition and evaluation are defined.

Family engagement is a collaborative partnership between families, school districts and the community. This partnership “enhances children’s learning and families’ well being” (NAEYC 2009).

SECTION I: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

District administrators, teachers and teacher assistants and social services staff all play critical roles in engaging families in their children’s education. With careful planning, both staff and families benefit.

DISTRICT PERSONNEL

Administrators

- ❖ Provide the structure to ensure that families have meaningful engagement opportunities.
- ❖ Provide opportunities for professional development training for all staff (including themselves) on working with children and families from diverse backgrounds (i.e. socio-economic status, race & ethnicity, developmental abilities). Training on promoting and sustaining family engagement should also be provided.

Teachers and Assistants

- ❖ Provide a welcoming environment for all families within the classroom.
- ❖ Should seek out information about their students’ lives, families, communities, and integrate this information into their instruction. Encourage and support families in creating and sustaining a home environment that values learning.

Social Service Personnel

- ❖ Promote a sense of community by providing local organizations and businesses with information on the preschool program. This encourages community buy in and collaboration.
- ❖ Conduct home visits and host family meetings in-district in order to foster a sense of security and trust on the families end.
- ❖ Offer a variety of trainings and meetings on topics that support the needs of the family. The goal of the trainings should be to enhance understanding, increase knowledge and help form a bond between the district, families and the community.

SECTION II: COLLABORATION

Collaboration is the process of working together to achieve one goal, ensuring academic and life success for the children being served. A collaborative relationship should exist among schools, families and communities. Important factors in developing this relationship are **mutual respect** and on-going communication. Communication is one of the key factors needed for successful collaboration. In moving forward with improving a district's system for engaging families, think about the following questions. How does my district communicate with the children and families served? What messages are teachers, administrators and other staff conveying?

School personnel must respect the fact that families are children's first teachers. Although administrators and teachers may be considered the "experts" in the education of children, families have the most important role in their children's learning and development. Also, families are an important source of information for teachers as they have first-hand knowledge of their children's strengths and challenges.

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

- ❖ Listen to parents/families without interrupting them.
- ❖ Ask questions about their views as well as their reservations.
- ❖ Repeat back to parents/families what they have said to ensure you have a full understanding of what they are saying. Remember, parent/family concerns are legitimate to them. Always show empathy when responding to concerns.
- ❖ Language differences can cause misunderstandings. Therefore, administrators and teachers should learn basic words and expressions to communicate with parents/families of different linguistic groups. This shows them that you value and respect their language. Bring in a translator for parent-teacher conferences and other meetings with families.
- ❖ Be aware of your voice pitch and tonal qualities when speaking with parents/families. You don't want your message to be conveyed in an offensive or defensive manner.
- ❖ Be aware of your body language, it can undermine positive verbal communication.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN COLLABORATION

Districts and individual schools must take the lead in breaking down the communication barriers with families and the surrounding community. Steps to creating a collaborative environment in school settings are listed below:

- ❖ Create a welcoming environment by posting friendly signs in the predominant languages representative of the student and family population.
- ❖ Maintain a clean and well cared for school building(s) both inside and out, promoting a spirit of pride.
- ❖ Expect staff to be approachable and friendly (smiles & hellos).

- ❖ Provide a comfortable area (i.e. parent center) that can serve as a waiting area for parents/families, a location for formal and informal meetings, and a resource room. Resources should consist of an array of books, articles, materials and videos on various topics, such as child development, health and safety and managing challenging behaviors. If possible, have coffee, tea or water and other refreshments readily available.
- ❖ Reach out to families prior to the beginning of the school year to build home school relationships. This helps to create a sense of security and trust for the child and family.
- ❖ Host “Back to School Nights” and/or similar events to help parents/families learn become familiar with the school program (i.e. curriculum).

HOME VISITS

Home visits are valuable in building respectful relationships with families. Home visits provide teachers and other program staff (i.e. social worker) with insight into the family dynamics, culture, needs and concerns of families.

PREPARING FOR HOME VISITS

- ❖ Visits should be scheduled at a time that is convenient for the family.
- ❖ Home visits should never be conducted alone especially if a worker feels their safety may be compromised. Ideally, teachers and social service personnel should conduct visits together to effectively assess family needs. A courtesy call should be made prior to visit to briefly discuss the purpose of the visit.
- ❖ Family/child history should be reviewed prior to the visit. Confidentiality must be maintained.
- ❖ Visits should not be too lengthy. Schedule additional visits if needed.

SECTION III: TRANSITION

For many children and their families, their first major transition occurs when they enter preschool. Preparing families for the transition process helps orient families to the program, anticipate services based on each child’s need, and provide valuable insight to each child and family. Family participation also helps reduce some of the stress that may be associated with transition.

