

Relationships Matter

Part 1:

Parental Engagement

Research Evidence

Practitioner Knowledge

Effective Implementation

About Pathways to Education Canada

Pathways to Education Canada is a national charitable organization that helps youth in low-income communities graduate from high school and successfully transition into post-secondary education or meaningful employment. The organization works with partner organizations to deliver a community-based dropout prevention and youth engagement program. It provides funding, evidence-based program practices, and public voice to enable program delivery.

Founded in 2001, Pathways to Education Canada operates nationally with programs in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and British Columbia.

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Preface

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Research on adolescent development and learning, interviews with Pathways to Education front-line staff, and anecdotal evidence gathered from staff, students, and parents suggest that the true strength of the Pathways to Education program — indeed any after-school youth development program — lies in how it facilitates the development of supportive relationships. Ever since its launch in 2001, the Pathways to Education program has been known for its focus on developing individualized supportive relationships with student participants (Acker & Rowen, 2014; Glogowski, 2015). This report is first in a series titled “Relationships Matter” that Pathways to Education Canada will be releasing over the coming years. The report on what we consider to be one of the fundamental relationships in the program — the developmental relationships that Pathways to Education practitioners and volunteers build with students in the program — is currently in development and will be key to helping us better understand relationship-building at program locations across the country. However, the current report — the first in this series — explores the relationships that program staff build with parents, defined as any adults who carry the primary responsibility for a child’s well-being.

While not as visible as other aspects of the program and often informal, complex, and challenging, parental engagement is crucial to its success. The interviews conducted for this report with Pathways to Education staff revealed that parental

engagement is consistently seen as key to ensuring better student support. While many parents are difficult to reach, may resist attempts at effective communication, or may be unable to ensure a consistent level of involvement, the process of developing relationships with parents is often seen as key to program effectiveness and student success.

This report builds on a scan of secondary research on parental engagement and a series of interviews with Pathways to Education staff in four program locations and three provinces. It is designed for practitioners, program managers, researchers, and program development professionals involved in after-school youth development programs, particularly programs for youth living in contexts of disadvantage and marginalization. It is our hope that practical recommendations presented in this report — based on a scan of secondary research and interviews with Pathways to Education practitioners — will be of value to a wide variety of professionals working with youth as they strive to develop positive relationships with parents.

By combining the best of existing research on parental engagement with practice-based knowledge of experienced front-line staff, this report aims to create a common understanding of parental engagement in youth programs for young people between the ages of 12-25. It identifies successful approaches and strategies that can be implemented to increase parental involvement in the positive development and

academic success of adolescents living in risk situations, while emphasizing the importance of respectfully addressing and considering the unique characteristics, needs, and interests of each family. Through theoretical and practice-based knowledge, this report also suggests that the level of parental involvement in youth programs is significantly influenced by contextual factors outside the control of program staff. Therefore, practitioners interested in enhancing their parental engagement efforts are strongly advised to carefully tailor the approaches and strategies in this report to the unique contextual circumstances of each family.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Two methods were used to conduct this research. First, a search of the literature databases (e.g., PsychINFO, Google Scholar, and ERIC) was completed, using predetermined inclusion and exclusion keywords to narrow down the scope of our search to parental engagement in the context of after-school programs for adolescents. Through this search, a number of peer-reviewed and academic articles were identified and reviewed. Reports and articles from non-peer-reviewed sources — commonly known as grey literature — were also included. Interviews with front-line staff at Pathways to Education program locations were then conducted to gather practitioner knowledge and explore alignment with existing literature. These interviews were conducted in person or over the phone and generally lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to

two coding cycles, completed by two researchers (both authors of this report). Coding for patterns helped to identify themes and define critical contextual factors, approaches, and strategies that manifest themselves in front-line work. The data was then coded one more time for alignment with existing research and synthesized to inform all five parts of the report.

REPORT OVERVIEW

In the sections that follow we offer a scan of secondary research on parental engagement, share our primary research findings from interviews with Pathways to Education staff, and provide a set of practical insights for organizations offering after-school programs for youth. Part I of the report highlights key research findings on parental engagement. Part II provides an overview of existing research and practical knowledge on contextual factors that can affect parental engagement in youth programs. Part III reviews approaches and strategies that can help promote parental engagement (e.g., providing family support and building trusting relationships). Part IV outlines the results of our research with Pathways to Education staff. Finally, Part V offers implementation recommendations for youth programs interested in enhancing parental engagement efforts.



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND AT HOME HAS BEEN SHOWN TO IMPROVE TEST SCORES, GRADES, ATTENDANCE, GRADUATION RATES, AND TRANSITION INTO AS WELL AS ATTAINMENT IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).



Part I: Introduction

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT OR PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT?

The terms “parental engagement” and “parental involvement” are often used interchangeably and both have a long history in the field of education (Sinay, Zheng, & Presley, 2009). Parents can be involved in the academic life of their children in a variety of ways. They can help supervise school outings, volunteer to assist with clerical tasks at the office, help out with school celebrations and events, or coach sports teams. These types of support can also be of value to after-school programs. Generally, these activities fall into the category of parental involvement. However, some schools or after-school community-based programs invite parents to sit on advisory committees, ask for input and direction regarding program development work, or provide opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect the future of youth- and parent-focused programming. Since these opportunities tend to acknowledge and build on parental input and voice, they extend beyond mere involvement and are more accurately defined as parental engagement.

This report provided an opportunity to explore these distinctions and to commit to a terminology and definition that reflect the philosophy of the Pathways to Education program. At the start of this project, both terms seemed to be equally relevant. However, as our research progressed, we were increasingly drawn to the idea of parental engagement. Involvement, as defined by Pushor

(2007) who explored relationships with parents in school contexts, tends to relegate parents to playing pre-defined roles where their knowledge and voice are not perceived as valuable or as potential contributing factors to the well-being and educational attainment of their child:

Parents who are “involved” serve the school’s agenda by doing the things educators ask or expect them to do – volunteering at school, parenting in positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with their schoolwork – while knowledge, voice and decision-making continue to rest with the educators (Pushor, 2007).

These parental involvement roles often include being an audience, an aide, or a spectator to activities and practices developed and implemented by educators or the school system (Epstein, 1995; McGilp & Michael, 1994). After a careful review of literature on parental involvement (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003) and parental engagement (Harris, Andrew-Power, & Goodall, 2009), as well as resources that explore the differences and similarities between the two (Sinay et al., 2009), we made the decision to build on the work of Pushor (2007) whose careful delineation of differences between engagement and involvement aligns with the philosophy of the Pathways to Education program and our internal findings regarding parental engagement practices. Pathways practitioners aim towards engagement, as defined by Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005):

The implication is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, as cited in Pushor, 2007).

