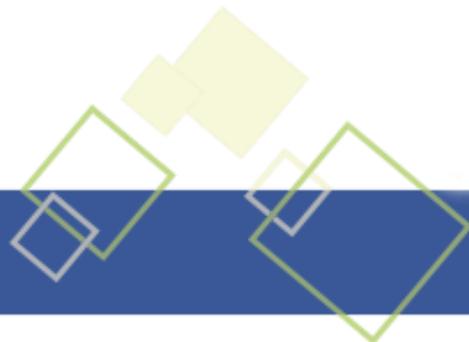# Advancing Family-School Collaboration in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Through the Family-School-Community Alliance

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This Practice Brief was developed as result of the roundtable dialogue that occurred at the 2019 PBIS Leadership Forum in Chicago, IL with the purpose to describe the Family-School-Community Alliance (FSCA) and the FSCA's recent work focused on family-school collaboration in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). An introduction to the FSCA is provided, followed by the rationale and current challenges of family-school collaboration. Finally, the features of the FSCA's model for family-school collaboration are reviewed along with suggestions for integrating and aligning family-school collaboration efforts within existing practice.

Family School Community Alliance Overview

In recent years, the compelling evidence from research and practice regarding the importance of connecting families and schools implementing tiered frameworks to support culturally responsive and equitable systems and outcomes for students has increased attention in the area of family-school collaboration. In 2017, partners of the PBIS Technical Assistance Center and collaborators around the United States (U.S.) organized the development and dissemination of a free e-book focused on Engaging Families in PBIS (see Weist et al., 2017). Acknowledging the need for an ongoing commitment to family-school collaboration, those connected with the e-book initiated the Family School Community Alliance (FSCA), an international organization consisting of researchers, practitioners, family service providers, youth and family leaders and other stakeholders. The goal was to advance research, practice and policy in this emerging field of family and student engagement and leadership in PBIS and related multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), as well as to create information, tools and resources that help translate family-school collaboration research into practice within tiered frameworks such as PBIS and MTSS.

Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

Family-school collaboration refers to two-way communication, home-school coordination, and joint problem-solving between families and educators to make educational decisions for the purpose of supporting student success (Garbacz et al., 2019). Ecological systems theory has guided decades of research supporting the importance of comprehensive and bidirectional relationships between schools and families that influence child development and success in school (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Christenson & Reschly, 2010). Research continues to support the importance of family-school collaboration for student outcomes (Cox, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Wilder, 2014). Historically, the importance of family-school collaboration has focused on the impact of students' academic outcomes (Wilder, 2014). Findings from recent meta-analyses suggest that family-school interventions have a significant and positive impact on students' mental health (e.g., emotion regulation and adjustment, self-esteem) and social-behavioral competence (e.g., interpersonal skills, self-regulation; Barger et al., 2019; Sheridan et al., 2019).

Most notably, these recent meta-analyses are some of the first to begin to identify the activities and behaviors of family-school collaboration that are most important for impacting student outcomes. Findings point to communication, home-based involvement, behavioral support, parent-teacher collaboration and overall parent-family relationship as positively associated with students' social-behavioral competence and mental health outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2019). Additionally, comparisons of home-based forms of engagement (e.g., discussions between families and children about school and educational aspirations, reading books together) and school-based forms of engagement (e.g., attending school meetings, conferences, participating in the school's Parent-Teacher Association) find that home-based involvement, with the exception of homework assistance, was consistently associated with a range of improvements in functioning, and for diverse students and families (Barger et al., 2019). Together, these seminal studies find that what families and educators do together, and what families and students discuss and engage in together at home, have a significant impact on student success in school.

Features of Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

The FSCA created a conceptual framework outlining six essential features of family-school collaboration identified in research. The features and research-based rationale for their importance in family-school collaboration within PBIS are described below followed by a summary of guiding principles shared across the six essential features.

