

Introduction

Growing up, I'm not sure that my parents came to my school more than twice a year. Once for the parent teacher conference or open house and once for the one time per year that I was either sick or injured and needed to go home. If you ask my mother, to this day, she will say that she NEVER helped me with my homework. She couldn't tell you the difference between the PTO, the PTA, or a UFO for that matter.

My parents worked hard. They both spent 40+ hours at work each week, volunteered regularly within the community and at our church, and were known around the neighborhood to be a good place to get a hot meal and a kind or inspiring word. They provided me with structure, discipline, and a foundation of faith and strong character.

If you were to present the first paragraph as a description of my parents to a group of educators, they would likely tell you that they have a room full of parents like this. You would probably hear words as kind as "absentee" or as harsh as "apathetic." You might even believe that my parents were unengaged, passive, or potentially neglectful. However, the second description paints the picture of upstanding community members: law-abiding, tax-paying, good-hearted family leaders. The inconsistency of perception of these portraits is one of the reasons why I desired to create this book.

Data on parent and family engagement are undeniable. The research on how effective engagement is in the overall success of children has been around for decades. Parents know they need to "help." Furthermore, a recent study conducted by NBC News Education Nation states that schools know that they need parents (NBC News Education Nation, 2014). Even so, there is a critical missing link. Educators are not taught to engage parents and parents are not taught to be teachers. The bridge between school and home has to be created, implemented, and maintained through a comprehensive approach to considering all perspectives and removing barriers to engagement.

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The challenge is real.

Not only do most major universities do a poor job of providing undergraduate education majors with instruction on supporting positive parent and family engagement, with more pressure than ever being placed on schools to “perform,” less money is spent on professionally developing these educators once they are teaching. Most professional development time is devoted to standard instructional methods and, perhaps, behavior management. Many educators enter the classroom either fearful of dreaded parent interactions or committed to working around parents, sure that they will never be supported the way that they need to be.

Parents, though they most often mean well, feel less equipped than ever to support schools. Common Core has thrown many parents for a loop, and the additional pressures of maintaining a home while living the American dream leave very little time, resources, or confidence for parents, even those who want to provide educators with the support for which they long. Beyond volunteering for a school field trip or selling a few fundraising items, many parents can feel ill-equipped for the task of educating their children.

On a recent evening, I entered the office of a school leader to be part of a case conference committee for a kindergarten student. I had known this student’s mother for several months and was eager to have this meeting, because this student was making such strides. I had, and still have, nothing but hope for his future. My hopes were not always this strong, given that when I met him for the first time, his reputation had preceded him to the point where I recognized him simply by his refusal to come in from recess when I saw him from my office window.

His mother, who has three other children, two older and one younger, works third shift and started the meeting by saying that, at 4 p.m., she had yet to go to sleep from her last shift and would be beginning her next one in a couple of hours. I appreciated her honesty. She was tired. She was not dismissive of the process but was sharing her need in that moment. In true counselor fashion, I led with empathy, affirming how difficult it must be to function on no sleep and that I appreciated her willingness to be there. With no ill intention, a teacher in the room offered that this would be a long meeting, mainly because there was a lot to go over. I was surprised that she did not recognize that she was being dismissive, primarily because that is not her nature. But it is a clear example of how the process can get in the way of the progress. In that moment, our primary goal was to build the case conference committee team. Establishing a relationship is key to any successful team or group dynamics. Had we been speaking with a less supportive mother, I know that that statement could have cost us.

However, the relationship with this mom was strong and she brushed it off. Not only have I personally been to her home, meeting with her family, immediate and extended, but she also knows I care for her son and she has seen that he cares for me. Her son has struggled for years through day care, preschool, and a previous elementary school that “suggested” that she take her son home and not bring him back. Home life and family functions have been nearly impossible as well. Her belief that we have not given up on her son had bought us some grace.

As we got into the meeting, going through psychologist reports, assessments, and data, there was so much material to grasp. I interjected every once and a while to confirm that mom was still with us. I was pleasantly surprised each time that she was not only with us but had done her homework and read through all of the materials prior to the meeting. She came prepared with questions, none written, but as we reached each section where there was a question, she felt comfortable to ask.

Then we reached the point where you could tell that her understanding of all of her then-answered questions and the material that was placed before her, including the proposed individualized education plan, had sunk in. She asked the simple question, “Is he going to have to repeat kindergarten?”

This question was so simple. She wanted to know if her son would be able to keep up with his peers. The greater question is unspoken. She wanted to know about her son’s future.

A few hesitant educators around the table not quickly responding “No” led her to continue.

“I mean, I just want him to take it seriously. If he has to repeat, it won’t really hurt him. But I know he’s smart and I just want him to be here and learn.”