Our interview transcripts revealed that while involvement and engagement were at times used interchangeably by front-line staff, the majority of interviewees described practices that aligned more with research on parental engagement activities (Project Appleseed: The Campaign for Public School Improvement, 2014) and the definition cited above. Even when the word involvement was used, the context suggested connotations associated with parental engagement — bringing parents into the Pathways to Education community, respecting and building upon their knowledge, and establishing mutually beneficial relationships that acknowledge parents as partners who have a particularly crucial role to play in the developmental trajectories of their children.

While Pushor’s definition of parental engagement addresses the relationships built with parents in

the context of school systems, not after-school programs, we found that it also aligns well with front-line practices in the Pathways to Education program. The definition’s focus on power-sharing and mutually-beneficial activities reflects the types of practices we documented through interviews with Pathways practitioners — efforts that move beyond information sharing and are designed to work with parents to ensure more effective or more complete support for the student. In short, they invite parents into the Pathways community as collaborators.

This type of collaborative relationship, Pushor argues, allows educators (or youth work practitioners) to create a community with parents, “a shared world [...] a world in which ‘parent knowledge’ and teacher knowledge both inform decision-making, the determination of agendas, and the intended outcomes of their efforts for children, families, the community and the school.” There is a “sense of reciprocity in their mutual engagement, a sense of benefit for families and the school” (Pushor, 2007).

As we read and re-read interview transcripts, it became clear that while many practices in the Pathways to Education program focus on parental involvement (keeping parents informed, organizing opportunities to see the program in action, be a spectator and supporter), the philosophy of developing meaningful relationships with parents and many practices that support it extend beyond involvement: they are designed to offer parents

the opportunity to be partners and work with program staff, and they play a key role in helping staff better understand family dynamics and circumstances. We believe that the consistent focus on building meaningful relationships with parents in the Pathways to Education program places these practices in the realm of parental engagement.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Over the past 30 years, research has shown that parents are critical contributors to their child's positive development and academic success (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Golan & Petersen, 2002; National Parent Teacher Association, 2009). Parental involvement in school and at home has been shown to improve test scores, grades, attendance, graduation rates, and transition into as well as attainment in post-secondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This positive connection between parental involvement and academic outcomes is well-established and quite powerful (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, schools often struggle with parental engagement, particularly in contexts where there are language barriers or cultural and socioeconomic differences separating the school system and its staff from the communities and families they serve (Sinay et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Fortunately, the positive influence of parental involvement on student well-being and success also extends to after-school programs. Parental involvement in youth programs contributes to

the positive development and academic success of adolescents in risk situations (Lamb-Parker, Piotrkowski, Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Clark, & Peay, 2001). According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2014), family engagement in after-school programs benefits parents, students, and even the school and the program itself. Parental engagement in after-school settings and programs can enhance parents' sense of connection to their children, their children's education, and their school (Harris & Wimer, 2004). It is also "associated with greater involvement in school events and affairs, and increased family assistance with children's homework" (Harris & Wimer, 2004). There is also evidence to suggest that programs with high levels of parental engagement can help youth develop improved relations with adults (Intercultural Center for Research in Education, 2005). Increased communication with parents is also associated with improved after-school program outcomes (Harris & Wimer, 2004). Effective parental engagement practices are also family-strengthening practices — they "have a positive impact on four main parenting processes: family environment, parent-child relationships, parenting, and family involvement in learning in the home and at school" (Caspe & Lopez, 2006).

Programs with a high level of parental engagement also tend to help reduce risk behaviours among participating youth. They have been found to lower rates of tobacco and drug use, delinquency, violent behaviour, and risky sexual behaviour (Moore, Guzman, Hair, Lippman, & Garrett, 2004; Moore &

Zaff, 2002). Furthermore, “youth enrolled in some after-school programs with a parental involvement component have been found to be more likely to refuse alcohol and marijuana, to better understand the dangers of marijuana and the health consequences of drug use” (St. Pierre, 1998).

After-school programs are also often perceived as more approachable by parents who are reluctant to or unable to fully engage with their children’s school. Such programs are also ideal settings for parent-program partnerships that can effectively support children’s learning. They are well-positioned to play the role of a “mediator” or “broker” between parents and their child’s school (Harris, Rosenberg, & Wallace, 2012; Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). They can provide practical guidance and assistance to parents who may not have a good understanding of how the school system operates, help develop and engage in better communication practices with school staff, and facilitate teacher-parent meetings and interactions (Harris et al., 2012; Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). In other words, after-school programs offer opportunities “to work together in close partnership and move beyond information sharing and occasional parental participation in activities and events” (Harris et al., 2012). According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2010), after-school programs and parents, working together as equal partners, can provide beneficial learning opportunities to participating youth by:

1. Understanding children’s learning needs;
2. Ensuring that program goals and activities align with children’s larger learning goals;
3. Facilitating communication with other settings where children learn to better coordinate learning supports;
4. Sharing key data and results regarding children’s learning progress (Harris et al., 2012).

Part IV of this report demonstrates that parental engagement practices at Pathways to Education community programs align with the above recommendations: front-line staff engage parents to better understand student needs and customize program supports, facilitate communication with the school system and access to relevant community services, and share the student’s learning and developmental trajectory. In other words, parental engagement in the Pathways to Education program plays a multi-faceted role. Front-line staff focus on

offering an environment where parents can feel at ease; providing parent-related activities and family services during times more accessible to working parents; offering resources to help parent-child communication; and providing parents with the tools to become more empowered in their involvement with their child’s education” (Afterschool Alliance, 2012).

Part II: Contextual Factors Affecting Parental Engagement

This section explores the contextual factors that can influence the different levels of parental engagement in youth programs. It is based on Bronfenbrenner's Socioecological Model (1979), which postulates that in order to understand human development, the entire ecological system in which growth occurs needs to be taken into consideration. Much like in his model, the contextual factors presented here — which provide an ever-growing diversity of options and sources for growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) — are categorized into factor subsystems (e.g. Child, Parent, Family and Community). These subsystems provide bi-directional relationships — both away from the individual and towards the individual — that can strengthen or weaken development.

Due to the heterogeneity of each family, the contextual factors explored here may not equally impact all families (Mendez, Carpenter, La Forett, & Cohen, 2009). In addition, families may not perceive certain contextual factors as affecting their involvement in youth programs (Mendez et al., 2009). Therefore, program staff must proceed with caution when assessing each family's circumstances and take into consideration the unique characteristics, needs, and interests of each family.