Positive Home-School Relationships

Positive home-school relationships are foundational to any successful strategy intended to connect families and schools. This feature emphasizes the important role schools play in proactively and intentionally implementing strategies to build and maintain positive, trusting relationships with families (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Cox, 2005; Green et al., 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000; Ritblatt et al., 2002) and obtaining representative family perceptions of the home-school relationship to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their partnership efforts for *all* families.

Two-Way Communication

Of all the forms and strategies conceptualizing home-school connections, two-way communication is common to most and is the essential mechanism through which families and educators connect. Two-way communication has consistently been identified in research (Sheridan et al., 2019) and policy (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act, 2004; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) as *the essential feature* of the home-school connection. This feature emphasizes the important role schools play in determining the communication preferences and needs of families, and ensuring that home-school communication systems are responsive to families and allow for family input. The emphasis is shifting schools from information providers to information gatherers who are purposefully deepening their relationships with families.

Shared Decision-Making

Family voice is essential to effective education and ensures that policies and practices are culturally and contextually responsive to the stakeholders served by the education system (Bal et al., 2016; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Thorius et al., 2013). This feature emphasizes the school's role in proactively obtaining representative and comprehensive family voice, and demonstrating the value of family voice through decisions that are shared between families and schools.

Family Voice for Equitable Discipline

Black students continue to receive exclusionary discipline at disproportionately higher rates compared to other groups (Skiba et al., 2014). This concerning fact emphasizes the school's role in reaching out to families affected by disproportionate discipline, and obtaining and using their voice to improve PBIS systems and practices to achieve equitable discipline outcomes for all students (Sandomierski et al., under review).

Training and Support for Family-School Collaboration

Family-school partnerships are often reported as an area in which educators receive the least amount of training and support (see Smith & Sheridan, 2018). Yet nearly all *required* forms of communication or notification to parents are related to communicating student problems or concerns (Van Roekel, 2008), creating a complex environment for educators to navigate. Furthermore, providing opportunities for families to learn the principles and practices of PBIS to support positive student behavior at home benefits student outcomes more than providing limited school-based supports (Sheridan et al., 2019). This feature emphasizes the importance of providing training and support options for both families and educators on family-school collaboration within PBIS.

Evaluation

Given the uniqueness of families and communities within a school, the goals, strategies and efforts for monitoring family-school collaboration should be responsive to each school community. This feature emphasizes the school's efforts to obtain, and gives equal consideration to, family input into the goals, strategies, and ways of assessing family-school collaboration efforts within the school's PBIS systems and practices. Furthermore, schools utilize family input to guide ongoing improvements and adjustments in the strategies they are using (Ferguson et al., 2010).

Guiding Principles of Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

The guiding principles shared across the FSCA's six features of family-school collaboration within PBIS include the following:

Family Voice Asking families their needs, preferences, and goals is foundational to the work of family-school collaboration. Obtaining and utilizing family input allows the school to focus their limited resources on responsive efforts with a higher likelihood of success inclusive of options beyond family attendance at school-based events (McQuiggan, & Megra, 2017). Throughout the six features of family-school collaboration there is emphasis on obtaining comprehensive and representative family input. The shift is to true collaboration with *all* families, not the loudest or most convenient. This principle maintains family voice as essential to informing the how, when, and why of family-school collaboration to allow for an expanded definition consistent with the behaviors of family-school collaboration identified in research (i.e., home-based supports, communication, coordination and collaboration occurring through virtual meetings, telephone calls, texts or emails; Sheridan et al., 2019).

School Responsibility Schools traditionally state they desire more family involvement; however, it's often the case that they want families to be involved in times and in ways that are preferred by schools. When families cannot be involved in those ways, they are perceived negatively as disengaged by the school. Additionally, when family perspectives and input are shared, they are often viewed as challenging or disrespectful to the school (Lawson, 2003; Marchand et al., 2019). Another theme shared across the six features of family-school collaboration is the proactive role of schools to reach out to families and welcome their voice in the school. Explicit and intentional efforts to tell families their perspectives are welcomed and valued are necessary prerequisites to genuine collaborative relationships between families and schools (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000; Ritblatt et al., 2002).