The level and type of participation prior to enrollment will vary across families, based on each family's interests, resources and general ability to be involved. Offering a range of flexible ways to learn about the program will help ensure that most families are ready for the program. The following activities will foster smooth transitions:

- ❖ Offer parent meetings focused on child and family expectations and services in the preschool setting. Topics can include parent role, curriculum, and family services;
- ❖ Send out invitations to visit the preschool;
- ❖ Have an open house for families;

- ❖ Provide evening options for working families;
- ❖ Hold a child orientation at the preschool prior to attending; and
- ❖ Set up home visits for teachers to meet the families.

To facilitate a smooth transition for toddlers who attend child care or for children with disabilities already in early intervention programs, preschool teachers should meet, consult and plan with the child's teachers and therapists, when appropriate, from their previous placement. If possible, they should observe the child in the setting.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR DURING TRANSITION

- ❖ Establish a transition team composed of families, community agencies and leaders, and preschool and elementary personnel (such as teachers, social workers, child study team and PIRT members, bilingual education specialists, curriculum coordinators, and administrators).
- ❖ Identify a transition team facilitator who will set and conduct regularly scheduled meetings and provide time for school personnel to attend the meetings.
- ❖ Identify children at risk for learning with a valid screening tool and provide supports targeted to the children's individual learning needs.
- ❖ Select an appropriate instrument for measuring program quality and administer annually to monitor progress.
- ❖ Plan systems for data collection, analysis, and accountability to provide information about student progress, program quality, and teacher effectiveness from preschool through third grade.
- ❖ Create common planning time for teachers within and across grade levels and with specialists to ensure developmentally appropriate standards, curriculum, and assessments are aligned horizontally and vertically.
- ❖ Consider having teachers loop with a class of children for at least two grade levels.

ROLE OF THE TRANSITION TEAM

- ❖ Survey families and the community to identify educational and social service needs.
- ❖ Include a process for collaborating with families, early learning providers, and local public and private agencies to fully understand children and families prior to school entry.
- ❖ Establish goals to ensure seamless supports for all children as they move through each year, including summer, from preschool through third grade. The focus will be on addressing development of the whole child rather than academic skills in isolation.
- ❖ Provide information to families on the transition to and from each level from preschool through third grade, including registration guidelines, placement options, teacher expectations, and health and nutrition information.
- ❖ Create transition activities based on the goals created to ensure seamless supports for the children and families.
- ❖ Generate a timeline for implementing the transition plan.
- ❖ Revisit and update the transition plan annually.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN TRANSITION

- ❖ Participate on the transition team or provide suggestions for activities.
- ❖ Meet with other teachers within and across grade levels and with specialists to discuss and implement developmentally appropriate standards, curriculum, and assessment that are aligned horizontally and vertically.
- ❖ Meet with teachers within and across grade levels to discuss transition activities for spring, summer, and fall for children and families.
- ❖ Prepare and disseminate developmentally appropriate home learning activities during the school year and the summer months.
- ❖ Get to know each child and family. Contact families prior to the start of school and communicate with them on a regular basis throughout the year.
- ❖ Welcome new children and families. Let families know how they can be involved in their child's school and classroom.

SECTION IV: EVALUATION

School districts should evaluate the family services program annually to determine what services and activities have been successful in supporting and engaging families. Survey results should not be used to personally identify families or reprimand staff in any way. The results should be primarily used to support professional development and program improvement.

Families should complete annual surveys that will provide districts with data to help them identify the areas in need of improvement such as recruitment and outreach, teacher family relationships, family services and supports and program quality etc.

Principals, directors, teachers and social service personnel should complete pre and post surveys that help them determine their biases, their knowledge or lack of on the family's background and cultures and community and district services available to families.

SECTION V. REFERENCES

- Barbour, C., Barbour, N., & Scully, P. (2011.) *Families, Schools and Communities Building Partnerships for Educating Children 5th edition*. New York, NY: Merrill.
- Greenwood, G.E., & Hickman, C.W. *Research and Practice in Parent Involvement: Implications for Teacher Education*. The Elementary School Journal Vol. 91, No. 3, Special Issue: Educational Partnerships: Home-School Community (Jan., 1991), from www.jstor.org/pss/1001714
- New Jersey Department of Education (2010). *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines: Family and Community Involvement*, 20-24.
- New Jersey Department of Education (2011). *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines: Transition*, 42-44.

Sailor, D. (2004). *Supporting Children in their Home, School and Community*. Columbus, OH:Allyn & Bacon.

Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2009). *Child, Family, and Community: Family-Centered Early Care and Education*. New York: Merrill Pearson.