CHILD FACTOR

AGE

Parental involvement in a child's positive development and academic success dramatically declines as the child gets older (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This decline is especially prevalent when the adolescent

enters high school. Eccles and Harold (1996) suggest that adolescents' need and desire for autonomy is what leads to the gradual detachment from parents. Therefore, the lack of parental involvement may be caused by the adolescents' desire to establish a sense of independence and should not be perceived in negative terms — understanding the increasing need for independence and autonomy on the part of the student and the extent to which that need is respected by the parents will help front-line staff understand the factors influencing parental engagement.

PARENT FACTORS

PARENTAL SELF-EFFICACY

Front-line staff at Pathways to Education suggest that parents have a variety of different assumptions about their role in the program. Some parents may feel the program is better equipped to help their child — especially once the student enters high school, where school work is often perceived by parents as being too advanced, specialized, or technical. As Eccles and Harold (1996) suggest, low parental self-efficacy is associated with parents' low level of education. In addition, parents — especially those who are newcomers to Canada — may have a limited understanding of the Canadian school curriculum. Therefore, some parents believe that a youth program is the only way to ensure their child's positive development and academic success.

PARENTAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

The Harvard Family Research Project (2014) sug-

EFFECTIVE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES ARE ALSO FAMILY-STRENGTHENING PRACTICES — THEY “HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON FOUR MAIN PARENTING PROCESSES: FAMILY ENVIRONMENT, PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS, PARENTING, AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING IN THE HOME AND AT SCHOOL.”

(Casper & Lopez, 2006)



gests that parents with little interest or concern for their child's education are less likely to be involved in youth programs. Parents who have low expectations for their child's education tend to place greater emphasis on the child's employment — perceiving work as a more valuable asset (Nunes, 2004). For example, many Portuguese-Canadian students work long part-time hours because they are expected to abide by their parents' traditional values (e.g., becoming financially independent) (Nunes, 2004). Working long hours in part-time or full-time jobs is thought by many parents to be aligned with these traditional values. Therefore, this emphasis on "earning a living" can devalue the importance of education (Gomes, 2008) and impact the level of parental engagement.

AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING

Authoritative parents are known to enforce strict rules during childrearing (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). This often leads to disruptive parent-child relationships. Steinberg et al. (1992) suggest that adolescents are less likely to desire parental involvement in youth programs if their parents are authoritative because they want to avoid being punished for any negative or unfavourable outcomes that may occur in the program or at school.

LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Immigrant parents may have never been exposed to the education system of their adopted country. They may not know about important requirements and policies (Eccles & Harold, 1996) and, as a result, may

feel comfortable relying on after-school programs or other community supports to guide them and their children through the complexities of the school system.

FAMILY FACTORS

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Parents have many activities and obligations competing for their time and are often unable to commit to youth program events and activities (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014). For instance, in single-parent families the caregiver tends to have multiple jobs to compensate for being the only breadwinner. Parental availability to engage in youth programs is also limited by the number of children in the family (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Larger families tend to have more complex child care needs.

ETHNIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

Many parents experience miscommunication with program staff because they do not speak fluent English/French, and/or have different cultural perspectives on parental involvement and positive youth development (Eccles & Harold, 1996). In some cultures, parents do not consider supporting and enhancing their child's academic success to be a part of their responsibilities as a parent (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES

Parents from a low socioeconomic background tend to be less educated, which may limit the skills and knowledge they can provide to their child for positive development and academic success (Hoover-

Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). They are also likely to have multiple jobs that require long and unpredictable hours, which can interfere with their ability to be involved in the youth program (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

COMMUNITY FACTOR

HIGH-RISK NEIGHBOURHOODS

Families who are actively involved with their child's positive development and academic success use different strategies depending on the resources available in their neighbourhoods (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Families living in under-resourced neighbourhoods rely more on in-home management strategies to help their children develop talents and skills, and to protect their children from the dangers of their neighbourhood (Seginer, 2006). However, more attention is often focused on protecting their children from danger than on helping them develop specific talents and skills. Neighbourhood characteristics have been shown to influence the extent to which parents can successfully translate their general beliefs, goals, and values into effective parenting practices. It is harder to be an effective parent if one lives in a high-risk neighbourhood (Furstenberg, 1993). Such parents often have limited resources available to implement the strategies they deem effective. They are also forced to cope with more external stressors than middle-class families living in stable, resource-rich neighbourhoods (Eccles & Harold, 1996).

PROGRAM FACTOR

LEVEL OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND STAFF BELIEFS

Parents become more involved in their child's positive development and academic success when youth programs actively try to promote engagement (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This requires staff to have positive beliefs regarding the appropriate amount and type of parental engagement needed in youth programs. Knowledge of specific strategies for getting parents more engaged is also important when encouraging parents to play a more active role.

CONCLUSION

This section explored the contextual factors that can influence the different levels of parental engagement in youth programs. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued, observing an individual's entire ecological system allows for a better understanding of development. Youth program staff must be cautious when assessing family circumstances because not all factors may equally impact all families, and some families may not perceive certain factors as affecting their level of engagement in youth programs (Mendez et al., 2009). Therefore, careful consideration of the unique characteristics, needs, and interests of each family is necessary when implementing approaches and strategies to increase parental engagement.

Part III: Approaches and Strategies to Increase Parental Engagement

Research shows that all parents — regardless of income, level of education, or cultural background — want their child to succeed (Henderson & Map, 2002). Studies that assessed programs that engage low-income parents found that almost all parents are willing and able, with training and assistance, to implement practices linked to children’s positive development and academic success (Henderson & Map, 2002). This section outlines approaches and strategies — based on existing research on parental engagement — that can be implemented by youth programs. Practitioner insights from experienced Pathways to Education front-line staff are provided for each strategy.

