Utah State Board of Education

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT GUIDE
MENTORING MODELS, WELCOMING COMMITTEES AND LANGUAGE SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

Local education agencies (LEAs) work to identify strategies that best meet the needs of their communities. Parent, family, and community engagement continue to be central to the conversation. This guidance will provide strategies and models to help LEAs support the influx of new families as they enter the school community.

WELCOMING FAMILIES

Culture is important as LEAs consider a mentorship model. Culture can influence communication style, perceptions of authority, approaches to problem solving and learning, and even how success and failure are defined (Raines, 2024). While people often think of culture as applying to a racial or ethnic context, culture applies to other groups and subgroups of people and communities. Culture is formed when there is a shared perception and behavior of a group of people; culture is learned, shared, can vary by individual, and influences how individuals think, feel, and behave.

Utilizing a mentorship model and a welcoming committee can help new families more quickly join and adopt norms and expectations of the school community.

When individuals enter a new environment or culture, the process of acculturation starts. Acculturation is a process of social, psychological, and cultural change that stems from the balancing of two cultures while adapting to the prevailing culture of society.

The Community Cultural Wealth Model (University of California, Merced, n.d.) identifies that all communities have strengths and talents and finds ways to leverage them in new and creative ways. An asset or strength-based model or Culturally Aware Mentorship (CAM) (Womack et al., 2020) can utilize these strengths and talents to build on family hopes and dreams (aspirational capital), the historical or traditional knowledge that families come with (familial capital), the communication experiences and skills that can help bridge communication gaps (linguistic capital), building and/or leveraging existing networks (social capital), experience and knowledge on how to navigate new systems and a new culture

(navigational capital), and the ways in which mentors dealt with hardship (resistance capital).
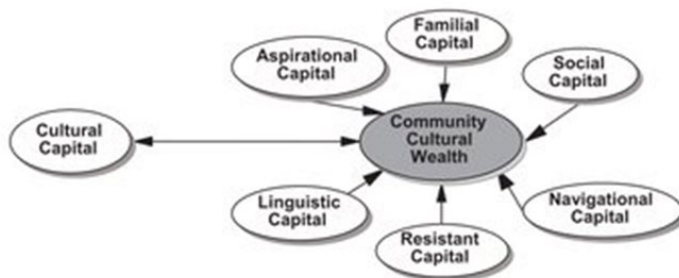

Figure 2. A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from: Oliver & Shapiro, 1995

Parents and families can be empowered to utilize their experiences to model for and support other families engaging with a new school system.

Research surrounding hope (Fosness, 2022) has found that hope is as much of a predictor of positive academic outcomes, graduation rates, and a positive life trajectory as a state assessment. Research surrounding family and community engagement has indicated that family and community engagement is as much a predictor of school turnaround as curriculum. By utilizing a strength-based approach and a mentorship model, LEAs can support families, maintain hope, resilience, and support a student's pathway towards completion of the Success Sequence.

An additional resource to engage families learning English is the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition EL Family Toolkit Tip Sheets webpage.

LEA OBLIGATIONS

Under state and federal laws LEAs have obligations to engage parents and families.
- Title I: Parent and Family Engagement Section 1116(a)(3) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires an LEA with a total Title I allocation exceeding $500,000 to reserve at least one percent of its total Title I allocation to carry out parent and family engagement activities under section 1116 of the ESEA.
- Utah 2023 ESEA: To promote parental, family, and community participation in language instruction educational programs for parents, families, and communities of English Learners (EL).

- Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), public schools must ensure students who are EL can participate meaningfully and equitably in educational programs. This can include home language surveys and identification, providing language assistance to students who are EL's including providing access to EL programs with sufficient (high-quality) resources, avoiding unnecessary segregation, and compliance with special education requirements related to Child Find.
- Special Education: Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) LEAs are responsible to ensure parent participation in evaluation, eligibility determinations, and development of individualized education programs (IEPs) (34 CFR § 300.322).

Engaging parents and families through mentoring, welcoming committees, and language services will expedite the involvement and meet legal expectations.

