

# Families as Partners:

Fostering Family Engagement  
for Healthy and Successful Students



NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION



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Family\* involvement in children's lives has been shown to reduce children's health-risk behaviors, improve their attitudes toward school and learning, and improve academic achievement and student success. But did you know that meaningful connections between home and school can also help develop and support healthy behaviors in children, such as increased physical activity (Ornelas, Perreira, & Ayala, 2007)?

Moreover, family engagement is important to a positive school climate, as well as to the development of promising school health policies and practices that benefit all students and prepare them for a healthy and successful future.

From a school district perspective, family engagement in health issues is an excellent first step toward getting families involved in schools. Families often are more willing to address health issues than potentially intimidating academic issues. And families who are engaged in the school district in a meaningful way are more likely to support their school even if they sometimes disagree with certain policies or other decisions.

The bottom line is: families want to be involved. They want what's best for their children and are generally willing to support their child in any way possible.

But we all know that families don't always participate in the school system. There are many challenges to their involvement: cultural

*\*The term "family" is used in this document to refer to a child's parent(s), guardian(s), caregiver(s), other family member(s), or any other adult(s) who plays a significant role in a student's life.*

## The Benefits of Effective Family Engagement

- Higher grades and test scores
- More classes passed
- Better attendance
- Better social skills and improved behavior at home and at school
- Easier adaptation to school
- Increased likelihood of high school graduation and attendance at postsecondary education

Henderson, & Mapp, 2002.

barriers, including language; history with the school system; differing expectations about the relationship between families and schools; and lack of knowledge about how the school system works, to name a few.

With the potential benefits so numerous (see *Benefits of Effective Family Engagement* and *The Health and Learning Connection*), how can schools better communicate them to families and ultimately get families involved?

This document provides a background on family engagement with a focus on health policies and practices and includes strategies school boards can use to effectively engage families.

“The bottom line is ... families want to be involved.”

### **The Health and Learning Connection**

Engaging families around health issues can be an important step for school districts and schools seeking to improve student achievement and prepare students to be successful in life. As highlighted in numerous studies, health and learning are connected. For example:

- Children who eat a complete, nutritious breakfast either at school or before school perform better (Food Research & Action Center, 2010).
- Overweight or obesity is associated with poorer performance levels (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005).
- Asthma—the most prevalent chronic health condition among children—is the greatest cause of school absenteeism (Akinbami, 2006).
- Student test scores improve after students have been physically active (Hillman, et al., 2009).
- Addressing behavioral and emotional dimensions of health improves education outcomes by reducing course failure rates, absences, and disciplinary referrals and improving grade point averages (Jennings, Pearson, & Harris, 2000).
- High school students with higher grades tend to engage in fewer health-risk behaviors than their classmates with lower grades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

## Coordinating School Health: A Shared Responsibility

Our society has a number of unhealthy influences: video games and TV; fast food; alcohol and drugs; and sexy celebrity role models, for instance. Families and school staff must deal with these influences that can be associated with risky behaviors that negatively affect health and decrease the chances of a child's success. Together, families and school staff share the responsibility to counter unhealthy influences and help students lead healthy, productive lives.

Coordinating school health practices is a practical way to address risky behaviors and their outcomes. Developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a coordinated school health (CSH) approach includes eight components (see The Eight Components of a Coordinated School Health Approach). While each component stands on its own, they interact to form a comprehensive whole that better meets the needs of students and families. Not surprisingly, a critical component of this approach is family involvement as that component is vital to addressing the physical, mental, and social well-being of students. The contributions effective family engagement makes to health and achievement are also clear. A review of the literature by Murray, Low, Hollis, Cross, & Davis (2007) identifies strong evidence that parent involvement, among other select aspects of coordinated school health programs, improves academic outcomes.

### The Eight Components of a Coordinated School Health Approach

- Comprehensive health education
- Physical education
- School health services
- School nutrition services
- School counseling, psychological, and social services
- A healthy and safe school environment
- School-site health promotion for staff
- Family and community involvement

For more information, visit [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/CSHP/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/CSHP/)



# Effective Family Engagement Strategies

There are several frameworks for effective family involvement that researchers have identified and that can be used to review a district's family engagement policies and practices. Once these are understood and addressed, they can be applied to engaging families in health issues.

One framework recommends three main strategies that school policymakers can follow to improve family engagement: (1) foster district-wide strategies; (2) build school capacity; and (3) reach out to and engage families (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009). These strategies address family engagement in terms of academics, but can also be effective in strengthening family engagement related to health issues, as outlined below:

**1. Fostering district-wide strategies** includes linking family engagement to district goals, creating infrastructure that supports and encourages family engagement, and institutionalizing ways to assess and improve district policies and practices. For instance, many school districts are involving families and community members in Wellness Committees or School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs). Having a paid district parent coordinator or school health center that involves families are other examples of ways districts are including family engagement in their infrastructure.

