

Family Engagement Equity and Access

Purpose

This tool compiles information from Core Principle 6, Providing Equity and Access of the [Vermont Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment](#). Equitable Family Engagement centers on embracing the unique characteristics and strengths of all families in the district. Families must be able to participate in their child's education regardless of background or current challenges. This tool includes an assessment of current practices and highlights strategies to support educators with differentiating their services and supports based on the unique needs of each child and family. The term family is inclusive of all individuals responsible for the care and education of a child. Students may live or be cared for by parents, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, kin, or have other non-traditional family structures.

Background

The Vermont Multi-tiered System of Supports (VTmtss) Framework articulates the components and principles of an effective school system to provide all students with the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports and services they need to succeed. Assessing indicators of Equity and Access and strengthening structures that promote equitable treatment of families creates the conditions necessary for educational success and high-quality learning opportunities.

The concept of tiered supports for Family Engagement is outlined in the article [A Multi-Tiered Approach to Family Engagement](#) written by Hadley Bachman and Barbara Boone. As the authors state, "Family engagement initiatives proven to be effective are balanced, equitable, reciprocal, and open partnerships that allow educators and families to share expertise and seek feedback in a mutually trusting way." The multi-tiered family engagement model, Bachman and Boone outline, is centered on the understanding that each family is unique and will need different levels of support at different times and in different situations. In this layered model, they present three responsive levels of practice: universal, tailored, and intensive.

The VTmtss Team has chosen family engagement as one of our team's goals for this school year. This family engagement key finding is reported in the [2021-2022 Vermont Multi-tiered System of Supports Survey Summary Report](#). There is varied reporting by principals of families' engagement in schools, with many reporting some level of involvement of families, yet fewer reporting meaningfully engaging families in all decisions regarding students or school.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about this document or would like additional information, please contact:

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Family engagement data collected from Vermont principals include the following findings:

- Sixty-one percent (61%) reported that families would always be represented in Educational Support Teams (EST) meetings.
- Although 85% reported that families are involved with decisions around academic supports, fewer reported that families are immediately made aware when students are identified as struggling academically (70%).
- Less than half (46%) reported teachers use family-provided qualitative data to inform their lessons plans.
- Fifty-one percent (51%) reported general educators collaborate more than four times per year with families.
- Only 22% reported that families participate in developing, implementing, or evaluating critical school programs such as establishing and engaging advisory committees for problem-solving or policy drafting activities as well as other relevant system-wide decisions.

Family Engagement Core Principle 6, Providing Equity and Access page 24

The following self-assessment questions are designed to help a SU/school system reflect and assess professional practices and to identify areas to focus on as part of an action plan development and implementation. These questions are coupled with recommendations that include proven strategies for engaging families, and strategies for overcoming barriers to family engagement with an emphasis on equity. As you review and assess these indicators and strategies, consider which are universal, tailored, and intensive.

Self-Assessment Questions	Strategies
<p>Is the historical context of where families may have strived or struggled, their current realities, and the desired future outcomes for their children considered? page 47</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know the demographics of your school or district (e.g., ethnicities/cultures, spoken languages, socioeconomic backgrounds) by looking at data and talking with your staff. Talk with your staff about their understanding of both strengths and challenges across your community. • Get to know individual families in your school of different backgrounds and find out what they need to be able to be connected to the school. Ask about things like translation/interpretation, transportation, timing, and their preferred role in their child’s education. Consider options for meeting times including before and after school and evenings. Share this information with staff and encourage them to use it in their planning. • Set expectations for classroom teachers to gather information about families’ culture, language, and background, and support them in using this information in their planning and teaching. Make sure that each teacher is being sensitive to both the family’s level of comfort with sharing and the appropriate venue for sharing (e.g., classroom, family night).
<p>Is training provided to staff on communicating with families who are not native English speakers and/or require translation or interpretation services? page 38</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each year, provide staff with time to review information (such as demographic data and/or family surveys) and to talk about experiences in the previous year, particularly as they relate to creating an environment in which every family feels included. • WIDA professional Development, Professional Learning Offerings, self-paced on-demand, eWorkshops and resources: Interested educators should contact their district’s WIDA account coordinator.