PARENT AND FAMILY MENTORSHIP MODEL

PROGRAM STRUCTURE OVERVIEW

An LEA would designate a staff, preferably a parent or family engagement specialist or liaison, that would work with the first cohort of family members. This staff member would work to train the first cohort mentors to:

(1) design the mentorship program,

(2) establish onboarding and outreach procedures, and

(3) train the mentors on essential skills they will need to ensure new families are able to develop during the mentorship process.

After one year, the assigned LEA staff member will begin transitioning the responsibilities to the first cohort mentorship group. This shift aims to make the program parent and family owned and led, with ongoing oversight and support from the LEA staff member. The goal is to help to welcome new families in the school community.

PARTNERSHIPS AND RECRUITMENT

Partnerships for the mentorship program should include:

(1) agencies or organizations that the target demographic engages with already;

(2) agencies or organizations that support meeting the needs or offer services to meet the needs of targeted demographics;

(3) agencies that employ or offer employment support to the targeted demographics including language interpretation and technical training.

The mentorship program might consider conducting outreach to adult education, institutes of higher education including trade schools, and non-profit or community organizations to identify existing partners. Ideally partners are cultural brokers, an individual in a community that can help bridge a gap in relationships between two institutions. These individuals are community assets who are knowledgeable and engaged with the LEA but also trusted and respected members of the community even by members who might not be visibly present. Cultural brokers help validate efforts, increase awareness, and identify members of the community who may be beneficial to LEA initiatives that might otherwise be overlooked.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT, TRAINING, AND SUPPORT

During the initial mentoring cohort, the assigned staff member(s) will need to ensure active listening and prioritize input from cohort participants. The reciprocal relationship will not only help build the initial connection but also help strengthen future connections with new families and the school community.

Mentors and mentees should understand what participation will entail. Recruitment efforts should include information on the demands on time and energy, stating how many hours per month, and clear expectations and tangible if possible. In other words, are participants going to be expected to engage in a specific action, contribute financially or with food, and what does it mean to be a mentor? Mentors and mentees must also have a clear picture of the short-term and long-term benefits. Short-term benefits can include stipends, childcare, or meals provided when mentorship meetings are held. The long-term benefits can include the benefits to their skills set, employability, and the impact this program will have on their students' learning.

Mentor engagement can look like one-on-one meetings with new families and large group planning, collaboration, and coordination. This mentorship model is being developed as an alternative to LEAs having a family and community engagement team.

Mentors are a welcoming committee to families entering a LEA. New families can find connections and a sense of belonging. When students and families are connected to their LEA, they tend to be more engaged. Higher rates of parent and family engagement have been correlated with improved student attendance, academic achievement, lower referrals to the office for disciplinary action, and increased teacher job satisfaction (Erdem et al., 2020).

Mentors will help orient families to the expectations of the school system. This is especially important for new families when mentors have firsthand newcomer experiences themselves. By sharing a similar experience, mentors and new families will better understand the needs and experiences which can help troubleshoot issues as they arise and normalize difficulties.

Mentors will support new families in learning how to access, understand, monitor, and engage with student data and the school. The process for parent participation involves stages of involvement, engagement, and empowerment. New families will develop skills to become involved by accessing and learning to navigate the school system and then will become actively engaged by participating in school events and offering input.

The goal is for new families to reach the final stage of parent empowerment. This is observed when new parents attend council meetings or seek opportunities to contribute to LEA goals and future planning. These parents will be recruited to eventually become mentors themselves

WELCOMING COMMITEES

Welcoming committees, either as a standalone or as part of mentorship model, are used to help welcome new families and create a sense of belonging; while orienting them to norms and expectations, they can also help new families learn how to enroll in and navigate new systems, programs and technology.

The welcoming committee and mentor can be instrumental in taking an initial inventory of strengths and needs of a new family. By having a comprehensive picture of the family, LEAs are better equipped to provide the best services and instruction to help ensure success for the student.

For new families who may already be overwhelmed with the process of learning a new language, culture, and many other systems, a welcoming committee and mentor, especially one with shared experiences, can help the new family and student in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for their well-being and success.

