STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL

PARTNERSHIP WITHIN SCHOOLWIDE MODELS

OF BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of several weeks, Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar obtained qualitative data for Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). Positive Behavior Support (PBS) can be defined as "an approach to behavior support that includes an ongoing process of research-based assessment, intervention, and data-based decision making focused on building social and other functional competencies, creating supportive contexts, and preventing the occurrence of problem behaviors" (Kincaid, Dunlap, Kern, Lane, Bambara, Brown, & Knoster, 201, p. 70). PBIS is the "school based application" of PBS (Kincaid et al., 2016, p.71). One critical feature of PBIS in schools is the inclusion of family member perspectives when developing schoolwide expectations and behavioral goals. However, there is a dearth of research empirical related to how to best include families within the PBIS process. In a qualitative analysis, Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar (2018) assessed parent perceptions of family-professional partnerships between teachers and parents whose student received either Tier 1 or Tier 2 PBIS supports through a series of focus group interviews. The study examined experiences and events that affect communication about student behavior between the parents and teacher(s). Participants were 28 family members from three PBIS elementary schools within one school district in the Southwest United States. Participants were asked to answer questions related to strengths and weaknesses in communication with teachers and ideas that they wish to express to teachers about supporting appropriate behavior and addressing challenging behavior. Based on findings of this study, as well as other studies related to PBIS, this paper synthesizes the research literature and provides evidence-based strategies that teachers can implement in their classroom to strengthen partnerships with family members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP

WITHIN SCHOOLWIDE MODELS OF BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

Strong partnerships in schools between families and teachers can provide a sturdy base for effective academic and behavioral interventions and supports. A cohesive team working towards a shared goal can be monumental in helping a child overcome problem behaviors in the classroom. Too often, these relationships remain underdeveloped and are under-utilized, or the parties involved are unsure of how to strengthen family-professional partnerships. Partnership and communication go hand in hand; effective, two-way communication between home and school is a critical component of a prosperous family-professional partnership and benefits every student in a classroom. In a research study conducted by Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar (2018), 28 family members from varying backgrounds and cultures identified unique "helping" and "hindering" incidents, or circumstances and events that family members perceived as having either facilitated or impeded family-professional partnership. Family members were also asked to discuss ideas that they wish they could express to teachers about how to best support appropriate student behavior and address student challenging behavior; these were referred to as wishlist items. The wishlist items from the family members could be grouped into the following four categories: we are on the same team, focus on student strengths, trust is critical, get to know and treat students as individuals (2018).

Wishes can become reality with the use of different PBIS strategies across home and school settings. Currently a number of evidence-based strategies for engaging families and promoting effective partnerships exist. However, within the PBIS literature, strategies for partnerships have focused on promoting family-school connections for students who require individualized support. There is currently a lack of research and direction for teachers related to partnership

practices at the universal (i.e., Tier 1) and targeted (i.e., Tier 2) levels of support (Eber, Hyde, & Suter, 2011). Tools used at Tiers 1 and 2 often include the use of less-than-sufficient one-directional communication in the form of school newsletters or student hand books. An obvious limitation of this approach is that the school is able to communicate with families, but the structure does not allow for a two-way reciprocal dialogue (Garbacz, McIntosh, Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Hirano, & Ruppert, 2016).

Strategies that prevent the current limitations frequently seen in partnerships can be implemented at Tiers 1,2, and 3 to grow partnerships and provide further support for students. The use of these strategies can help set a strong foundation for the partnership as families and professionals work with trust and respect towards a common goal. Communication, trust, and culturally responsive practices are just a few of the areas that these strategies can enhance. The following paragraphs will address these components of partnerships, focusing on evidence-based strategies that directly align with the feedback obtained by family members in the Strickland-Cohen & Kyzar (2018) study. The purpose of this paper is to provide easily implementable evidence based strategies inspired by the results found from the 2018 Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar study, focusing on the main areas of communication, trust, and teamwork.

Enhancing Communication in Family-Professional Partnerships

One aspect of every effective team, is communication. Communication between family members and teachers can take on many forms—emails, phone calls, face-to-face meetings in the pick-up line after school. Clear and consistent communication is essential when families and teachers are working together. As stated earlier, trust is a critical component of these partnerships, and open two-way communication is key to building trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) state that "building and maintaining trust depends on repeated social exchanges" (p. 44).

These social exchanges are saturated with both listening and honesty which form a durable base for partnerships (Strickland-Cohen & Kyzar, 2018). A shortage of personal interactions between parents and teachers can hinder trust between family members and teachers, as well as the strength of the overall partnership.