Integrated and Aligned with Tiered Frameworks A third guiding principle shared across the six features of family-school collaboration is the integration and alignment with PBIS. Implementation of PBIS establishes systems and practices that allow for family-school collaboration efforts to be easily integrated within existing priorities of the school. Furthermore, this ensures family-school collaboration efforts are implemented in ways that are directly connected with student learning and success.

Considerations for Implementation

This type of systemic approach to family-school collaboration is often a paradigm shift for schools leaving them unsure where to begin. Below are some considerations for initiating implementation of the previously described six features of family-school collaboration.

1. **Develop a comprehensive, ongoing data collection system that allows schools to monitor and disaggregate family responses by racial/ethnic subgroups, grade-levels, etc., to ensure representative voice.** Consistent with tiered logic, estimate that at least 20% of families will require more intensive outreach. Consider proactive planning of staff time, including full-time and itinerant staff, to assist with individualized outreach (e.g., phone calls, translation services, community or home visits). Initially, it would be beneficial to obtain family preferences for ongoing two-way communication in addition to information about their child that can be used to ensure responsive instruction and supports. Follow-up opportunities for families to provide their voice and input should include ideas for improving the school's PBIS systems and practices (e.g., suggestions for teaching expectations that are responsive to student and family culture, input on making the discipline process more effective). Schools will need to schedule time in the beginning of the year to review family responses and adjust home-school communication systems accordingly.

2. **Prioritize relationship building among staff and families especially prior to and at the beginning of the school year.** For educators, initial steps in relationship building include (a) self-reflection on biases and barriers to creating positive relationships with families, (b) cultivating a sense of empathy and perspective among staff to create a buy-in for an expanded perspective beyond traditional notions of family-school collaboration, and (c) intentional focus on relationship building activities (National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2017). School leadership should clarify expectations and incentives for implementing strategies, allocating time, and coaching, to support staff in implementing relationship-building strategies. Initial relationship-building strategies could include sharing positive news at the beginning of the year with every child in the teacher's class (or homeroom) to establish trust, respect and mutual goals of student success. Additionally, efforts to proactively build or mend relationships with families of students who have multiple indicators of risk, or who have experienced repeated behavioral concerns, offer great potential for impacting student success. Express genuine interest in helping the child have a positive year and ask for input from families on how to achieve that goal.

3. **Focus on outcomes and the process.** Take a continuous improvement approach and adjust practices and efforts based on their reach with families in all racial/ethnic subgroups and their impact on the home-school relationship. Obtain feedback from families on home-school collaboration and communication efforts prior to the school year ending. Utilize the feedback to plan improvements in communication systems, as well as supports and infrastructure for staff to be successful in their efforts to maintain positive family-school relationships.

Conclusion

The practices described in this brief require commitment by schools to establish a culture that genuinely welcomes, values and utilizes family input and voice in the work of educating students. A key theme will be for schools to manifest a culture that is accepting of input from families with openness to collaboration rather than defensiveness or feeling challenged. School leaders can begin to model a collaborative approach with staff and students by asking for input and respectfully accepting and considering feedback from stakeholders. For many students, schools continue to fall short in helping them to reach their goals. Utilizing authentic family input to inform systems and practices has great potential to ensure that our schools are most effective and equitable for all students.

The FSCA is conducting research and developing implementation tools and resources to advance family-school-community collaboration. The FSCA emphasizes research based and practically useful tools and resources to guide implementation. Updates will be shared and products will be made available to stakeholders through the FSCA website (https://fscalliance.org/). Another aim of the FSCA and its website is to connect stakeholders interested in advancing family-school-community collaboration in research, practice and policy realms, while offering a platform for international connections. The FSCA is an open organization and welcomes all to engage in whatever capacity is amenable. Please contact Devon Minch (dminch@usf.edu) or Andy Garbacz (andy.garbacz@wisc.edu) if you have questions or would like any additional information about connecting with the FSCA. We hope you will engage with us as we work to advance the work of family-school collaboration in PBIS and related multi-tiered systems of support.

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