DEFICIT APPROACH VERSUS STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Youth programs that use a deficit approach aim to “save” adolescents from the negative influences impacting their families (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). These programs tend to enroll parents in adult learning opportunities (e.g., English, GED, job skills training, and parenting courses) to minimize the impact of language barriers, for example, or increase the parents’ overall knowledge and skills. This approach also aims to “cure” families by teaching parents societal and school norms — emphasizing that parents who deviate from these norms negatively affect their children’s academic performance and growth (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006). Although parents can benefit from such learning

opportunities, research suggests that it inadvertently defines parents as subjects that can be manipulated, leaving them without power to position themselves in ways that align with their strengths and views regarding parental roles (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Rather than using this deficit approach, youth programs should embrace the strengths-based approach which views parents as positive contributors to their children’s education, regardless of contextual factors (Kakli et al., 2006). In using this approach, programs become responsive to each family’s individual characteristics, needs, and interests, while empowering them to act on their own and on their children’s behalf. Soliciting family feedback (e.g., having a suggestion box, conducting formal/informal surveys, and hosting family forums or information sessions) on current programming is one example of using the strengths-based approach (Kakli et al., 2006). Taking parents’ feedback into consideration and implementing their ideas ensures that parents see their role as helping to shape not only program goals and activities but also their children’s academic performance (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

STRENGTHS-BASED STRATEGIES

1. PROVIDE FAMILY SUPPORT

Youth programs can serve as neutral ground for

“USING A MULTIFACETED DEFINITION OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUGGESTS THAT FAMILIES’ PARTICIPATION IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LEARNING CAN MOVE FROM MORE BASIC TO MORE ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT. [PROGRAMS] MUST FIRST DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES, CONVEY THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT, AND BUILD A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS FAMILIES’ ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION.”

(Kakli et al., 2006)



parents, allowing them to openly discuss a variety of personal matters, including immigration, relationship challenges, child custody, confusion about educational requirements, and finances. Listening to parents indicates that there is an attempt to understand and relate to their needs and interests — to ensure that they feel respected. When program staff learn about family characteristics and needs, they can then use their knowledge to refer parents to appropriate services and resources in the community (Kakli et al., 2006). Pathways to Education front-line staff indicate that referrals should always be offered as suggestions, not the only way forward in a given situation — it is the parents' decision to take advantage of the referral opportunity or to decline.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

“I refer parents to community resources, where they can get help to pay their hydro bill, if things sort of bottom out and they are in threat of being disconnected.”

“I've been asked for support in dealing with the school, which is part of my role, not just administration and student, but if the communication was lacking between the school and family, or vice versa. There are times that I could be used as someone to accompany the parents to a meeting, or serve as a buffer for the interest of the child.”

“I sent the links [to resources] and I explained what they were, and if they needed any help to please let me know and I would do whatever I could to assist them further.”

“I try to feel out before I make a referral, whether or not that would be welcome [by the parents].”

2. COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

In order to provide family support, youth programs must have strong connections to local organizations (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). For instance, youth programs that work with a culturally diverse population can benefit from seeking information at local organizations that support specific ethnic groups (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). It is also important for program staff to collaborate with school administration and teachers. They can serve as a mediator for parents and children — expressing their school concerns and advocating for or supporting the students' academic needs. By collaborating with local organizations, youth programs can enhance the resources they provide and gain new ideas to help engage parents.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

“I managed to get her out of the program and get all the money back ... then eventually got her

enrolled in a different board that had completely different qualifications for how you get into online learning.”

“When we’re going to meetings or when we’re hearing about things, we’re really trying to think: could this service be helpful to a family or can I make a connection here because otherwise these two people might never have crossed paths?”

“What I think happened is that the parents didn’t get a lot of support early on, probably because of their socioeconomic situation, probably because of some cultural things, and they got pretty frustrated early on and then anytime that they needed to engage with the school system. Then, when parents tried to access resources, they were just so angry [...] I was able to just be that person, like kind of a bridge between the parents and some other resource folks ...”

3. COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

There is growing evidence indicating that personalized, respectful, and ongoing communication with parents can result in trusting relationships (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Personalized communication refers to the use of appropriate and parent-accessible communication methods (e.g., phone calls, emails and

face-to-face meetings). Respectful communication refers to sharing students’ positive progress and achievements with parents, rather than focusing only on negative feedback or concerns, or connecting with parents only when their child is underperforming. Ongoing communication refers to the frequency of the program staff-parent interaction. Front-line staff at Pathways to Education Canada indicate that parents are not always available. Constant attempts to communicate with them can lead to frustration and the deterioration of the trusting relationship. Therefore, they suggest that program staff should let parents dictate how often communication is required.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

“... there is a good amount of time that does go into having to communicate with parents.”

“... there needs to be some kind of responsibility in the sense that we’re here to work together ...”

“I sort of gauge my interaction with parents, I let them set the mode for interaction, and if they don’t want it, then I just don’t pursue it.”

“... the foundation for a parent’s interaction starts with registration and re-registration of participants, and so that is a time when parents have to sign up the student, and that’s when you

make that connection. That's why it's important that the person who [will be working with that student is present at sign-up] because you make that connection where they feel comfortable with you asking questions ..."

"... registration is always the key engaging point where you have a face and a name, and so calling home not long after, let's say, inviting the student to engage in some activity or something, and you talking to mom back and forth [gets easier]. You build that from just an acquaintance level to someone who is sort of trusted to know that you have the child's best interest at heart ..."

"I also like to call home if I have good news ... like if a student has excellent attendance or they are able to follow through with something ... I don't think any kid would object to that."

4. HAVING FAMILY-FOCUSED STAFF

Entrusting individual staff members with the responsibility of involving parents has proven beneficial for many youth programs (Kakli et al., 2006). Research shows that programs with staff dedicated to family involvement are more likely to reach out to families regularly, both formally and informally (Kakli et al., 2006). Programs with designated staff are also more likely to offer program orientations, family

nights, get-to-know-staff events, and information sessions on students' educational options. Program staff can be trained to assess family characteristics, interests and needs, and dedicate their time to address each family's issues and concerns. Having staff that are sensitive to the contextual factors of each family emphasizes that the program perceives parents as important contributors to their children's positive development and academic success. However, having dedicated staff members should not serve as an excuse for other staff members to not work with parents.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

"Having someone who focuses specifically on making phone calls would be very beneficial for the parents who want more interaction. On the other hand, it could be detrimental to the relationship I'm trying to build with the parents."

"If there are too many people involved in the communication with families it can cause confusion. However, I think [having staff dedicated to] the planning of activities or events [for parents] could be helpful. We currently have a member on our team — the mentoring supervisor — who is working on tasks like this, to help increase parental involvement."

"...I don't feel that we've emphasized the parent

part maybe as much as we should. However, this year, at the beginning of the academic year, we have started talking about it more, and we have formed a parent engagement committee, which is great!"

"With staff focused on engaging the parents as well as students the important conversations flow organically."

