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Authentic Family Engagement in Michigan

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WHY FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

Engaging families to work in partnership with schools and communities improves the chances for student success in school, and throughout their lives. Family engagement promotes student equity, which is crucial to the nation's increasingly diverse student body.

Involving families in their students' education in a meaningful way can be challenging for state agencies and school districts that are looking to simply meet a "family engagement" requirement.

By reframing how staff think about family engagement and infusing guiding principles throughout health and education systems, families can be partners in their students' education and well-being.

With support from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, Michigan is doing groundbreaking work at the state level to infuse family engagement principles across state agencies. Through cross-agency collaboration, Michigan has developed an instrument to measure attitudes and beliefs toward engaging families.

This innovative work is beginning to influence how schools in Michigan are engaging with families, with Saginaw Public School District's implementation of family engagement practices showing promising results.

MICHIGAN BUILDS THE FOUNDATION FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Michigan is leading the way in instilling family engagement principles throughout state education agencies and local education agencies (LEAs). With the award of a Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grant, the state began to take a closer look at how family engagement was taking place across their state departments and within local schools. The first step was having open discussions about family engagement among different agencies—breaking down siloes and working collaboratively across departments. By involving multiple state agencies, braiding funding streams, and collaborating among grant programs,¹ Michigan is making strides in assessing and promoting family engagement statewide.

Michigan has a novel but common-sense approach to authentic family engagement. State staff have discovered that it is imperative to first determine staff attitudes and beliefs about engaging families before embarking on family engagement initiatives at the state, intermediate, or local levels. If staff attitudes and beliefs are negative, those need to be addressed before family engagement programming is implemented. A key way to do this is by committing to professional development with staff to help them reframe any negative beliefs about families.

¹ The grant programs are as follows: SS/HS, Project AWARE, and Race to the Top.

To support its ongoing family engagement work, Michigan is developing a philosophical statement that can be used as a standard to follow when the commitment to family engagement gets off track. Input from stakeholders identifies respect, transparency, and empathy as key concepts that will be included in the philosophy statement.

The Michigan approach to family engagement was developed by Barb Flis, Founder of Parent Action for Healthy Kids and Family Engagement Specialist for the State's SS/HS grant. Flis helped the three LEAs that were funded through SS/HS—Education Achievement Authority of Michigan, Houghton Lake Community Schools, and Saginaw Public Schools—integrate family engagement into all of their SS/HS work. Flis also developed the Family Engagement Perception Instrument (FEPI) under a previous Michigan Department of Education grant, Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and then refined and tested the instrument for her work with SS/HS.

The FEPI, a six-question instrument, can be used at the state, intermediate, and local levels to assess staff who serve children and families in any setting. Flis is developing a user's guide for the FEPI along with self-scoring instructions that empower development of action steps. The three SS/HS LEAs have used the FEPI to advance their family engagement work and operationalize the family engagement principles that were created at the state level.

Based on each school's collective FEPI results, Flis provides professional development to district leaders and school coaches, and guides districts' strategic planning work in family engagement. For example, Flis recently attended a luncheon at a school for parents and staff to discuss family engagement. She wrote recommendations that include next steps and ways to promote positive energy between the schools and families. This work has led to family engagement becoming a part of the district's strategic plan, with full buy-in from district leadership, which is critical to the success of schools fully implementing authentic family engagement.

INFUSING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT SS/HS

Element 3 of Safe Schools/Healthy Students is focused on "Connecting Families, Schools, and Communities," but family engagement must be woven into all of the elements if it is to be truly meaningful. To this end, the three SS/HS LEAs have worked to include families in their discussions and planning around all of the SS/HS elements, including mental health, substance abuse prevention, and school climate.

To support this work, SS/HS State Coordinators Shawn Cannarile from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and Elizabeth Newell from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) purposefully promote and support family engagement in SS/HS at the state and LEA levels. Their work includes the following:

