

Project 292

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# Promising Practices for Meaningful Family Engagement

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“We’re all gonna merge in the end and create one great human being.”

- Garnet, parent

**The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.**

Henderson, Anne T. & Mapp, K. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*

# Our Purpose

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We sought to uncover promising practices to engage families in our rural context and to understand the critical elements of their success.

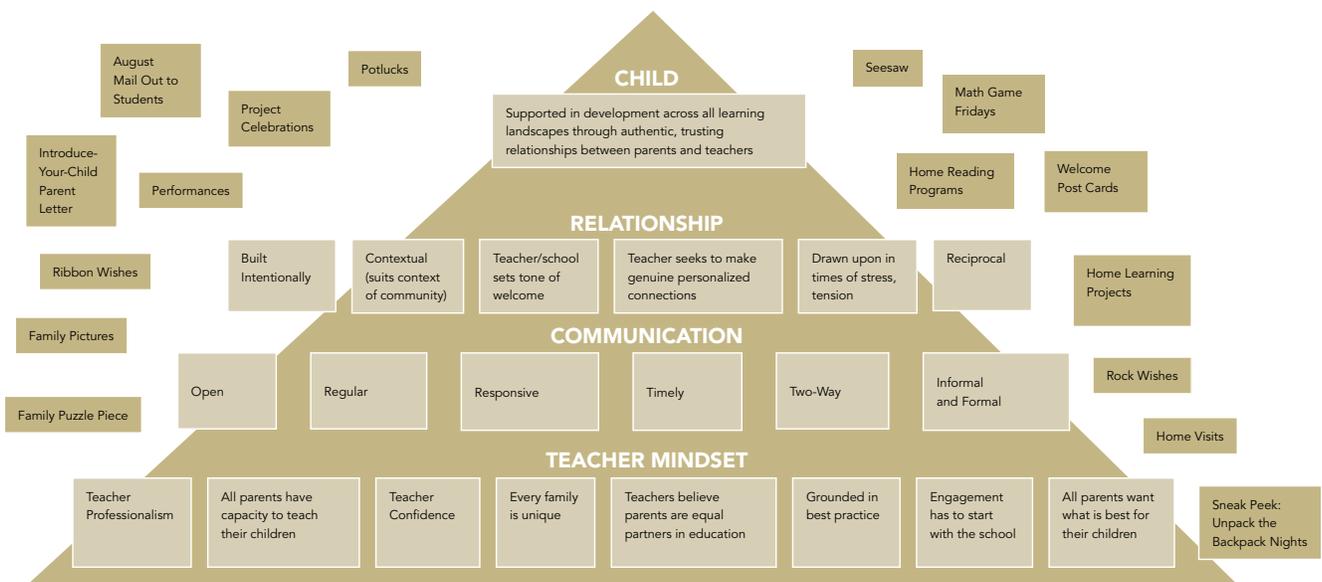
# Our Context

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We are three researchers teaching in elementary schools located in mid-sized towns in rural Saskatchewan. The families in each of our classrooms for the 2018-19 school year were invited to participate and engage in our journey.

# Our Process

- Representation of parent voice through narrative inquiry.
- Teacher-created intentional activities based on research throughout the 2018-19 school year.
- Three teacher reflective journals.
- One teacher focus group.
- Eight parent focus groups.
- Twelve individual parent conversations.
- Eleven parent questionnaires.
- Total of 42 parent voices heard.



# Our Core Beliefs

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*Beyond the Bake Sale* gives the following core beliefs as foundational to successful family engagement.

1. All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
2. All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.
3. Parents and school staff should be equal partners.
4. The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family/School Partnerships*. New York: The New York Press

**Be intentional in your engagement strategies  
– what is your purpose?**

# What Our Parents Are Saying

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## **Kassandra on Differentiated Engagement:**

"Be open-minded; no families are the same. Their dynamics are all different. Work different times, one parent may be home, one at work. Everybody is different, and each kid is different too."

## **Deb on Teacher Believing in Parent Voice:**

"(Parents) don't always reach out and have those one-on-one conversations with teachers, but when you are invited to, it's a lot easier to then do it."

## **Danine on Seesaw:**

"[A] quick Seesaw message ... just really keeps that door open."

## **Deb on Reducing Anxiety Through Timely and Responsive Communication:**

"That morning was terrible, and without having had a chance to touch base with you easily and conveniently, (it would have been a) terrible feeling. [My son] was calm by the time he left the house, because he knew that I'd been able to talk to you."

