



Position Statement

SCHOOL–FAMILY PARTNERING TO ENHANCE LEARNING: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is committed to enhancing the academic, behavioral, and social competence of all students across the span of schooling from early childhood through matriculation to postsecondary settings. The goal of enhancing student competence cannot be accomplished by schools or educators alone, and requires multitier systems of support (MTSS). Families are essential in this endeavor. Thus, NASP supports partnering between families and educators to accomplish shared goals for student competence.

PARTNERSHIPS DEFINED

Unlike traditional parent involvement activities that emphasize passive support roles for families (e.g., volunteer, fundraiser), partnerships involve families and educators working together as active, equal partners who share responsibility for the learning and success of all students. Families and educators are broadly defined to include all caregivers and a variety of school staff, such as administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals.

BENEFITS OF SCHOOL–FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

There are numerous benefits of school–family partnerships for students, families, and educators. Students demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher achievement and test scores, improved behavior, increased homework completion, greater participation in academic activities, improved school attendance, and a reduced need for more intensive services such as special education. Educators report greater job satisfaction, higher evaluation ratings from parents and administrators, and more positive associations with families. Families experience enhanced self-efficacy, better understanding and more positive experiences with educators and schools, improved communication with their children, and better appreciation of the important role they have in their children’s education. These positive outcomes have been documented across families from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

KEY COMPONENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

A focus of partnerships is on establishing intentional coordination, consistency, and continuity across families and educators. These conditions are accomplished through joint problem-solving, two-way communication, and shared decision-making.

Some families and educators accomplish consistency and continuity with little effort or formal coordination, yet in other cases there are differences in expectations, goals, and communication

patterns. These may lead to frustration and misunderstandings among students, families, and educators and undermine efforts to support students. If left unaddressed, the differences and lack of communication further divide and separate the two most vital support systems available to students: home and school.

Underlying partnerships are positive relationships. Trust has been identified as a key element in effective positive school–family relationships. Many parents struggled in school and may distrust that school will be a positive experience for their child. Evidence suggests that trust is built over time, and for families and educators, may be improved with positive communication (Adams & Christenson, 2000). In fact, evidence suggests the nature of interactions is more important than the frequency, indicating the importance of planning quality contacts with families.

Although school–family partnerships effectively occur from preschool through high school, evidence suggests the nature of partnerships may change as children develop (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Specifically, students may take a more active role in the partnership as they develop more independence in their learning and social–emotional development. In addition, families may modify their involvement style to account for their child’s development. Thus, child and adolescent development should be taken into account during partnership-centered activities.

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

NASP is committed to a multitiered system of support for students and the use of evidence-based instruction and interventions. A tiered model matched to the student’s level of need is a useful heuristic for conceptualizing communication and partnering among families and educators, as well as differentiated levels of support (see also NASP position statements titled *Appropriate Academic Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students* and *Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students*). Just as some students require more intensive interventions to enhance progress, some partnerships between families and educators require more explicit effort and time. Partnering becomes more, rather than less, important as students encounter difficulty at school.

Although additional research is needed, there are evidence-based family and school–family collaborative interventions to enhance students’ mental health, behavior, and achievement. Notably, key components of these interventions include a focus on two-way communication, shared data collection, mutual goal-setting, and home–school monitoring. Also promising are family interventions that focus on specific, measurable outcomes; those that train parents as tutors; and conjoint (school–family) consultation (Christenson & Carlson, 2005). Educators, families, and school psychologists have important roles and responsibilities in establishing partnerships to support and enhance outcomes for students.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Partnerships among families and educators require ongoing planning, development, and evaluation. These also require the allocation of adequate resources (including time) to assist families and educators in fulfilling their partnership roles. Schools must take the lead in providing opportunities for partnerships to be developed and sustained through the following methods.

Providing a Positive Environment

It is the school's responsibility to create the conditions that welcome all families. Educators and administrators must send consistent messages to families that their contributions towards forming effective partnerships are valued. Specifically, schools must make clear that families are viewed as equal partners in their children's education. Too often schools and families attempt to initiate dialogue during high stress, critical times. Creating a positive environment where partnerships are emphasized is a first step in creating a safe, positive space where families and educators can engage in positive interactions. Efforts need to be made to work collaboratively with all families, including those whose primary language is not English, those with limited literacy skills, those who might be seen as overly involved, and those who are, for a variety of reasons, generally hesitant or uncomfortable in schools or with educators.