Self-Assessment Questions	Strategies
<p>Are families' cultural and language needs considered and addressed when developing and disseminating important information to families? page 37</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use families' native language in spoken and written communication from the school. Perhaps a family or two with more experience with the school would be willing to translate documents for families or record the weekly school message in their language. • Make sure signs and postings around your school reflect the languages spoken by the families in your school. • Create a family resource section in your office and/or library. Provide information in books, handouts, or other print materials, and make computers available for families to use to look for online resources. • Ensure that all families can access school activities by offering translators and/or interpreters to welcome and assist families. For less common languages, you may wish to reach out to local colleges or universities to see if someone in their language program or an international student can help identify a translator. • Establish an advisory group of diverse families that can advise your school on the best ways to communicate with families and provide feedback on communications that have already gone out. Identify Stakeholders, page 118 • Check the reading level of communication; there are free online tools that can help you assess the reading level of your written resources. i.e., Online Utility Readability Calculator

Self-Assessment Questions	Strategies
<p>Do educators understand the unique characteristics and strengths that families bring to the school so that families can use those strengths to support improved outcomes for students? page 34</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carefully consider opportunities for families to share what they know and how they understand the world. Ask families what they would like to share and find ways to incorporate their ideas into full-school events or into classrooms, as they are comfortable. Sample Family Survey Questions, page 110 • Tap into the expertise of programs within your school’s community that serve families. Ask them for resources, information, and ideas for making your school a welcoming part of your community for all families. SWIFT Community Asset Mapping and Community Resources Assessment • Approach all conversations with families with cultural curiosity. Ask questions prior to and during meetings with families and/or to gauge your cultural awareness. For example, “Have I learned the correct last name and pronunciation of the parent’s name?” or “Am I open to the fact that the families’ economic / social reality may make it impossible for them to participate in school life in the traditional ways?” • Offer a continuum of options for family engagement in your school so that physical presence is not the only way families may be engaged. • Check your individual attitudes, beliefs, and values when working with families. Remember that it takes time to develop relationships with individual families. • Revisit family events and activities in your school and make sure that they are reflective of the families in your school. Consider how activities promote the overall improvement of the school and/or district, making sure to consider different cultural perspectives, different family structures, and the overall approach that your school and/or district is trying to take toward improving family engagement. • Change family activities such as Mother’s Day teas, making Father’s Day cards, or making family trees to be inclusive of different family structures. Gather input from families about how to observe some of these events or complete activities without excluding children.

Self-Assessment Questions	Strategies
<p>Do educators understand how culture and background influence people’s interactions and engagement level with the school? page 57</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide educators with professional development on how various cultures view education and schooling practices, including how to effectively engage with individuals who may have different backgrounds or experiences. • Invite family members from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to present to or meet with teachers and talk about their experiences with education and how they can feel most welcome in the school or classroom. • Help every family you work with understand that you appreciate and welcome their input and feedback, even if it may be different than your own. Keep in mind, in some families and in some cultures, it may be seen as disrespectful to disagree with educators and administrators. • Get to know individual families and ask them what makes the most sense to them for their level of engagement. Be accepting and non-judgmental about the ways in which families opt to engage.
<p>Is there representation on advisory bodies and committees that reflects the composition of the student body, including families that are living in poverty, have limited English proficiency, have disabilities, or have a student with a disability? page 45</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carefully consider the groups you currently engage and look for opportunities to either engage groups for more than one purpose, or to expand the group to ensure representation more reflective of your school population. • Provide joint trainings and team building activities for educators and family leaders. Use these activities as a jumping off point for joint planning, or for addressing school or district issues together as a team. • Provide families with training or other professional development so they can successfully participate in school and district-wide decision-making and planning. • Provide parenting classes that help parents understand the school system and ways that they can both support and advocate for their students. Involve families in the development of classes. • Build capacity by identifying family members that may be interested in leadership roles, and then providing training and mentorship so that they may facilitate or cofacilitate either meetings or leadership development for other families.

Summary

This family engagement assessment tool provides indicators of equity and access and strategies for strengthening structures that promote equitable treatment of families. School systems will develop focus areas for action plan development and implementation by combining this assessment with the responsive level of family engagement practices determinations: universal, tailored, or intensive. By assessing current family engagement practices, focusing on strategies to strengthen, and considering levels of practice, school systems will support conditions necessary for educational success and high-quality learning opportunities for all.

Resources

[A Multi-Tiered Approach to Family Engagement](#), Hadley Bachman and Barbara Boone, August 29, 2022, Vol. 80 No. 1

[Vermont Agency of Education Parent, Family and Community Engagement Webpage](#)

[Vermont Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment](#)

Contact Nancy Hellen at nancy.hellen@vermont.gov, to find out more about Family Networking Series, and additional Parent, Family, and Community Engagement resources.