

## Coaches boost knowledge and skills needed to work with families

**S**chool constitutes such a small portion of a student's learning experience. In reality, students spend more time within their families and communities than they do learning in school. As a result, family and community make a significant contribution to a student's academic success.

When teachers involve students' families in the educational process, students will be more successful in school. Over five decades of research confirm this. To involve families and stakeholders, such as community organizations, business and industry within the school's community, and others, teachers rely on a body of knowledge and skills that they often develop from trial and error rather than from preservice or professional development programs.

A study by Joyce Epstein (1997) identifies a variety of ways to involve families in education. They include:

- **Parenting:** Helping families create home environments that support student learning.
- **Communicating:** Developing effective home-to-school and school-to-home communication that helps parents know what is happening in their child's education and how their child is progressing.
- **Volunteering:** Organizing family support in both the school and classroom.
- **Decision making:** Including parents in decisions related to school programs.
- **Collaborating with community:** Identifying and integrating resources and services to support education.

Coaches can serve to fill this void in a variety of ways.

**1. They can facilitate problem-solving sessions with teachers in their schools to explore meaningful and productive ways to involve families in their children's education.**

Considering how to involve parents at the school level, teachers and coaches can identify involvement strategies that are sensitive to cultural background and the unique challenges of families within the school community. Coaches may also help the school develop and implement special programs at school to engage parents. Academic programs, such as family math and literacy nights, family computer classes, or open library nights, provide opportunities for families to both learn about and support student academic outcomes.

**2. Coaches might help teachers develop a deeper understanding about the cultural background of students and their families.**

Coaches can identify



**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

resources, facilitate focus groups, interview parents, and offer various professional learning opportunities to help teachers understand their school's community and the cultural backgrounds of students.

Coaches can help teachers learn appropriate strategies for engaging parents, especially those



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unable to participate in routine school activities.

### **3. Coaches can help teachers identify ways to communicate with families.**

Parents want to know what their children are learning. Classroom newsletters, phone calls home about successes as well as problems, notes, parent meetings, or other forms of communication can keep parents involved even if they cannot participate in activities at school. For example, coaches can demonstrate how to use newsletter templates in common word processing programs to create classroom newsletters quickly and easily and include samples of student work and classroom photos. Communications to families might include information about what students are learning as well as a range of suggestions for how families might reinforce and extend learning at home. Coaches might help teachers use technology to communicate to families and students beyond the school. Coaches can also help teachers access and use district or community services for translation if needed.

### **4. Coaches can help teachers use a variety of ways to inform families about how students are progressing.**

As coaches support teachers in integrating both assessment of and assessment for learning in their classrooms, they can provide more specific and accurate reports of student progress to parents. By sharing various reporting formats, coaches assist teachers in choosing the most appropriate format for the level of students and family background. For example, families of elementary level students may be more interested in seeing samples of student work in the reports about student progress. At the secondary level, families might be more interested in knowing if students are on track with earning credits toward graduation.

### **5. Coaches can help teachers, especially novice teachers prepare for parent conferences or meetings.**

Coaches can suggest meeting agendas, share tips, help teachers know how to organize student-led parent conferences, and role-play meetings with parents. By helping teachers prepare for

potentially difficult conversations with parents, coaches can ease teachers' anxiety, give them support, and help them enter the meeting more confident.

### **6. Coaches might help teachers prepare for meetings with parents and school administrators when difficult situations occur.**

Coaches can listen and affirm as teachers share their feelings. They can engage teachers in exploring their interests and needs before they meet with parents. They can explore possibilities with teachers for solutions. They might practice opening statements and goal statements. By rehearsing and gaining clarity before the meeting, teachers are likely to be less emotional and more prepared.

### **7. Coaches can identify resources within the community to help both families and schools support students' educations.**

They may work with the district coordinator of community resources or may work with staff within the school to gather information about local adult education programs, hospitals, libraries, religious organizations, social services, or community organizations to learn what services they offer to families and schools. Coaches may learn about foundations, businesses, or other possible sources of external funding for special programs to support families and family involvement in schools.

Coaches support the implementation of the Family Involvement standard in various ways as they help develop teachers' understanding and skills related to engaging families in their students' education both at home and at school.

#### **Reference**

**Epstein, J. (2002).** *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, 2nd edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ◆

**For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)**