5. IMPLEMENT PROGRAM QUALITY MEASURES

By actively seeking feedback from parents through the use of satisfaction questionnaires and surveys, youth programs can create a system that directly responds to unique family characteristics, needs, and interests. Asking parents to rate the program on its degree of helpfulness and their satisfaction with assignments and activities, allows parents to have a say in how the program is run.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

"We have attempted to do surveys to find out what parents need from us ..."

"We'll use multiple choice questions for what kind of engagement they would prefer. So it's like, 'once a month', 'once a semester', 'only when necessary', and most parents tend to check off 'only when necessary', but then you

had people who were like 'I would like to hear from the coach every single week' ..."

"... the surveys did give us a little bit better of an idea on what parents are looking for..."

CONCLUSION

In this part, we built on existing literature and practitioner insights to outline approaches and strategies that can be implemented by youth programs to increase parental engagement. Although research and practical knowledge show that these approaches and strategies are effective, many parents can still find it difficult to commit to ongoing engagement in their children's success (Weiss, Lopez, Rosenberg, Brosi, & Lee, 2011). Program staff must have a deep awareness and understanding of the contextual factors that affect parents' abilities to effectively engage in their children's success. This allows staff members to develop the patience and empathy necessary to properly accommodate each family's unique needs, characteristics, and interests (Weiss et al., 2011).

Part IV: Parental Engagement in the Pathways to Education Program

We created Pathways by engaging the community in [an] action research process, along with community based agencies and local schools. After listening to parents, schools, agencies and dozens of young people themselves, graduates and dropouts alike, we learned that the barriers to success were not things that could be addressed solely within the schools (Acker & Rowen, 2013).

The programmatic focus on listening to and understanding parents, families, and their circumstances and needs dates back to the initial community engagement process that led to the development of the Pathways to Education program and its launch, in 2001, in Toronto's Regent Park community. The co-founders of the program, Carolyn Acker and Norman Rowen, developed the program based on an extensive review of relevant research, effective practices, and a series of community focus groups and consultations. By listening to the voices of parents from a variety of backgrounds and cultures (and in their first languages), and to the voices of young people in the community — including those who had left high school early — the founders discovered three key barriers to high school completion: language, subject knowledge, and knowledge of the Canadian education system. The consultations demonstrated that lack of proficiency in English prevented many parents from helping their children with schoolwork. Those who did not identify language as a barrier reported that their own level of education made it difficult to support their children's learning and development. Finally, even when parents possessed the level of education or subject knowledge required to support their children academically, they were not familiar with the education system, its policies, methods of instruction, assessment and evaluation approaches, and expectations. While other barriers emerged through this consultation process — including public transit costs, a culture of low expectations, and affordability of post-secondary education — the voices of parents in the community revealed that they felt

isolated from the school system and from the academic life and experiences of their children. In short, the city's most physically isolated low-income community was also — in the minds of its parents and youth — critically disconnected from the education system and the academic opportunities it provides. The founders of the Pathways to Education program were therefore presented with an opportunity to re-connect these two worlds, to bridge the chasm separating the parents of Regent Park from the academic life of their children.

This report, while short and modest in its scope, shows that the Pathways to Education program has been successful — over the past 15 years and in a number of program locations throughout the country — in engaging families and parents, and in supporting their need to be connected to schools and their children's academic progress and experiences. Parental engagement is an important component of the Pathways to Education program throughout the country. Front-line staff and program administrators connect with parents on a regular basis, organize social and information-sharing events, implement practical parental engagement strategies, form committees to enhance existing programming, and, whenever possible, build lasting relationships with parents. Interviews with Pathways practitioners reveal that program staff are persistent in their efforts to increase parental involvement in the program and the school system, build relationships based on trust, balance the needs of the student with the needs of their parents, learn about the circumstances, characteristics, and needs of the

families they serve, and provide support through formal referrals and informal information-sharing. Pathways practitioners also insist that the sense of connectedness and support can be built only on a case-by-case basis: since every family is different, a customized approach is needed to ensure maximum impact. Interviews with program staff revealed that parental engagement is a crucial aspect of building relationships with Pathways to Education students and is therefore connected to program success. While the focus rests on supporting the students, understanding the students' family dynamics — the environment where they spend most of their time and interact with other adults in their lives — is key to understanding how to best offer that support.

This is not to say that engaging parents in the Pathways to Education program is easy, that all parents want to and can be involved in the daily life of the program and their children's experiences. Pathways staff told us that parents generally fall into three categories: those who are very engaged and stay connected on an ongoing basis (attend all drop-in sessions for parents, return phone calls, initiate conversations with program staff), those who get involved and return phone calls only if there is a concern or a specific need for their involvement (meeting at the child's school that requires parental participation, disciplinary or behavioural issues), and those who are very difficult to reach (do not return phone calls, do not attend any parent-focused events at the program site). In other words, parental engagement is fraught with challenges. This is because individual family circumstances dif-

fer widely: some parents are able to find the time to stay connected with program staff and prioritize these relationships, some are very busy supporting their family financially, and some are overwhelmed by mental health challenges, addiction, medical problems, or legal issues. However, even parents who are unable to provide as much support for their children as they would like appreciate that the program and its staff can step in and offer a network of support while they work to regain full control of their personal lives. While their level of engagement may be low and staff efforts to increase it often unsuccessful, the parents are considered a crucial presence in the student's life and kept informed about their child's progress.

The level of parental engagement with the program is also often defined by cultural backgrounds and beliefs about child-rearing, education, and family life. There are also other challenges: adolescents enjoy independence, taking risks, and learning how to be and act without parental supervision. A strong, consistent programmatic focus on parental engagement can therefore result in alienating some students. A delicate balance is necessary: keeping the parents informed and connected while allowing the students a measure of autonomy and helping them develop a sense of agency and master self-regulation requires expertise in building trusting relationships with students and their families. Interviews conducted for this report revealed that Pathways to Education staff learn to navigate a sinuous, often shifting, demanding, and complex path of relationship-building that prioritizes the student

while respecting, engaging, and often supporting the parents and their own individual needs. In other words, while parental engagement often manifests itself in special parent-focused events, such as drop-in evenings, spaghetti dinners, or registration and information sessions, it is the consistency of ongoing communication and building relationships based on unconditional positive regard, genuine interest, trust, and collaboration with parents that results in growing practitioner understanding of the students' families and their lives outside the program. Time and time again, front-line staff told us the following: the wrap-around approach requires that we understand as much about the students we serve as possible. Their home life and their parents are crucial to "seeing" the whole student.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION PROGRAM