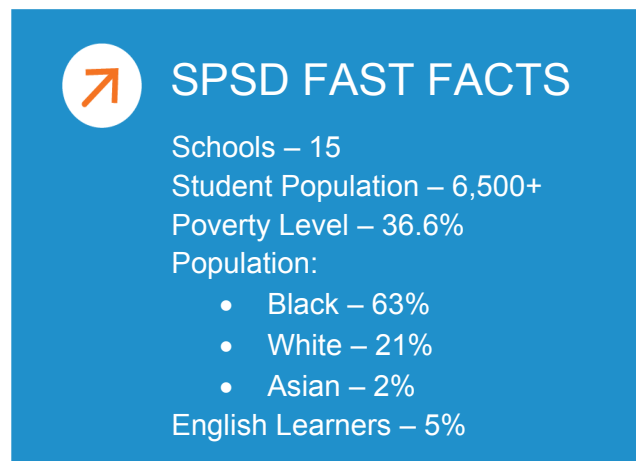
- Ensuring that family engagement receives ample time and effort in the SS/HS grant at the state level;
- Advocating for family engagement within their SS/HS-funded schools;
- Seeking out the state-level departments doing family engagement work and building connections by finding commonalities; and
- Forming the Michigan Health and Education Partnership, a collaborative group of stakeholders who became early adopters of the family engagement efforts.

When reflecting on these efforts, Newell goes back to the importance of understanding staff perceptions about family engagement: “I learned in this process the importance of stepping back to evaluate our assumption that staff are functioning with positive beliefs and attitudes about families,” she says. “It really emphasized how a staff member’s mindset can positively or negatively influence their approach to authentically engage families.”

WHEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BECOMES A PRIORITY, SUCCESS FOLLOWS

SS/HS-funded Saginaw Public School District (SPSD) made a full commitment to family engagement, and their efforts have been fruitful. As a former S3 grantee who had worked with Flis, they fully capitalized on her expertise and together formed a true, bidirectional partnership.

“This work is about a shift in energy around engaging families from negative to positive,” Flis explains. “Through S3, Saginaw understood the potential this could have for the school and community and went full speed ahead.”



Building on the work started with S3 at their high school, Saginaw used the SS/HS funding to gain momentum and move family engagement forward using a strategic approach. This approach included hiring a Family & Community Engagement Specialist, conducting an environmental scan, and creating a logic model. The district also administered FEPI to all staff, which allowed each school to understand their own, unique strengths and challenges before embarking on any initiative to promote family engagement. Flis provided professional development to district leaders and staff, conducted “lunch and learn” sessions for staff and parents about family engagement, and provided recommendations to help Saginaw refine their efforts along the way.

Tiffany Pruitt, the Saginaw Family & Community Engagement Specialist, worked to engage families and community members into SS/HS efforts by training parent leaders on the grant’s initiatives. This has resulted in, for example, families and community embracing restorative practices, which have become the default strategy when conflict arises.

Both Flis and Pruitt say they have learned from each other. “It was easy to see Tiffany had the passion,” says Flis. “I often say engaging families is hard work and ‘heart work,’ and Tiffany has certainly taken that to a new level.”

Flis began to see the effects that her work with the district were having, as well as a pathway for future efforts. “The ‘aha’ moment came when I heard common language in the district around engaging families,” she recalls. “That was when I knew the development and adoption of a philosophical belief statement on family engagement was needed. Whether it is state to local or local to parent, it becomes a true partnership when we listen and learn from each other.”

This [video](#) describes the evolution and successes of family engagement in Saginaw.

For other school districts looking to improve their family engagement, Flis advises, “This work on family engagement is not about meeting requirements. Don’t overlook the value of meaningful engagement in a rush to meet requirements; family engagement is not a token. We need to gain parents’ trust and embed their thoughts in our planning.”

BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STATEWIDE

“Bidirectional communication is crucial. Just unloading information and data on schools and parents is counterproductive to building partnerships.”

**—Barb Flis, Founder
Parent Action for Healthy Kids**

Flis says the energy around family engagement is building throughout Michigan. “We are showing our successes to all of the state agencies so we can get their buy-in on the approach and philosophy. Especially with our local communities, we can showcase how family engagement can be successful. We are working to scale this work up to the intermediate school district level to reach as many districts as possible,” she states.

“Family engagement is a priority for the Every Student Succeeds Act, so we are ahead of the curve. We will continue to work tirelessly on family engagement across agencies and bring it to new districts,” continues Cannarile.

In summarizing the lessons learned thus far regarding family engagement in Michigan, Cannarile concludes, “The lesson we are learning at the state level is that the shift in mindset is key. We learned to understand the support we need and the work we must do with families to get their buy-in. It’s about so much more than just having families show up at meetings. We have redefined our vocabulary around family engagement, we are having thoughtful conversations, and we are creating relationships. Families can be heard, and they need to have a voice. We must be transparent and build trust and embed families’ voices in all of our practices.”

Michigan’s urgency to gain access at all levels is about sustainability. As Flis puts it, “The time has come to give family engagement an equal seat at the table.”

It looks like Michigan is certainly well on their way to doing just that.