

Staff Discussion Questions

Bridge Differences

What are the racial, class, and cultural differences in your school—among families and between staff and families?

What are you doing to recognize, address, and bridge these differences?

Consider:

- Are the differences openly discussed in a constructive way? Who is involved and how?
- How does your school foster increased understanding of these different cultures among students, families, and staff? Does your school reflect the cultures of its families in the curriculum, in books and materials, in activities and events, in class discussions?
- To what extent are class differences recognized? For example, which parents run the PTA/PTO and who comes to the meetings? Who are the families that tend not to come to the school? What is your school doing to tackle these differences?
- How does the school accommodate families with limited English?
- What is the tone of typical conversations or remarks about families in the faculty lounge? Do they tend to be negative and blaming (“those parents don’t ...”)?
- Do families and their children feel welcome, respected, and treated fairly?
- Does the school survey parents and teachers about school climate? What are the disparities in their responses?
- How do your school and parent organizations follow up on the results?

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Link to Learning

In what ways are your school's programs and activities for families focused on improving student achievement?

Consider:

- Do you use student achievement data in planning your parent involvement program? If yes, how?
- How much could a parent or visitor learn about what children are learning and doing in your school just by walking the halls in your building? What evidence is there that students are expected to learn at a high level?
- In what ways are standard school events (e.g., open houses, fun fairs, concerts) designed to give families information about what children are learning? About standards and what the tests cover?
- How much do families and the community know about what happens in the classroom? What does the school do to get this across? How does the school display student work?
- Does the school offer regular workshops and other information sessions for families? Are the topics suggested by families?
- What happens at PTA meetings? Do they tend to be dry, formal business meetings? Do they feature students and what they are learning and doing in class?
- What is covered in the school newsletter? How does the newsletter communicate what students are learning and how teachers are teaching?
- How does your school collaborate with community-based afterschool programs? For example, do program staff and the school exchange ideas and information about students? Does your school share curriculum and textbooks with tutoring programs?

Build Personal Relationships

What is the school doing to help parents and teachers build trusting, personal relationships with each other?

Consider:

- How easy is it—really—for parents to reach and work with teachers? How explicit are the opportunities for access? What are the hidden rules?
- What are the informal opportunities for families to have one-to-one conversations about how children are doing? How do they find out about them?
- Do relationships tend to be easier with white and middle class families than with low-income families and families of color?
- Are problems at your school discussed honestly and openly, using data? Is it OK to bring up concerns and frustrations and to question decisions?
- What forms of parent outreach are expected of teachers at your school?
- What does your school do to reach out to families who do not respond to the usual overtures?
- Does your school ask parents about barriers and what would help them be more involved at school and at home? How does your school respond?

Support Advocacy

How does your school support parents to be advocates for their children and guide their children successfully through the system?

Consider:

- How does your school work as a partner with parents to make sure their children do well and take on more challenging work?
- How much voice do parents have in determining their child's placement or program? Does the school try to limit parent influence? Why, and in what ways? What do you think is NOT appropriate for families to know and have a voice in?
- What role do families play in setting goals for their children?
- Does your school district help families make transitions from grade to grade, and especially from school to school? What kinds of orientations are offered?
- What information does your school give families about guiding their kids through the system and steering them toward higher level classes and programs?
- What kind of tracking is practiced? Can families have open, honest discussions with school staff about tracking? When, and in what ways?
- What happens if a parent requests his or her student be placed in a higher level group or program? Does the school actively recruit and prepare Hispanic and low-income students for gifted and advanced classes?

Build Social and Political Connections

How does the school help families build their social and political connections?

Consider:

- How does your school help families get to know each other and be familiar with community groups?
- How does it help families understand how the school system and local government operate; how to voice their concerns to elected officials and government agencies?
- What social opportunities does your school offer? How does it foster personal connections?
- What community groups does your school work with? What do they offer to families?
- How are families involved in school governance and improvement? How many families play this role? Is there a committee structure to engage more families?
- In what ways does your school support families' efforts to improve conditions in the community?

Develop Capacity

What is the school doing to support and encourage families and teachers to work closely together?

Consider:

- What outreach practices are standard at your school? What level of contact with families is expected of each teacher? How explicit is that standard?
- How does your school deal with negative and unproductive teacher attitudes toward some families and children? Does it use data and research?
- Do teachers attend events for families?
- What professional development is offered? Who takes part? Are support staff members invited? What about parents and family members?
- How does your school address issues identified by staff and respond to their immediate concerns? For example: understanding different cultures in the school, getting help with translation and interpreters, defusing conflict.
- Does your school study the community? How does it draw on families and community-based groups for information and access?
- Do teacher evaluations include rating their efforts to reach and work with families? What criteria are used?