Personal interactions can look different for each professional-home partnership and can depend heavily on the policies enforced by the school or school district. The families surveyed by Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar (2018) indicated that multiple modes of two-way communication can greatly benefit partnerships and the overall PBIS efforts in place for students. Parents whose children were receiving Tier 1 PBIS support, the broadest tier which includes universal screening for all students, noted that email and other electronic applications that allow parents to directly communicate with educators or access information about schoolwide or class-wide events positively contributed to home-professional partnerships. Conversely, parents of students with Tier 2 support needs, a more focused tier with fewer students, described and focused on the importance of communication methods that allowed them to monitor progress and discuss behavioral incidents directly with the teacher. An example given by the parents was the use of email as a main, direct source of communication. The same strategy, for example the use of consistent emails between teachers and parents, can meet different needs for families in a classroom. In a 2004 article, Graham-Clay presents strategies for teachers and highlights exemplary forms of two-way communication that teachers can easily and effectively utilize. An example of a two-way communication strategy is frequent phone calls home, made easy with convenient phones in the classroom. Graham-Clay referenced an example in which a teacher made monthly calls home that provided invaluable information about the students in the class that may have been missed without this communication strategy in place.

Graham-Clay suggests replacing "no news is good news" approach, and advocates instead for the use of "good news calls" in which teachers recognize progress or positive behaviors of students periodically. By calling families to report on positive student behavior in addition to the less-favorable occasions, teachers can build trust. This can help to enhance the parent-teacher partnership, thus creating a stronger, united support system for the child (Graham-Clay, 2004).

An essential component of effective, two-way communication is positivity. Consistent communication is critical, but it is also important to keep positivity a consistent characteristic of the communication. It is often said that "life is about balance;" this can be applied to the feedback that parents are receiving from teachers. The participants of the Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar studied identified as positivity as a helping incident and a wish, whereas they indicated that a focus on problem behavior weakened partnerships (2018, p.18). One parent from the study addressed problem focused feedback by describing her son's previous teacher, explaining "It was all negative and there was never any, you know, communication with me unless it was telling me how bad he was … and I know he's not a bad child" (Strickland et al., 2018, p. 19). A lack of positivity in feedback can affect the future conversations between parents and teachers.

As discussed earlier, communication should model a bustling two-way street, not a one-way dirt road down a scenic route. While the expectation of teachers bringing positivity into the equation has been stated, it is also important to consider the ways in which parents can add positivity into the overall home-school communication. Results from Strickland and Kyzar's study showed that families providing positive feedback to teachers was seen as a helping incident by family members in the Tier 1 focus group (Strickland et al., 2018). The study provided anecdotal examples of parents who reached out to parents to acknowledge the impact the teacher had on their child, noting that the teacher was on the same team and working towards a common

goal with the families. One example is a parent who made the following comment about her son's math teacher: "He [student] has hated school, and this year he loves school and math. I've told the teacher, too, because teachers need to hear that. They need to hear the positive" (Strickland et al., 2018, p. 17) The phrase "a little goes a long way" is used often and it applicable in far more situations than telling a child how much soap to use when washing their hands or hair. Receiving a little positive feedback is better than none, regardless of how long a teacher has been teaching or how well they know a child's parent. Positive feedback can serve as an indicator for a teacher that the current methods and practices are working for a specific child; it lets him or her know that a child is progressing, not remaining stagnant or regressing.

Communication is not just between the parent of a child and a teacher; communication is also between a child and a teacher or a child and his or her parents. When positive feedback is used with constructive feedback, teachers can become a source of encouragement for children in addition to families. A participating parent from the Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar study explained how impactful teacher encouragement was for her daughter; [Her teacher] is always being positive with her because she'll come home and she'll actually say, 'Mom, I had a great day.' She is paying attention and doing better in school… and it will continue on into the evening and that night at home with us, because she feels better about herself…" (Strickland et al., 2018, p. 20). This encouragement can also been seen in the form of turning problem behaviors into opportunities for growth; with the support of teachers and through partnership conversations, challenging student behaviors can be turned into strengths. A participating parent in the Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar study discussed her daughter's tendency to talk during inappropriate times. The parent explained "Instead of disciplining her for talking too much, give her a reading assignment maybe that she could read out loud to other students or something like

that. So take what you have issues with, and show her positive ways to use it in class" (2018, p. 20). Positive interactions between teachers and students can leave lasting impacts beyond a conversation between a parent and child. In 2017 Ali brought attention to the various benefits that go along with positive interactions in the classroom in an academic journal; positive feedback and encouragement from a teacher can promote further successes and can bring about the continuation of desired behaviors from a student. Ali states, "Cultivating self-positivity in the classroom is not only and impeller to academic achievements, but also to supporting social skills such as how to cope with mistakes, difficulties and failure" (2017, p. 418). The self-positivity referred to by Ali stems from teachers boosting students' confidence through encouragement and finding the good in the actions of a student. Direct, immediate, positive feedback can impact a child in such a way that their creativity, attentiveness, and social skills improve (Ali, 2017).

Utilizing Culturally Responsive Practices and Building Trust in Partnerships

When assessing family member's perceptions of strengths, weaknesses, and wishes related to communication with teachers, researchers noted common themes of the importance of trust and parents and teachers working together towards a common goal toward supporting prosocial student behavior. Parents in the study had a desire for trust in the partnerships that they had with the teacher of their children. Trust can develop in partnerships through honesty, listening, equality, respect for all parties, and consistent communication (Haines, S. J., Gross, J. M., Blue-Banning, M., Francis, G. L., & Turnbull, 2015). One participating parent from the study expressed, "I think trust is the most important thing. I am trusting my child with this teacher" (Strickland et al., 2018, p. 21).