**2. Building school capacity** involves providing schools and school employees with the resources they need to engage families. This can include training and assistance from others, including community organization partners, to help school staff members learn the most effective ways to involve families or to learn about health issues that may be affecting their students, such as asthma or allergies. The school staff also can benefit from skill-building to handle such challenges as cultural and language barriers so that communication improves between families and schools.

**3. Reaching out to and engaging families** entails including families in the process in addition to communicating with them. Schools can convey information on school health policies and practices, welcome



# “There are several frameworks for effective family involvement that researchers have identified ...”

input by providing contact information on whom to talk to about health issues, talk to families about their interests and concerns, encourage immediate contact between families and school staff when concerns about health arise, share good news about students, take steps to accommodate families whose first language is not English, and make creative use of technology in reaching out to families.

Another framework for reviewing family engagement was developed by Joyce L. Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools and professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. It consists of six types of effective family involvement that can be particularly helpful when trying to break down some barriers. To truly see the benefits of family engagement, opportunities to support all six types of involvement should be built into policies and procedures. Each of these types of family involvement entails varying practices and presents their own challenges. But, each promises results for students, families, and teachers alike. The six types include:

- 1. Parenting.** Help families establish home environments that support students at every age and grade level.
- 2. Communicating.** Design effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress.
- 3. Volunteering.** Recruit, organize, and train families as volunteers to support students and school programs.
- 4. Learning at home.** Involve families with their children on homework and other curriculum-linked activities.
- 5. Decision making.** Include families in making school decisions and advocating for the schools, and develop parent leaders and representatives.
- 6. Collaborating with the community.** Coordinate community resources and services for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community.\*\*

\*\* For more details, refer to: Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997.

# Getting Started

Engaging families in school health might sound like a tall order, but your school district probably already has policies and practices in place to encourage family engagement. A review of your current policies and practices and how they relate to effective family involvement strategies will help you see how these can be expanded to include health and wellness activities as well as help you identify aspects of family engagement that can be added to your current health and wellness policies. Chances are you can build on your district's existing efforts to address family engagement in health, nutrition, and safety.

## Review your district's policies and procedures to find out what's in place, what's working, and what else needs to happen to effectively engage families

As you review current policies and practices to learn what your district is already doing to support family engagement, consider the following questions:

- Does your school board have a policy that expresses family engagement as a priority? Are there district-wide strategies for engaging families? Is family engagement viewed as an integral part of the work of the school board and school staff?
- Is the approach to family engagement comprehensive? Does it include Joyce Epstein's recommended six types of family engagement as described above: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community?
- Does outreach to parents reach all families? Are communications conducted in culturally appropriate ways?
- Is there a shared vision for family engagement? Do policies or regulations communicate the full range of family engagement opportunities? Are both formal and informal ways for families to be involved supported and encouraged? Is there a district-level position that coordinates and oversees family engagement activities?
- Are a variety of means used to gauge families' satisfaction, such as open dialogues, meetings, community gatherings, and/or questionnaires? Are these same methods used to find out what is most useful to families and what needs aren't being met?

### Tools to Use

Available on NSBA's website, [www.nsba.org/schoolhealth](http://www.nsba.org/schoolhealth), under the "Family Engagement in School Health" webpage:

- Sample family engagement policies
- Joyce Epstein's model of family involvement in schools
- Connecting with hard-to-reach families
- School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs), including sample policies
- Family engagement-related surveys
- Family engagement programs



## Learn about the needs of your families and involve them in planning

Effective initiatives enlist families' help in planning and making decisions about the programs and services that affect their children's health. And being involved in the process helps keep families aware of and satisfied with policies and practices as they develop. Your district might already have strong parent-teacher groups, but you might also want to consider other types of outreach that encourage a two-way dialogue on issues schools and students are facing.

There are many ways to receive input from families, including open dialogues with community members, standing committees such as SHACs, and surveys and questionnaires. When considering different means of obtaining family feedback, it is important to remember that you want the views of everyone in the district—not just a select few. Engage segments of your community that may not normally be included so that everyone feels welcome. While meetings will provide more in-depth responses, bear in mind that surveys and questionnaires will reach more people. You can use surveys and questionnaires to evaluate family satisfaction with various elements of district practices as well as to identify subjects they would like addressed or health issues they feel are important for improving performance, such as school meals and nutrition education, and screenings for vision and dental problems. Once the district has put practices in place to improve offerings in some areas, you can use surveys to help monitor the success of those practices and determine whether they are meeting the needs of the families who suggested them.