And there you have it.

What I have said from the beginning. What I know to be true. The basis for all that I do in my work with parents.

She has a dream for her son.

She wants what’s best for her son.

She wants him to be successful.

She cares.

Now if you pulled this student’s records and looked at them in black and white, you might disagree with me. You would see dozens, yes, dozens of absences. You would see no early interventions prior to kindergarten. You may even deem his home life as, shall we say, less than traditional.

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Just like my first description of my parents, on paper, this mother looks like many marginally interested, minimally involved parents who drive educators up the wall.

But she cares.

This leads me to the essential, driving force behind this book. Contrary to the educational world years ago, the role of the modern-day educator has evolved, and a renovation of the approach to parent and family engagement must occur. Educators have to work harder to eliminate judgment and blame from tainting our perspective. We are tasked with undoing years of distrust and negative media attention that tints the view that many parents have of traditional educational models. To minimize, insult, or alienate parents, even when we feel that their behavior is negatively impacting the child, is a counterproductive task that has to stop. Much like a successful co-parenting relationship, our role must be to connect with the dream that the parent has for their child and use it to build a path, brick by brick, that will pave the way to our student's brightest future.

The process of undoing ineffective patterns of behaviors is a daunting one. Adapting a collaborative care approach designed by medical professionals to systematically produce productive behaviors is the foundation for this book. The following chapters will walk you step by step from initial evaluation of parent and family engagement efforts through enhancing program outcomes with sustainability in a format that will challenge, enlighten, and empower you. These tools have been battle tested on schools just like yours: poor, underperforming rural schools; thriving urban and suburban buildings; elementary, middle, and high schools; and unique combinations of multi-age-level buildings as well. Many face the same challenges that you do: shrinking budgets, low staff morale, and parents who are so jaded about education or overwhelmed by life that getting them engaged seems an impossible task.

I am reminded of a recent visit I made to the home of a client. Not having visited the home before, I typed the address into my GPS. I followed the directions turn by turn, right up to the moment where I was met with a road closed sign. According to my GPS, the house was literally within walking distance of this sign, yet I could not drive through. The construction extended itself in the most unfortunate pattern, making all through streets impassible. Finally, after re-navigating multiple times and coming from a completely different direction, I arrived at the house. I was angry that the client had not warned me about the dreadful construction that had wasted my time and my gas.

My GPS was not aware of the road closure. It did not take into account the roadblocks that I would encounter. My client, who likely did not generally

take my path and who was familiar with the neighborhood in which she lived, did not think about the roadblock as a challenge. She knew how to navigate the path. She held the tools to navigate the journey but was unaware of the need to provide me with those details.

The following week when I returned for another visit, instead of using the map, I tried to retrace my steps using the landmarks that I had seen leaving the previous visit. With ease, I was able to identify that although two of the more common entry points to the street were blocked, there was a completely accessible entry point that brought me nearly effortlessly to the door. What I realized in this moment was that even though the path I thought I needed had been blocked, there was still a path that got me where I needed to be.

Modern education is often much like a trip to an unfamiliar address. We have a general idea of how to get where we need to go, even tools to use to get us there. We know our students need basic skills and we have a general idea about how to get them there, but with challenges like poverty, limited language, or family and social concerns, not to mention larger-scale problems like systemic racism, we feel like we have reached an insurmountable roadblock. The purpose of *Authentically Engaged Families: A Collaborative Care Framework for Student Success* is to provide you with not only a road map but more of a guided tour that takes into account the roadblocks and street closures that you may encounter, as well as shortcuts to make your trip easier.

By utilizing the collaborative care model, which has been effective for many years in the medical world, we have created a simple Vision, Plan, Action method to make this process both user-friendly and reproducible. In addition to my own experience in and around school buildings, after-school programs, and community organizations, I have also collaborated with several schools to test these theories ethnographically.

As a follow-up to my first story about the kindergarten student, let me add that while he has not graduated yet, the process yielded a diagnosis that prompted his mother to seek additional resources. She has advocated for him to have additional interventions and he is doing well.

A WORD ABOUT COLLABORATIVE CARE

I became aware of the collaborative care model while working in home-based therapy. My primary role was providing therapeutic interventions to families involved in Department of Children's Services (DCS) cases. As you can imagine, the needs are high. The stakes are higher, and often we are dealing with complex challenges and less than enthusiastic participants.