Supporting the Efforts of Families and Educators

Family participation increases when such participation is promoted and valued by the school. Educators can encourage collaboration by eliciting and understanding families' perspectives and expectations. Multiple options for participation should be made available, with the recognition that individual families and families from diverse backgrounds will support their children in different ways at home and school. Educators should foster an open dialogue between home and school and provide opportunities for families to develop partnership roles in their children's education, including having decision-making roles in school governance. Resources must be provided by the school to support the collaborative efforts of families and educators (e.g., flexibility for teachers to meet with families in the community or at alternative times during the week, development of a family support room in the school, encouraging family-to-family sharing/support, partnership training for educators and families).

Working With Families From Diverse Backgrounds

Effective school–family partnerships are also needed to support students from diverse populations. Educators recognize that families come in a variety of configurations and have multiple perspectives, expectations, and communication styles. Schools need to provide education to staff and families that encourages understanding and celebration of diverse family forms, cultures, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. When families and schools educate one another about their unique cultures, students see their worlds aligning and working together in supporting their success (Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2010). Partnering is based on the assumption that families, children, and educators are doing the best they can. Efforts are made to understand others' behavior and intentions rather than judge them as right or wrong. Increasingly, school–family partnerships are seen as an essential component of efforts to address disparities in educational outcomes. Schools actively collaborate with community resources (e.g., neighborhood associations, cultural leaders) in coordinating partnering efforts with families.

Promoting a View of Education as a Shared Responsibility

School–family partnerships are not an activity. Rather, partnering is an ongoing process that guides the development of goals and plan implementation. When school–family interactions are characterized by open communication, mutually agreed upon goals, and joint decision-making,

education becomes a shared responsibility. Together, families and educators can discuss expectations for student achievement and their respective roles in helping students meet these expectations. School–family partners can engage in efforts to increase mutual respect, understanding, caring, and flexibility among families and the school community. When problems arise, they are addressed jointly by families, students, and educators in a respectful, collaborative, solution-focused manner. In sum, the more continuity between home and school, the greater success children are likely to experience.

THE ROLE OF FAMILIES

Child-rearing is both complex and difficult. Individual families face multiple challenges with unique sets of resources, skills, and preferences. Therefore, it is unrealistic and potentially damaging to family–school relationships to take a one size fits all approach to partnering. Roles for families should be broadly conceived but individually applied. That is, educators and families should work together to develop an array of opportunities for families to participate meaningfully in their children’s education. Such opportunities should be offered with the knowledge that families will differ in their choices; these differences must be understood to reflect individual families’ needs and preferences. Roles for families include:

Coordinating Learning at Home

There are many ways families support student learning at home, from emphasizing the importance of effort and modeling problem-solving behaviors to reading with their children, limiting time on electronic media (e.g., television, video games, computers), and ensuring a time and place for homework completion.

Supporting Learning at School

Families also support student learning at school. They may engage in school activities as volunteers and committee members.

Engaging With Educators at School

Families attend and interact with school personnel at various functions, athletic events, student performances, and other extracurricular activities.

Actively Partnering With School Personnel

Partnering requires active roles and contributions of both families and schools. Families engage in dialogue with educators about academic and behavioral expectations and progress. Families are empowered to ask questions, provide feedback, and seek support from educators, as appropriate; communicate about their child (e.g., progress, difficulties), including knowledge, cultural beliefs, and observations; and participate as active decision-making members of problem-solving teams (e.g., student assistance, response to intervention, Individualized Education Program).

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

NASP encourages school psychologists to take part in national, state, and local education efforts to define the role of families in forming true and lasting partnerships among families and educators. School psychologists advocate for universal school–family partnerships and identify strategies to provide opportunities for families and educators to form and maintain partnerships by:

- Recognizing and promoting the need to address concerns across the different contexts within which a child exists;
- Implementing systematic, evidence-based models for school–family consultation and family interventions;
- Establishing or participating in current school-based teams consisting of parents, educators, and community members that assess needs, develop priorities and plans, and implement joint efforts to improve educational outcomes for students;
- Serving as liaisons to support two-way communication and coordination among homes, schools, and communities;
- Partnering efforts occur between families and educators throughout screening, early intervention, and special education processes by effectively including families in their student’s assessment, planning, interventions, and progress monitoring;
- Providing professional development opportunities for families and educators on the positive effects of partnering and current research on the most effective collaborative processes and on evidence-based programs in academic, behavioral, and mental health interventions and programs; and
- Supporting the sustainability of partnering practices through ongoing monitoring and accountability for efforts.

SUMMARY

The benefits of partnering across home and school are well supported in the scientific literature. The focus of partnerships is coordination, consistency, and continuity across families and educators through effective communication, joint problem-solving, active involvement, and shared decision-making. NASP is committed to creating and enhancing partnerships between families and educators to promote positive outcomes for all children and youth.

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