Your district will want to develop its own questionnaires, tailored to local needs. In formulating surveys that will be helpful at the district level, consider questions such as these:

- Do families feel that their input is welcomed and meaningfully integrated into their district's policy and practice decisions?
- Are families aware of all the opportunities to be involved?
- Are families satisfied with the health practices in schools, such as physical activity, health services, and accommodations for students with allergies and chronic diseases?

Your review of district policies and practices, and the results of family feedback, will identify the health-related information you need to communicate to families—in print, online, at meetings, and through other formal and informal communication channels—and show you how to strengthen family engagement in schools and school board decisions.

### State School Boards Association Resources

As you get started, remember to check with your state school boards association for available resources related to family involvement. The range of resources varies among state associations, but could include a parent newsletter template, sample policies on parent involvement, or services targeting community engagement.

For example, the Texas Association of School Boards has a website ([www.tasb.org/about/schools/build/](http://www.tasb.org/about/schools/build/)) that links school board members to useful family and community involvement-related resources. The Tennessee School Boards Association has a sample Parent/Family Involvement policy, in addition to other resources available at [http://new.tsba.net/Services\\_Products/Policy\\_Services](http://new.tsba.net/Services_Products/Policy_Services).

# ‘‘Not all families understand how their child’s school operates ...’’

## Ask what families need to know to be involved and how well your district and schools are meeting those needs

Important as it is to inform families about your district’s school health policies and practices, there’s more you can explain. Being involved with the school board, you’re well aware of how schools work and who the players are. But many outside of schools find public education a confusing and daunting bureaucracy. Not all families understand how their child’s school operates, and many understand little of the relationship between schools, the school district, the state, and the federal government. In addition, some families don’t understand the need and the importance of addressing health issues among students. The following questions can help you identify families’ needs:

- Do families understand the governance structure of your school district and schools? Do they need more information on state and district responsibilities for funding and policy-making?
- Do families know how to communicate with the district or school? Do they know the entry points at both the district and school level for learning about policies and procedures pertaining to health? Is information on departments, key staff and their responsibilities, and names and contact information available and easily accessible to all families? How do they find this information?
- What channels are available to involve families? What specific areas currently need family involvement? What is the best way for families to work with the district and schools so they feel part of the system?
- Are families aware of the link between health and learning? How does the district communicate and support that information?
- Are families well informed about policies, practices, and their rights and responsibilities that relate to health services, health and physical education, and wellness overall?
- Do families know about school district advisory committees that address health issues and how they can get involved? Are they involved in advisory committees, such as a school health advisory council or other community/school advisory committee? Do they know about specific opportunities for involvement?

### Tools to Use

Available on NSBA’s website, [www.nsba.org/schoolhealth](http://www.nsba.org/schoolhealth) (under the “Family Engagement in School Health” webpage) are NSBA tools to communicate with and engage families:

- *Back to School: How Parent Involvement Affects Student Achievement*
- How Schools Work and How to Work with Schools PowerPoint presentation
- Entry points for health and wellness in your district, including health-related committees in which families can be involved
- Fact sheet on the link between health and learning
- Sample cover letter to families on ways the district addresses health and wellness
- Promoting family involvement in health issues online

- Are opportunities offered through the schools or by other community groups for families to learn parenting skills, participate in leadership development training, access volunteer opportunities, or enroll in GED and English Language Learner programs? Are these programs aligned with families' needs and interests?

### Ask how you can build the capacity of your board and staff to strengthen family engagement

- Is there training support for administrators, teachers, and other school staff on working with families, including reaching across cultural and language barriers and making the school environment a welcoming place for everyone? Does the board seek training on effective strategies for engaging families in the policy development process?
- Are objectives for improving family engagement included in district and school improvement plans? Are educational opportunities provided to school staff on the link between health and learning and family engagement?
- Are there effective communication strategies for reaching families with information that will help them be involved in their children's education, their school, and the district? Are multiple strategies such as home visits, flexible visiting hours, and website and e-mail correspondence included? Are these strategies provided in ways that are culturally and linguistically appropriate?
- Are there efforts to connect and collaborate with state and local family engagement organizations such as the State Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) and local PTAs or PTOs?
- Are staff members encouraged to develop and sustain school/community partnerships such as with hospital/school services and programs?
- Is there coordination with community employers to foster workplace policies that enable families to be involved in their children's education and with school programs?
- What is in place to evaluate your family engagement practices to learn what is happening and determine improvements that may be needed?

By thoughtfully addressing questions such as the ones posed in this publication, you and your district will lay the foundation for meaningful family engagement in schools and school health—and help ensure student success.

### Tools to Use

Available on NSBA's website, [www.nsba.org/schoolhealth](http://www.nsba.org/schoolhealth) (under the "Family Engagement in School Health" webpage):

- Additional resources on family and community engagement, including state PIRCs and Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs)



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*Working with and through our State Associations,  
NSBA Advocates for Equity and Excellence in  
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