

PBL in practice

Family engagement

Family engagement is an active, interactive, dynamic, and ongoing process in which family members and key stakeholders engage as equal partners in decision-making, planning, and implementation to support children and adolescents across settings.

(Weist et al., 2017)

The Department of Education's [Parent and Community Engagement Framework](#) defines parent engagement as a meaningful relationship between the parents¹ and teachers with the shared goal of maximising learning and wellbeing outcomes for students.

¹ The term 'parent' in the Parent and Engagement Framework refers to parents, carers, kinship and families.

This PBL in practice paper highlights ways to plan for family engagement in PBL and provides examples of effective family engagement strategies used by schools.

References

UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health. (2018). *WSCC practice brief: Family engagement*. University of Connecticut.

Weist, M. D., Garbacz, S. A., Lane, K. L., & Kincaid, D. (2017). *Aligning and integrating family engagement in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): Concepts and strategies for families and schools in key contexts*. Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education). Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press.

Witte, A., Singleton, F., Smith, T., & Hershfeldt, P. (June, 2021). *Enhancing family-school collaboration with diverse families*. Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. www.pbis.org.

The benefits for students of family-school engagement include improved academic outcomes, stronger relationships with adults and peers, better social skills and improved mental health.

Research also shows benefits for schools, such as increased staff morale and improved school climate.

Genuine engagement exists when there is a meaningful relationship between families and teachers with the shared goal of maximising learning outcomes for students.

Families can be involved with PBL implementation across all tiers. For example, at Tier 1 families can be surveyed when developing and reviewing expectations and the PBL teaching matrix. There may also be parent representatives on the school PBL team, or PBL teams will develop a process to ensure that families are consulted and their input listened to and acted upon.

At Tier 2 families are informed and actively involved in targeted interventions. For example, intervention overview materials for families will be developed and mechanisms put in place to share student progress with families.

Families of students receiving Tier 3 support are a valuable source of information and important members of the student's support planning team. Schools and families work collaboratively to agree on the short and longer-term goals for students receiving interventions.

Challenges for families

Schools should be aware of barriers preventing families from being actively engaged with their child's school. It is important that schools approach family-school collaboration with empathy and without judgement. For example, what may be taught as respectful at school (for example, taking off your hat indoors) might not be what is expected in some communities. Schools need to teach which behaviours are appropriate for school, while not de-valuing what happens in the student's home or community.

Consider the following challenges which may face some families and develop strategies to overcome these barriers.

- Families may face logistical challenges such as an inability to attend school events at the time or location scheduled.
- There may be home responsibilities such as caring for younger children or aging family members during the day.
- Some families may not have transportation to attend a school meeting or event.
- Linguistically diverse families may face communication challenges.
- Some families may have a fear of being judged when making attempts to engage in their children's school experience.
- It can be difficult for some families to engage with schools because of feelings of inadequacy and distrust.



Strategies

Some of the successful ways that schools can facilitate family engagement include:

- Setting up the school environment to welcome families, for example, by creating a welcoming office foyer, training office staff to welcome visitors positively, having clear signage and providing family-friendly information on the school website and through social media.
- Making positive contact with families regularly by phone, text or email.
- Setting up systems for families to easily communicate with the school.
- Surveying families about their preferred communication method, or including a tick box on enrolment forms.
- Making a list of ways that families can participate (for example, volunteer opportunities, helping at events).
- Looking for ways to be visible in the community outside of school. For example, displaying school expectations in shops or have a banner at sporting events.
- Holding school events at community centres or hubs.
- Asking community elders and leaders to run information or professional development sessions for school staff.
- Asking cultural liaison officers or community leaders how best to foster positive relationships within the community.
- Communicating both positive and negative news to parents and the broader community, where appropriate.
- Building a bank of resources to support positive parenting, especially when parents are feeling vulnerable and at risk.
- Providing communications in a range of formats and languages, tailored to the cultural make-up of your school.
- Offering short workshops or information sessions for parents on topics of interest.