## **Christian on Valuing Education:**

"Not only for the teacher to do it, but also the parents. It really showed your kid you're ready for them to learn from you and teaching them also. Like bonding every weekend. That's why I keep on asking my son, 'How is your school? Any good or bad things happen? Do you have an assignment?' So I can help him whenever he needs help."

## **Joylene on Face-to-Face Engagement in In-Between Times:**

"Face-to-face [communication is] one thing that really sticks out to me. Even if I'm picking him up, you always reference something that he's done great that day. Even today, you said he did amazing on his multiplication. So tomorrow morning I can say 'I heard you did amazing on multiplication,' and then he can talk to me about that because it opens up more communication with him ... and it makes me feel like my kid is important to you [which] makes me feel more comfortable. [I] get the feeling that he matters."

**Igor on Face-to-Face Communication:**

"Maybe when you have, how you call it, eye contact, right? Maybe you can ... feel more comfortable to talk ... I guess better face-to-face."

**Marlene on Relationship as a Two-Way Street:**

"I think that we need to make sure that there is a completely open-door policy, and the doors swing both ways, not just one."

**Tana on Unpack the Back Pack/Welcome at the Beginning of the Year:**

"Just an ease in to, get rid of that anxious drop off first day of school. This year was especially tough. It's been a hard year. So I definitely think it helped, just that first nervous getting there."

**Tanis on Coming from a Place of Non-Judgment:**

"[Communication] coming from a non-judgmental place. Because ... you can feel that, and you know ... [teachers] could be ... understanding, open-minded, caring."

**Deb on the Impact of Open Communication on Engagement:**

"It's too important. I'm in. I'm sold. I think that the development that [my son] has experienced in this classroom with me being more on track with his learning and the feedback [has made a huge impact on his] academic development, never mind [his] emotional and social [development]."

**Syhra on Communication and Making Learning Visible as a Means to Engage:**

"Communicate. Positive, negative, just random happenings that are happening in the classroom. So whether it is learning projects, special events ... share that with families, because definitely it is worth so much more to the parent when that happens, that communication happens. Then it feels like you are more engaged and aware of what they learn at school."

**Count connections, not number  
of people at an event.**

**Tanis on Trust:**

"I think that trust between the teacher and the parent [and] that open communication between us ... that bond ... 'cause it takes a village,' you know, to raise them. I feel like to me it's the trust and the feeling safe and knowing that I can send him to school and know that if he's having a bad day ... or a good day ... you're there for him as well."

**Joylene on Compassion:**

"Watch how [you] say things ... just to have that compassion with [families], because you don't know what's going on at home with people."

**Sheri on Relationship:**

"I really enjoy being present in the classroom where he can see me; he can see that I'm interacting with his classmates, his teacher. He sees that his teacher and I are collaborating and trying to get to a place where we're helping him. We have the same goal to help him, right?"

**Deb on Home Learning:**

"We've had some kind of cool conversations and breakthroughs that we wouldn't have had [without the Home Learning Project]. There's been a few moments where it made us more involved with [our] children, and they love that because some of the activities we wouldn't have done."

**Deb on Rock Wishes:**

"It does make, even as parents, us more welcome and feel more like we can be closer and more open with you when we have concerns. When you have activities like that ... that go away from academics and start into your emotional part, then it instantly creates more of a connection with you."

**Erin on Welcoming Through a Host of Practices:**

"I think that doing all of those: parent orientation, letter in the mail before the year started, sneak peak, sharing assignments, Seesaw, face-to-face ... interacting with us parents has made it welcoming and for us to be more involved with you and our children, I guess."

# Before You Move On ... A Look in the Mirror

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1. What do I believe is important when partnering with families?
2. What am I already doing to build positive relationships with my families?
3. What is holding me back from engaging with families?
4. What past experiences are forming my current practices when partnering with families?

# Top Five Recommendations

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1. Communicate – the more the better – **early, often, and timely**.
2. Build an open and welcoming environment that fosters relationships with families.
3. Use an online learning platform that makes learning visible and allows two-way communication such as Seesaw or Class Dojo.
4. Select building blocks that honour family knowledge such as home learning projects.
5. Personalize engagement opportunities to meet the needs of the families in your care. Consider access to technology and work schedules.

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