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When a family has entered the “system,” they are given a caseworker in the DCS office. Then they will most often be given a therapist, a home-based case manager, a social worker, a guardian ad litem for the children, and even more. If the children are removed from the home, there will be foster or relative caregiver placements and a set of providers for them as well. All of these people coordinate with the original DCS caseworker to make sure that the family gets the support that they need. In the behavioral health industry, collaborative care has been widely recognized as one of the most effective models of managing the treatment of patients with complex mental health needs. Particularly, when working with patients who are impacted by multiple diagnoses, limited resources, or other extenuating circumstances, the collaborative care model pushes for an “all hands on deck approach.”

In my communication with many educators, especially those who believe in providing support services to students and families, they often struggle with identifying where to draw the line. Things like scope of practice, experience, and even just time management can make it very difficult for anyone to feel like they are making the progress that they need to make. Traditionally, the relationship between parents and families and schools is more hierarchal in that the school is seen as the authority. The collaborative care model brings all the players to the table and allows us to identify strengths and challenges proactively with a team approach.

Traditionally, there are a minimum of three roles on the collaborative care team: one being a primary care physician, one being case management personnel, and a consultant who is aware of the needs of this particular patient and has a specialized set of skills for providing care. The benefits in the mental health world are amazing. Things like decreased depression and reduced need for medication have led to recommendations for this model to be the practice of choice. It can be more cost-effective, and all participants feel more supported, which leads to better results.

In many instances, however, the team is much larger. The multidisciplinary nature of the team allows for a variety of “experts” to impact individual patients on a deeper level. There can be therapists, specialists, and advocates who also contribute. The idea is that if we all come to the table, tell what we know, and use our individual strengths, we can all make the most of the time we have with the patient. By sharing information with each other, there can be a greater ability to make connections with the patient as well, helping to eliminate duplication and saving time.

Using the collaborative care framework as a guide, each student would essentially become the “patient.” Parents are in the role of primary care physician, and teachers become case managers. Support personnel like counselors, aids, and others are consultants, utilize their knowledge

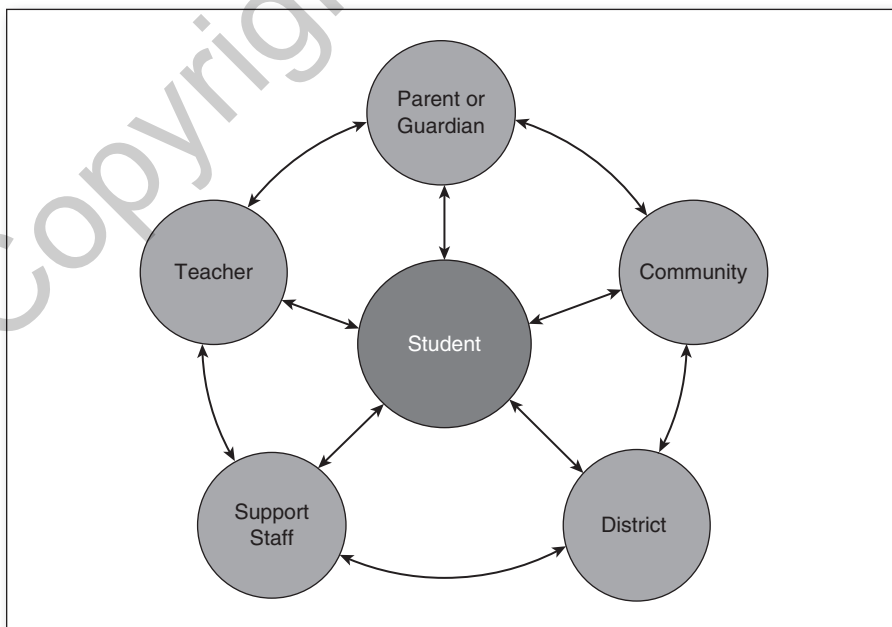
of the student and his or her needs to positively impact conversations. When we look at parent and family engagement under this model, it changes drastically. We go from telling parents what *we* need from them to having honest conversations about what our students need from the “team.” In Figure I.1, you will see a visual representation of the collaborative care approach to engaging families.

My theory is that by taking on some of the attributes of this approach, we can apply them to the way we advocate for student success. By implementing the spirit of collaborative care into the framework of the school, this approach will remove the “us” and “them” of the current educational model and take on the true team approach, with less concern for roles and more attention to outcomes.

If you think about it, this makes perfect sense in an educational setting. For example, if you have worked in special education for any length of time, collaborative care may feel familiar. In many ways, a similar approach comes into play with students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The system of assessing students on multiple facets then bringing together all the stakeholders has been shown to be an effective method of supporting the complex dynamics associated with students who have special education needs.