The research findings summarized in Part I of this report are consistent with what we have learned from front-line staff at several Pathways to Education program locations: parental engagement is key to their work, crucial to student success, and part of program culture at every location. Every interviewee emphasized that further improving and expanding the level of parental engagement, both collectively as the Pathways to Education team and as individual program staff, is high on their list of priorities. Many also referred to broader existing or planned internal initiatives designed to enhance parental engagement. These included parent surveys to better understand their needs and understanding of

the program, special internal committees to develop and implement additional parental engagement strategies, and site-based events for parents (e.g. information nights and social dinners). Since the level of parental engagement often depends on the parents' availability, willingness, and interest in being connected to the program, it is viewed as a complex and varied aspect of front-line work. It is generally defined as connecting parents to the school system and helping them navigate it, facilitating and often participating in meetings with school staff, keeping parents informed about their child's progress in the program and at school, and providing referrals to other community services and agencies. However, Pathways to Education staff also spoke extensively about the following three aspects of parental engagement:

1. Collaborating with parents to further enhance the influence of the program on their children;
2. Getting to know the family and the student's home context to better understand the student's immediate environment;
3. Maintaining a difficult balance between keeping the parents engaged and ensuring that their children enjoy a certain degree of independence and autonomy as program participants.

At the individual level, as front-line program staff responsible for providing one-on-one support and mentorship to students in their care, all interviewees explained why they do their best to establish and

“HOW CAN WE BE THERE FOR [PARENTS] AS TRUSTED FRIENDS AND ALLIES IN THE VITAL TASK OF RAISING THIS SOCIETY’S YOUNGEST GENERATION TO BE HEALTHY, CARING, AND RESPONSIBLE? THE ANSWER TO THESE KINDS OF QUESTIONS POINTS TOWARD CREATING COMMUNITIES, ORGANIZATIONS, AND SYSTEMS THAT RECOGNIZE STRENGTHS OF PARENTS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR FAMILY COMPOSITION, CULTURAL BACKGROUND, OR OTHER INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, AND THAT UNDERSTAND THAT PARENTING IS BEST DONE IN THE CONTEXT OF A SUPPORTIVE, ENGAGED COMMUNITY.”

(Roehlkepartain, Mannes, Scales, Lewis, & Bolstrom, 2004)



continually enhance their relationship with parents. While all emphasized how challenging parental engagement can be — especially with parents who face language barriers, juggle several jobs to support their family, or struggle with other challenges, such as addiction or mental health — they also explained that parental engagement is much more than a bureaucratic requirement to keep parents informed. Instead, Pathways to Education program staff see parental engagement as an opportunity to build relationships that can positively impact the student. The barriers many parents face often make it challenging for front-line staff to develop and maintain relationships. However, when those efforts succeed, the relationships that emerge further enhance the positive impact of the program on its student participants.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Parents Extend Program Impact: “We are together, both parent and Pathways working towards a common goal.”

One of the three key findings that emerged from our interviews was that engaged parents can be allies to program staff in supporting the student and enriching programmatic support. Every Pathways to Education program takes this aspect of their work very seriously and every staff member exerts a significant amount of effort to engage parents. When those efforts succeed — and they often do — the pay-off is that yet another adult takes an active interest in the student’s progress, further extends the impact of the wrap-around Pathways to Education

program, and becomes an ally to program staff: “I think a lot of the time the parents have a lot to say in their children’s life, and I feel like if the parents are on board with our organization ... and see value in it, then I feel like that’s going to be getting their child to more sessions and participating.” Pathways to Education program staff see parental engagement as a way to further extend the reach of the program, to ensure that students receive positive reinforcement and encouragement from program staff as well as parents: “I’ve seen changes in some students when the parents are involved. It helps our work as well, and it also shows the student that we all care and that we’re all willing to work together for their benefit.” When parents are involved, front-line staff feel that their work is having a stronger impact, and that their support and message are amplified. When parents are involved,

that gives us extra help in the sense that the message isn’t just coming from us, it’s coming from their parents, or guardians ... I’ve had more success when the message also comes from the parent, or vice versa - the parent gives the message, and then we reiterate the same message to the student. I find it has a stronger impact on them, or a bigger influence in what we’re trying to help them with.

When students do not perform to the best of their ability or do not follow program requirements, front-line staff connect with parents to ensure help with reinforcing the message: “That’s when we’ll start to call the parents and try to get them on

Pathways to Education program staff see parental engagement as a way to further extend the reach of the program, to ensure that students receive positive reinforcement and encouragement from program staff as well as parents.

board to get their child following the process and the rules and regulations, and even just being a little bit more responsible.” Some program staff define this process as collaboration. They see parental engagement as an important component of the program because

when parents aren't involved, then there's no follow-up, there is no one to keep the kids accountable [outside of the program]. There's only so much we can do on our end, there's only so much the schools can do also, so it's only through collaboration with everybody [that success happens], and parents are probably the most major key to student success.

When parents are part of the support process and involved in ongoing communication about student progress, “the students know that conversations with parents are ongoing,” and that “helps with keeping them accountable, and it’s not the same as conversations with teachers which are not as frequent.”

Parental engagement is therefore a “holistic component to supporting the students — if we can really get the buy-in from the parents, it makes getting buy-in from the kids easier.” In several cases, successful examples of parent-program collaboration were described as working as a “unit”: “we are together, both parent and Pathways working towards a common goal.” This type of collaboration also makes the work of Pathways to Education staff easier. Parents are “important communicators” who

provide crucial information and monitor their children and their progress at home: “It’s really about team work: we need to be on the same page here and at home, or else it doesn’t work ... or it would take much more time and energy.”

2. Parents as a Resource: “Tapping into the resources and information that’s there.”

The idea of parents as “important communicators” who can provide additional reinforcement at home and offer support and encouragement by working in tandem with program staff is connected to another one of our findings: parents can be an important resource for program staff. Ongoing relationships with parents provide Pathways practitioners with valuable insights into the family dynamics, characteristics, circumstances, and needs. This, in turn, helps them better understand the student and offer individualized support. When parents are responsive and available, parental engagement efforts often manifest themselves as a relationship-building process initiated and maintained by individual front-line staff members. When successful, this process ensures that front-line staff can customize the program by responding to the needs and characteristics of the family, based on the insights gleaned from sustained relationships with the students and their parents. Parental engagement is therefore key to ensuring effective individualized support for the student:

having that comfort level established and that rapport established with the parent really helps to better understand what's happening and

affecting the student academically. It's really important — the comfort has to be there for the parent to disclose sometimes what is really personal information that's really having a significant impact on the student's performance.

