

Parent Empowerment Strategies: Engaging parents, strengthening families, and building communities

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Families & Schools Together, Inc.

- Non-profit based in Madison, Wisconsin
- Partner with schools, districts, and community organizations to implement **FAST**[®], an evidence-based family engagement program.
- FAST was developed in 1988 by Dr. Lynn McDonald, Professor of Social Work and Family Therapist.
- Backed by extensive research – both individual program components and program effectiveness through Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) – FAST has been shown to improve well-being and academic achievement among children.

To strengthen family engagement...

- **Examine what you believe (sometimes requires a mindset shift)**
- **Think about challenges you encounter/solutions to overcome these barriers**
- **Learn more about what you can do to empower parents**

STEP 1: Examine what you believe about Family Engagement

Families are central and critical to children's educational performance.

- Do you agree with this statement?
- If yes, what are some ways you are upholding this value in your work with families?
- If no, how might your approach with families change if you did believe it?

Policies and practices of organizations should always support and include parents to enhance the parent-child relationship, rather than undercut or isolate the parent from his or her child.

- Do you agree with this statement?
- If yes, what are some ways you are upholding this value in your work with families?
- If no, how might your approach with families change if you did believe it?

All parents love their children,
and want a better life for them.

- Do you agree with this statement?
- If yes, what are some ways you are upholding this value in your work with families?
- If no, how might your approach with families change if you did believe it?

STEP 2: Think about the challenges you encounter in doing family engagement work

Reflection questions:

- Think about the challenges you face in this work. What barriers to family engagement would you like to remove?

- **STEP 3: Learn more about what you and your school/district can do to empower parents**

Family Recruitment

Best Practices

- Build relationships with parents: home visits/ one-to-one meetings.
- Needs assessment to identify needs/ reduce barriers: transportation, childcare, working with parents' schedules – find out from parents what they need
- Involve parents in recruiting other parents

Example: FAST Parent Graduate in San Antonio, TX has had tremendous success recruiting families as Parent Partner. “I see me in some of the parents.”

“When I am going to talk to parents, I throw on my t-shirt and jeans. I show them I am just like them.”

Family Retention

Best Practices

- When a family decides to come to a school event, the staff must continue to build on the relationships created during recruitment.
- Greet each parent first, before greeting children, to make them feel welcome.
- Get to know your families' needs – what activities they want and when (childcare, a meal, fun family time, etc.).
- Take-home flyers, phone calls, text messages, in-person face-to-face meetings (some families may need more than one home visit).

Family Recruitment and Retention– Small Group Discussion

- Are you currently doing something like this with your children and families? How is it working?
- If not, what are some ideas that you could incorporate? What kind of supports or changes would you need to incorporate with this family strategy when thinking about MLL families?
- Other comments, suggestions, reactions

Parent Empowerment

Ways to Empower Parents

- Never assume you need to do something for parents without knowing if they can do it themselves.
- Find ways to support parents to take a leadership role in their family where family hierarchy is reinforced.
- Defer to the parent instead of interacting with the child directly.
- Find ways to help to elevate the voice of parents in planning and executing family engagement activities (e.g. have parents on the planning committee).
- Opportunities for reciprocity; affirmations; empowering language.

Parent Empowerment— Small Group Discussion

- Are you currently doing something like this with your children and families? How is it working?
- If not, what are some ideas that you could incorporate? What kind of supports or changes would you need to incorporate with this family strategy when thinking about MLL families?
- Other comments, suggestions, reactions

Parent Group

Parents gather together in a group for open discussion. Discussion is lead by parents, facilitated by parent or community partners. Parents sit in a circle. This activity provides a forum for discussing sensitive issues in a safe, nonjudgmental environment.

Goal is for parents to get to know one another without their children present, to help build social capital. Parents are able to feel more connected to other parents, and less isolated.

Parents are encouraged to talk about whatever topics they choose—challenges they may be facing, things happening at the school or in the community. Discussions must remain confidential within the group. No staff from the school present in the group.

Parent Group— Small Group Discussion

- Are you currently doing something like this with your children and families? How is it working?
- If not, what are some ideas that you could incorporate? What kind of supports or changes would you need to incorporate with this family strategy when thinking about MLL families?
- Other comments, suggestions, reactions

Special Play

Modeled after play therapy. Parent and child pairs have one-on-one time together without interruptions. Playtime is open-ended and undirected.

Parents are coached to follow the child's lead, and the child directs the play. "Don't teach, don't boss, don't judge."

- Creates a strong bond between parent and child, which builds the child's self-esteem; child thrives on having parent's full attention, and responds with love toward the parent, which builds parent's self-esteem.
- 15 minutes of positive attention and interaction helps reduce challenging behavior both in school and at home.

Special Play/One-to-one time— Small Group Discussion

- Are you currently doing something like this with your children and families? How is it working?
- If not, what are some ideas that you could incorporate? What kind of supports or changes would you need to incorporate with this family strategy when thinking about MLL families?
- Other comments, suggestions, reactions

Special Session

Parents select a topic of interest and importance to them and work with the school or community to create a presentation/information session and family activities around this particular topic.

Parents are empowered to be involved in the creation of the Special Session, working with the school to present info, or recruit someone from an outside organization to present relevant content.

Special Session– Small Group Discussion

- Are you currently doing something like this with your children and families? How is it working?
- If not, what are some ideas that you could incorporate? What kind of supports or changes would you need to incorporate with this family strategy when thinking about MLL families?
- Other comments, suggestions, reactions

Key Take-aways

- How can we shift our perspectives/mindset?
- How can we collaborate with our families to create solutions to or navigate around barriers we may encounter?
- What are some specific activities we can start at our schools to engage with our MLL families?

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