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Tuckman's Linear Model of Group Development (Jones, 2019) best illustrates, when a new group is formed, including new families in a school, there will always be a storming stage as the family attempts to understand the norms or expectations of them. The clearer and more structured a school welcoming committee and

mentor's norms and expectations are, the faster the family will be able to enter the performance stage.

LANGUAGE SERVICES

According to the [2023 United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Annual Report,](#) three-thousand five-hundred complaint allegations were raised relating to Title VI issues. Of those violations, fifty-four related to parents who do not speak English fluently. Language accessible services are a legal obligation of the LEA. LEAs find themselves vulnerable to an OCR complaint if they fail to meet the legal obligation of providing language accessible services or resources to parents and students.

Parents must receive guidance in a language they understand so they can be informed of their students' rights, the range of EL services available to their student, and the benefits of those services. They are also entitled to meaningful communication in a language they can understand, such as through translated materials or a language interpreter, and to receive adequate information about any program, service, or activity that is called to the attention of parents of non-EL students. Parents or guardians may choose to opt out of EL services.

"Having a really engaged caregiver is critically important to the success of any young person but especially a young person who might be new to the school community or might be learning to speak English and integrating into the broader school community."—Paige Duggins-Clay, Chief Legal Analyst, Intercultural Development Research Association (Geduld, 2024).

When working to overcome language barriers, LEAs often use various technologies to enhance parent and family engagement. Online translating systems (e.g., Google Translate), translation headsets, and when possible, a staff or faculty member who speaks the family's primary language, or even the family's own student, have all been used to help bridge the communication gap.

While situations may occur where a language gap needs to be addressed, it should be the goal of all public-facing agencies and organizations to prevent these

situations as much as possible. When using translation and interpretation materials, it is essential they are written and translated at a level that is understandable by the target audience. According to ParentPowered (n.d.), a promising practice to ensure accessibility of materials for all families is to write public facing materials at a third grade reading level, using a strengths-based approach to every message.

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE SERVICES

The Utah Parent Center (UPC) provides an option for families of students who receive special education services to access language services support via the UPC's Family-to-Family Network or District Consultants.

An additional resource for LEAs and families is the U.S. Department of Justice's Information for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them. This resource can be shared and posted so all members of the school community, from paraprofessionals to extended family members in a caregiver role, can understand their rights and responsibilities with language services.

Budgetary restrictions and a shortage of language interpreters are cited as barriers to having high-quality language interpretation services for families.

Establishing parent and family networks, such as the mentorship model, is one strategy that helps build family engagement through mentors speaking a common language. Incorporating parents and families into the school community as participants, leaders, and assets then can be understood as having layered benefits through the multiple impacts when done in an intentional, evidence-informed, and embedded model.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), engaging families of multilingual learners has also shown benefit by linking classroom content to a student's fund of knowledge (Figueras-Daniel et al., 2024). Funds of knowledge are academic and personal background knowledge, accumulated life experiences, skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social

contexts, and world views structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

According to NAEYC, families are the primary context for children's development and learning, and home languages can enhance children's communication, comprehension, self-expression, and learning. Having parents and families present, visible, and engaged in their school community has the potential to ease the workload on LEAs.

Less Effective Language Services

- Online Translating Services or Translation Headsets: Technology can often be a great tool, especially when human contact or service is unavailable. As a caution LEAs should not rely solely on technology like Google Translate or translation headsets, as these devices can often be unreliable. Nuances with tone, context, or even region might be missed by this technology, thus creating confusion and even offending families if the technology utilizes an incorrect word or a word that holds different meaning for different regions with variations of the primary language.
- Staff or Faculty Member: Unless the staff or faculty member has undergone proper training and is certified as a language interpreter, utilizing staff or faculty can cause miscommunication. This may be accidental as staff or faculty inadvertently input their own opinions or alter the original message as they struggle to keep up or are unsure about how to convey the meaning of the original message being translated. It is best to use a certified interpreter to keep the translated message as close to the original message as possible and to use the correct verbiage as opposed to informal or incorrect language.
- The Family's Student: It is not appropriate to ask students to engage in difficult conversations or take on adult roles as support for their family when they are the reason why the meeting is being held. Accuracy of the information being shared with both parties should also be considered, especially if the conversation involves discussion involving discipline or academic standing.

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