Without these insights, staff may “set and establish ... goals for the student and keep hitting [their] heads against the wall and not understanding why it's not working.” A strong relationship with the family “is really important to make sure that we are tapping into the resources and information that's there.”

Relationship-building with parents generally begins at registration — many Pathways to Education programs ensure that front-line staff are given opportunities to speak with the parents whose children will be part of their case load. After that, program staff build relationships with parents by meeting in person at occasional events, such as BBQs or information sessions, checking in by phone, sending an occasional formal assessment, or providing regular updates whenever appropriate. These often informal but regular opportunities to connect with the family tend to lead to an increasing sense of connection and a building of trust:

I find that it just starts from some point of concern about something that's happening with their kids at school, so it often starts with a conversation and ... a lot of it is trust. Once you show that you care and that you're able to assist in some way, then they realize that you're not just a sym-

bol or something like that, that you actually can accomplish things for them.

This process was often described as building “from just an acquaintance level to someone who is sort of trusted to have your child's best interest at heart.” However, the process of developing trust was also described as a long one. Front-line staff described it as something they have to earn, that takes a significant amount of effort, and is usually earned only after they have had an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the student and his or her family:

Trust is something that builds slowly ... I can't expect that a parent is going to divulge all the information about what is going on in their family right away. So, the families where I'm the most involved are the ones that have been in the program the longest, where I've had the most time to develop a relationship with them ... it's a question of time, and it's also a question of openness and availability.

Often, developing relationships with parents involves providing support that may not focus directly on the student and that may require staff to support parental needs. While some Pathways to Education staff acknowledged that providing support to parents may involve going outside the scope of the program, all interviewees made it clear that supporting parents is a crucial part of relationship-building that helps them better understand the family's needs and circumstances, and that it is closely



**“WITH PARENT ENGAGEMENT, POSSIBILITIES ARE CREATED FOR THE STRUCTURE OF SCHOOLING TO BE FLATTENED, POWER AND AUTHORITY TO BE SHARED BY EDUCATORS AND PARENTS, AND THE AGENDA BEING SERVED TO BE MUTUALLY DETERMINED AND MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL”
(Pushor, 2007).**



connected to providing a better environment for the student:

Although the student is the priority, we're also here to support and refer the parents if we know that they need help and [know] a service that could help them, because we also think of the environment the student is in. If I can help their parent, and that creates a healthier environment at home, then that's part of the job as well.

One of the Pathways to Education program staff described his efforts in mediating between the parents and the school system as “being a buffer”. His well-established relationship with the family provided the kind of insight that the school system simply did not have. Having established trust and learned about the family’s circumstances, he understood the family’s needs and frustrations resulting from a long struggle to secure appropriate services and accommodations for their child. Their needs were finally addressed with his support and advocacy within the school system:

They were able to connect with the mental health services and some other resources that would support their child, and I think if I hadn't taken the time to nurture that relationship over the course of several months, this issue wouldn't be [resolved] today.

Relationship-building is an ongoing, consistent process, and not a series of conversations that take place only when a concern emerges: “It’s about

building a relationship with them so that we’re able to build some trust and really just nurture it and have contact not only when there’s something [wrong] happening.” Interviews with program staff revealed a consistent focus on continually developing their expertise in

connecting with families and connecting with parents when there isn't a need, so just building a relationship and really nurturing the relationships between the parent and us and the student, so that when we have to connect, or when we see that a connection could be made, we've already sort of established some sort of trust or some buy-in, and that's really important.

It is therefore hardly surprising that every program staff member we interviewed mentioned either emerging, ongoing, or well-established initiatives to engage parents more effectively. In short, parental engagement in the Pathways to Education program is a continuous process of ensuring that parents are connected to the program and, if available and willing, can help to extend its reach into the student’s home and allow front-line staff a meaningful glimpse into the student’s immediate environment.

3. Striking a Delicate Balance. “They may not want their parents to know what they’re going through.”

Successful parental engagement also requires a delicate balance to reconcile the student’s need for autonomy with the parent’s right to know and play an active role in their child’s development: “On

Program staff consistently reported that ongoing relationships with parents provide them with valuable insights into the family dynamics, characteristics, circumstances, and needs. This, in turn, helps them better understand the student and offer individualized support.

one hand, if you don't involve the parent and they should be involved, then you're alienating [them] or creating a problem. On the other hand, if you call the parent you might be alienating the student who then won't have anything to do with you anymore." Front-line staff build and protect meaningful relationships with youth. They know that the right level of parental engagement can facilitate further success and expand the student's circle of support, while a stronger focus on parental engagement can jeopardize the relationship with the student and prove insensitive to his or her needs. While staff understand that they can always do more to engage parents, they are also fully aware that a strong relationship with the parent can be a "slippery slope because too much [parental] interaction defeats the purpose of building trust with your students." Adolescents can be suspicious of too much parental participation in the program and resent that focus. Knowing the extent to which front-line staff can engage the parents so that their involvement helps to more effectively support the students and does not alienate them is an important skill. This is of particular importance in situations where "a student and parent don't get along, then you have to almost pick a side ... and the side you pick has to be the student because that's who you need to work with [towards] success."

As a result, while parental engagement is often seen as another resource and potential source of support, it is never a default solution to every challenge. In fact, the staff we interviewed made it clear that the student is always their first priority. When challeng-

es present themselves, the staff have an opportunity to work through them with the student first, and brainstorm solutions together as part of their mentoring relationship. Connecting with parents right away would deprive the student of an opportunity to think through the situation they had found themselves in, explore different ways to move forward, and act on them. It would also deprive staff of a teachable moment — an opportunity to be a mentor and a guide: "A lot of times I try to work out things with students first, and find solutions with them. I'd much rather give them the responsibility over their own behaviour than put it just on their parents."

There is also the question of providing students with the privacy they need to explore their developing identities and attempt independence: "They may not want their parents to know what they're going through ... they'll seek counsel or help from us faster than running to a parent." Staff are sensitive to the fact that parental engagement may impact their relationship with the students — especially older high school students — who enjoy the sense of autonomy that the program provides, including opportunities for self-regulation and decision-making. Front-line staff understand that there are many situations that call for discretion and provide opportunities to offer students support and guidance in a context of a trusting relationship that could be jeopardized by parental involvement: "There are students who confide in us and don't want me to speak with the parent." Since every family situation is different and students have different needs and different relationships with their parents, program staff are very

adept at “having conversations and trying to get a better understanding of what’s happening at home.” This case-by-case approach is a hallmark of the Pathways to Education individualized wrap-around model and ensures that decisions regarding parental engagement are made on an individual basis, once the youth worker has formed a good understanding of the family’s characteristics and needs. In short, knowing how to manage connections with parents and the student’s expectation of independence is an important skill:

In some situations, some information might be really helpful with parents, and in other situations that information may not be an ideal thing to share with the parents, and so I think it’s just on an individual basis trying to gauge [the level of involvement]. Some students don’t enjoy their parents being involved ... they have strained relationships or the family make-up, or whatever’s happening in their family home is already kind of stressful and they don’t want to add something else.

