

# To&Through MIDDLE GRADES NETWORK

## Strengthening Family-School Relationships

### WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

*“Family school partnerships are distinct from parental involvement and involve child-focused approaches by which families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across socioemotional, behavioral, and academic domains.”* (Smith et al.) Family engagement in school environments is predictive of a host of positive outcomes including increased academic achievement, improved study habits, increased likelihood of graduating from high school, better homework habits, and more positive attitudes toward school and college.

Unfortunately, family-school engagement drops significantly between elementary school and middle school. Elementary learning is typically more conducive to parental involvement (i.e. simple parental tasks like reading to kids and testing spelling) versus in middle school, where the presence of multiple teachers for students and the increased autonomy adolescents experience make the task of engaging families in middle school more difficult.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic and transition to remote learning has made it even more clear how important authentic family-school relationships are. As families take on more direct responsibility for supporting the education of their children, partnering with teachers to align on goals, helping to keep their children motivated, and understanding the content of assignments themselves, requires an increased level of collaboration.

### HOW DO WE STRENGTHEN FAMILY -SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS WITH AN EQUITY LENS?

The Inclusive Partnerships dimension of the CPS Equity Framework is critical to a school’s work with families. As the definition notes, the goal is to bring together diverse individuals to “collectively create solutions and build trust that mitigate or solve complicated or complex problems.”<sup>2</sup>

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The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and fight for racial justice require schools to be more attuned to parents' needs than ever before. Schools must develop cultural competence in order to communicate effectively, meet parents where they are, and challenge their perceptions of what constitutes family involvement to develop relationships based in trust.

### SECONDARY DRIVER | IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

Family-school partnerships is primarily fostered through **effective communication**. Improving communication with parents has been shown to improve our most historically underserved students' grades immediately, increase classroom participation, lessen school absences, and improve parents' satisfaction in their students' teachers.<sup>3</sup> This section will provide resources for improving communication between parents and schools.

- [Remind](#) | Remind is a CPS-approved online platform that streamlines communication with students and their families via text, email, or the Remind App. It allows integration with other frequently used classroom software like Google Classroom, to keep parents in the loop about their students' homework assignments and creates an open line of communication for parents with their student's teachers.
- [Two-Way Communication Guide](#) | If implementing a new software program feels overwhelming, this resource from *Waterford.org* provides a series of simple, evidence-based strategies for creating effective, two-way communication channels with your students' parents.
- [Other Strategies to Improve Communication](#) | This resource from the *College of Education at the University of Hawaii* details a wide variety of potential strategies to improve communication with your students' families. The first activity involves enlisting students' voices and experiences to brainstorm ways to improve communication with their parents. Whether you're looking to improve family-school partnerships on a classroom level or school level, this module will detail a strategy suitable to your needs.

### CHANGE IDEA | STUDENT LED CONFERENCES (SLCS)

Parent-Teacher conferences offer a direct opportunity to make families partners in shaping their student's learning. However, incorporating students' voices and experiences into these conferences can strengthen the learning partnership that exists between students and their teachers/parents.

- [Leaders of Their Own Learning: Student Led Conferences](#) | This guide from *EL Education* offers a variety of implementation guides for SLCs, including videos of how they ideally operate, sample materials for introducing to parents, and tips around scalability.
- [Improving Student Led Conferences](#) | Maximizing the potential of an idea like student-led conferences can be difficult. This article details how *Intrinsic Schools*, located here in Chicago, used continuous improvement strategies to make their SLCs more effective when they weren't working.
- [Student Led Conferences Protocol](#) | This simple two-page protocol from *Scholastic* will help you understand the structure of SLCs, as well as the action steps required of each stakeholder prior to the meeting.

### SECONDARY DRIVER | IMPROVING PARENT PROGRAMMING

Another way to improve family-school relationships is to simply get parents in the building more often. This section will look at ways by which parents can be brought into their children's education through engaging school events.

- [Middle School Event Ideas](#) | This article provides ideas for a variety of parent engagement events, including enrichment activities, sports-related activities, family events, and just-for-fun activities.
- [Engaging Families in Remote Learning](#) | If you're looking for ways to engage families with regards to remote learning, this resource from *Challenge Success* is full of resources to help keep families engaged, even if you can't bring them into the school building. Consider sending out some of these information/resources to parents or hosting calls and presenting on these materials.

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- [Project Appleseed](#) | Events like the “Family Math Night”, geared toward middle school students, can provide meaningful opportunities for parents to engage in their student’s learning. This is one of 30 separate activities this guide explores. It also contains a remote learning guide for families, which could be especially useful for the 2020-2021 school year.

### OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships](#) | If you’re looking to take a deeper dive into ways that family-school partnerships can be developed, look no further than this book. MGN has purchased a copy of this book for each school so reach out if you have not yet received it. You can also tap into your CPS FACE Manager for support developing a more robust strategy tailored to your school community.
- [Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home: Strategies and Resources for Families and Caregivers \(AIR\)](#) | Tools in English and Spanish to help parents foster emotional health and well-being at home.
- [Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works](#) | This guide, produced by the *Coalition for Community Schools*, synthesizes the knowledge and experience of several dozen principals about what works and what doesn’t in terms of engaging families and the wider community your school is situated in. The Executive Summary provides “Six Keys to Community Engagement” that serve as a compass to keep your engagement strategy on course. We believe it is a helpful, practitioner-based framework for thinking about this work with clear, actionable steps for success.
- [Family Engagement in Schools: A Comprehensive Guide](#) | This resource from *Panorama Education* offers a great overview of what family engagement is, why it’s important, and implementation strategies. Panorama also offers a survey to use to build these connections.
- [Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement](#) | This overview made by the *State Support Network* is organized around five categories of equitable family engagement strategies, offering summaries of research and examples of school practices.
- [Teaching Tolerance: Family Engagement Guide](#) | This guide offers a step by step process by which you can examine your practice around family engagement. It provides a number of engaging testimonials, useful outside resources, and probing questions to create the necessary reflection to engage the families of your school in an equitable, effective manner.



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Language in the Guide Was Adapted From:

[1] Smith, Tyler E., et al. "Understanding Family-School Engagement across and within Elementary- and Middle-School Contexts." *School Psychology*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2019, pp. 363-375., doi:10.1037/spq0000290.

[2] Bryk, Anthony, and Barbara Schneider. *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

[3] "How Two-Way Communication Can Boost Parent Engagement." Waterford.org, 13 Mar. 2019, [www.waterford.org/education/two-way-communication-parent-engagement/](http://www.waterford.org/education/two-way-communication-parent-engagement/).