In terms of parent engagement, each family is indeed its own system. We have students who come to us to learn a variety of things, academics,

Figure I.1 The Collaborative Care Framework



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social skills, and emotional development. Some come with a strong foundation, others with no preparation at all. Ultimately, teachers are tasked with teaching children and providing the instruction that will take them from where they are to where they need to be, but expecting the teacher to do it alone is ludicrous. Parents bring their children to us to facilitate learning. Integrating the needs of the student and family with the goals of the teachers and school was described by one writer as an intricate dance in that it requires knowledge of technique with personalized artistic flair. The traditional model of parent engagement, where schools provide standard resources to all families and request certain behaviors in return, does very little to establish a team atmosphere that is specialized for individuals.

THE VISION, PLAN, ACTION METHOD

Throughout this book, you will see me refer to VPA; this stands for vision, plan, and action. The Vision, Plan, Action model for approaching parent engagement is a general approach to hold ourselves accountable for the statements, decisions, and behaviors we exhibit when seeking to connect with families. While we work through the chapters of this book, I will ask you to self-reflect on each by addressing the following criteria:

- *Vision*—Create a shared, realistically achievable vision to be used as an anchor point for the formal engagement plan
- *Plan*—A formalized document with actionable points agreed upon by all stakeholders
- *Action*—Specific points of activity and behavior that can be monitored for accountability and effectiveness

The reflection questions will help lead you to the creation of a successful family engagement plan. By beginning with the end in mind and collaborating with stakeholders to create a shared vision, educators can effectively plan for the completion of activities that promote that vision and take on specific action points that can be easily monitored and adjusted for maximum success.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Let me begin by saying that whenever you see the word “parent” in this book, it is taken to mean the person or persons in the position of parenting your student. At times, this may be a grandparent, sibling, extended family

member, foster parent, or some combination of the previously mentioned family members. At times, I will use the term “parent and family” and at other times, simply “parent”; the terms are used interchangeably and are never meant to exclude anyone who may be providing care for your students.

This book is the culmination of years of research, a passion for supporting and empowering parents and families, and a desire to enhance the preparation of teachers who want to do the same. Because traditional teacher education programs in this country are doing a less than stellar job of preparing fledgling educators with the skills to effectively communicate and collaborate with parents, there is a great need to fill the gap for new hires. However, many seasoned educators are also yearning for a fresh approach, based on research but realistic in implementation. Most importantly, it comes from a place of wanting all students to be holistically supported as they develop their unique gifts and knowing that doing this effectively requires more than what we as educators can do alone.

This book is written from my perspective as a parent, counselor, and professional parent coach working with a variety of families in and out of school settings. Professional school counselors, social workers, teachers, administrators, Title I interventionists, and parent and teacher organizations will all find tools in this book that can impact practices and streamline systems of engaging families. This book can be used to guide the creation of a formal engagement plan or simply for individuals looking to add strategies to an existing plan. My goal with this book is to make the significant research available on parent and family engagement more user-friendly by highlighting ways in which I or other professionals have used it in tangible, practical ways.

Whenever I conduct a training session, write a blog, or even when I have general conversations in session with clients, it is my hope that I share both information and inspiration with whomever I encounter. This book is no different. If you have a thirst for information on engaging parents and families, there is a foundation of theory and basic practices. In this book, you will find that I spend just enough time on the overview of the standard material while providing the tools for further research if needed. As a practicing educator, I know many schools, particularly those with high needs, find much of the theoretically based material to be accurate but lacking concrete application techniques. My goal for this book is simple. If you are in a Title I school, alternative school, online school, or, like me, work in a school where 70 percent of your families speak a language other than your own, you will see some tips you possibly have not considered. My hope is that you have a new passion for connecting with families in spite of the challenges. My desire is that the tools here will save

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you a few late nights of research and prevent you from being frustrated by inconsistent results from practices that are not meeting your needs. But most importantly, my hope is that, with the help of this book, partnerships will be formed that leave all involved changed for the better.

The book is designed to walk you through all of the things you should consider when writing a formal parent engagement plan. While these plans are not necessarily required for schools, I believe that without a formal plan, schools are reduced to inconsistent random acts of engagement, which do very little to create the team atmosphere that we want with ALL families. Throughout this book, you will find templates and examples, suggestions and ideas, and hopefully simple ways to take the abstract concepts of relationship building and make them more achievable. As often as possible, these ideas have been tested by me or other colleagues with whom I am fortunate enough to work; however, in full disclosure, there are a few that are currently on my wish list and have not been completed as of this publication. I recommend that you mark in this book, use the reflection questions to fine tune your vision and spark your imagination, and let this book be a tool that you use like a great cookbook. Take the “recipes” and add your own special touch so that your staff and families’ needs can be accounted for. Reach out to me and let me know how it’s going. I love to hear from you, and I am always happy to give feedback regularly on my Facebook and Twitter accounts. So without further ado, let’s begin, at the beginning.