However, whenever more serious issues emerge that require parental involvement for legal reasons or because decisions need to be made in regards to the student’s education, front-line staff are well-prepared to engage parents in ways that will facilitate resolution and still protect the sense of trust inherent in the relationship developed with the student. When students and their families face times of crisis, Pathways to Education staff see their role as that of a connector who, whenever possible and

appropriate, responds to the needs of the family, the student, and everyone invested in the student’s well-being: “in a [crisis] situation, the staff are in constant conversation with those parents.”

CONCLUSION

When meaningful relationships with parents are developed, front-line staff are rewarded with a fuller understanding of the student’s home environment which, in turn, ensures more effective support for the student. Having such insights also translates into opportunities to provide more targeted support for the family, often through referrals. While some parents are direct in asking for help with job searches, resume preparation, or facilitating access to other community services, others will not engage in conversations that they perceive as being beyond the scope of the Pathways program or as particularly private and sensitive. However, program staff who have insights into family circumstances and needs as a result of a well-established and meaningful relationship become aware of the challenges families face, which often involve access to proper housing, family finances, or food security, and they feel compelled to provide support through referrals. Since these challenges are private family matters, front-line staff let the parents know that, as a community program, they can facilitate referrals and do so in sensitive ways that respect the family’s privacy and sense of agency. Staff told us that they “can only recommend and encourage” parents to access relevant resources in the community and “leave that door open so that they know it’s ok to connect if

Adolescents can be suspicious of too much parental participation in the program [...] Knowing the extent to which front-line staff can engage the parents so that their involvement helps to more effectively support the students and does not alienate them is an important skill.

need be.” Pathways staff recommend services, provide information, and let the parents decide. They ensure that parents know “that this is a safe space and a familiar space, and they can access resources, and we are here to help in any capacity that we can.” Program staff proffer assistance but also “leave it up to parents to contact us if they think that there’s something else that we can do.” The success behind effective parental engagement is therefore defined in terms of effective relationship-building, developing trust, and engaging with each family and student as unique individuals with their own characteristics and circumstances:

There is no blanket solution because anything dealing with people breaks down to a case-by-case situation, and so the key is to just reach out and connect with the parent if possible, and if you see that the parents do not want to be engaged, then you don’t push ... let them set the mode for what they want.

Throughout the interviews, the three themes outlined above were a consistent presence. We learned that parental engagement is a key relationship for program staff, and that it is never taken for granted. While the extent to which families are willing or able to engage with the program varies and is often beyond the control of program staff, the commitment of Pathways to Education staff to engaging families and working with them for the benefit of their children can be described as unwavering and sustained. The words “relationship” or “relationship-building” were used frequently to describe parental

engagement. The challenges of engaging parents and building lasting relationships with families were certainly addressed, but we heard much more about what is being done to build bridges, facilitate understanding, initiate conversations, and deliver the program with parents as partners — and, in fact, build a better program and customize it to the needs of each student — by building on the insights gleaned from parental engagement. Effective parental engagement is about working with parents to extend the reach of the program into the home environment, learning with and from each family, and successfully reconciling the parent’s right to be involved and the student’s need for privacy and independence. Pathways to Education front-line staff have collectively told us that, when implemented well, parental engagement allows them to provide better support to the student.

Part V: Recommendations for Successful Implementation

The following section provides recommendations for youth programs interested in increasing parental engagement. Each family has its own unique characteristics, needs, and interests — engagement approaches and practices should be tailored accordingly. It is important to remember that even with careful consideration, recommendations may still prove ineffective because of contextual factors.

FAMILY SUPPORT

- When appropriate, refer families to community resources that can help with housing expenses, employment, mental and physical health concerns, and other information.
- Offer to connect parents to adult education classes, based on interests and needs.
- Provide workshops, handbooks, or pamphlets that help families understand how the program and school systems work.
- Provide workshops or other sessions that teach parents how to advocate for children at school.

COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

- Discuss individually with parents their child's needs, interests, challenges, accomplishments, and opportunities.
- Provide orientation or introduction materials about the program.
- Initiate general information phone calls to parents.
- Send home flyers, newsletters, and bulletins about the program.
- Whenever possible, ensure that initial registration is processed by staff who will be working with the student throughout the year. This provides a good opportunity for introductions and rapport-building.
- Incorporate positive aspects or achievements of the student into all communication with parents.
- Share common goals with parents (e.g., the positive development and academic success of the child).

- Allow parents to set the mode for verbal and written interaction and the extent of their engagement.
- Respect the level of autonomy desired by students.
- Hold listening sessions where parents can voice their concerns and hopes for their children.
- Openly discuss the program's mission, goals, and strategies with families, through orientations, open house events, newsletters, and emails.
- Select meeting times that accommodate parents' availability.
- Avoid the use of educational jargon or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to parents.
- Provide translators for parents to ensure that limited proficiency is not a barrier.
- Conduct periodic family orientations to familiarize new families with program staff.

FAMILY-FOCUSED STAFF

- Train staff to accurately assess and address contextual factors that exist within each family.
- Ensure that all staff are dedicated to interacting with parents.
- Have a parental engagement committee dedicated to scheduling and planning activities and events specifically for parents.

IMPLEMENT PROGRAM QUALITY MEASURES

- Provide questionnaires and surveys in multiple languages.
- Implement the results of questionnaires and surveys. Keep in mind the varying characteristics, needs, and interests of each family — not every family will benefit from new or all strategies.

“AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS ARE ABLE TO TRANSCEND [...] DIVIDES, OFFERING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PARENTS CAN FEEL AT EASE; PROVIDING PARENT-RELATED ACTIVITIES AND FAMILY SERVICES DURING TIMES MORE ACCESSIBLE TO WORKING PARENTS; OFFERING RESOURCES TO HELP PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION; AND PROVIDING PARENTS WITH THE TOOLS TO BECOME MORE EMPOWERED IN THEIR INVOLVEMENT WITH THEIR CHILD’S EDUCATION.”

(Afterschool Alliance, 2012)



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