Trust goes beyond just the teacher and the family members of the child; the trust between a student and his or her teacher is also a critical component of any home-school partnership.

Teachers as well as other professionals in educational roles can utilize various strategies that foster the development of trust and teamwork aimed at a common goal in partnerships. Bryk and Schneider (2003) completed a decade of research, by means of case studies and data analyses, and gathered focus group data from 400 principals, community leaders, parents, and teachers from Chicago public schools. Bryk and Schneider concluded that part of a teacher's role is to reach out to parents to build trust. The authors state "parents in most urban school communities remain highly dependent on the good intentions of teachers" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 45). The authors concluded that being empathetic towards the unique situation of each student and his or her family, recognizing parents' vulnerabilities, and using interpersonal skills to form partnerships and engage families are all ways, independently or in combination, teachers can build and strengthen trust.

Once trust is established, it may become easier for those involved in partnerships to feel as though all parties are working towards a common goal, whether the goal is an academic outcome or an improved social-emotional skill-set. On the road to attaining these common goals throughout the school year, a shared language is often beneficial. The use of PBIS in the home and at school can lead to reaching a common goal. Family advisory groups and PBIS leadership teams can work together to establish expectations and values. However, when doing so it is critical for teachers and educators to be culturally responsive. "PBIS procedures will not be equally applicable to all families" so it is imperative that culture, values, and expectations are considered when advancing towards a shared goal (Garbacz et al., 2016, p. 64). Some strategies for cultural responsiveness that can easily be infused into the classroom are including resources in all languages spoken in the community, asking families their preferred communication method and using it, creating a community based in trust and shared values that is inclusive of all

members, and acknowledging cultural implications that may go along with aspects of PBIS (Garbacz et al., 2016).

This idea of culturally responsive communication is present throughout a study by Ozmen, Zincirli, and Seluck; this 2016 study looks at potential barriers to communication between teachers and parents in partnerships by means of a survey-style qualitative study of 3,958 teachers from 317 different elementary schools within one city. Out of the 317 schools, 21 schools were chosen at random from the larger sample size to receive and complete the surveys. The results of the study showed socio-cultural barriers as a main hinderance to partnership communication. Omez et al. brings attention to the strategy of school faculty—teachers as well as upper administration—intentionally being knowledgeable of a family member's culture and asspects of the culture's structure so communication can be increased. Teachers then, are also recommended to work on accepting any cultural differences that exist, starting with those that are relevant to the success and growth of the child (Omez, Seluck, Ventiri, 2016). Omez et al. states "trust-based communication that can be established between teachers and parents bears great importance from the aspect of determining problems, finding ways to deal with them, and providing students with help on their way to learning" (Omez et al., 2016, p.29).

Aside from cultural responsiveness, there are various components to consider when building the trust between a parent and teacher. In 2014, the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) published a toolkit for engaging families, complete with step by step models and activity print outs geared at enhancing partnerships. REL describes the potential barriers to parental engagement and prospering partnerships. These barriers include: language differences, availability of families, differing views on education, and personal school experiences (2014). This aligns with the ideas of helping and hindering incidents present in the Strickland-Cohen and

Kyzar study; negative experiences can majorly impact the likelihood of a family member actively contributing to a partnership (2018). REL states "building that trust depends on understanding the barriers that influence engagement and mutually valuing families' contribution to student learning" (2014, p. 38). A strategy proposed by the educational laboratory is called "The Iceberg Concept of Culture" and is an infographic that emphasizes the difference between elements of culture that are easily seen and elements that are unspoken or unconscious. The conscious elements represent the top of the iceberg that is present above the water and includes cultural aspects such as clothing, food, language, and celebrations. The unconscious elements represent the large portion of an iceberg that sits beneath the surface, often overlooked; below the surface includes dozens of components including personal space, eye contact, tempo of work, preference for competition versus cooperation, and attitudes towards elders to name a few (REL, 2014). Much like the Titanic would have fared better if the iceberg below the surface was taken into consideration, the same can be said about teachers and being conscious of actions and words in the classroom and during interactions with parents. Teachers can then use this knowledge and apply it to scenarios using graphics according to REL. The toolkit provides a graphic with the example of a math night where teachers can fill in possible cultural implications that may be present at the event. Teachers aren't expected to be perfect, but trust really can be built and support a partnership when time is being put in towards creating the best experience for families.

Strategies for Family Engagement

Partnerships can be compared to icebergs but they can also be compared to a typical school day. Much like a school day can either be looked at as separate parts or one whole day, the same can be done for different components of home-school relationships. Aspects like communication, trust, and teamwork can often be grouped together when looking at the level of engagement

present in a parent-teacher partnership. Through consistent, open communication, the door is opened for families to become more active members in their child's education. Learning what interventions could be put into place at home is just one way that parents can be actively engaged.

Children are at school for about 7 hours a day; the rest of the time, the child is with their parent(s). There may be things that a parent sees that could benefit the overall growth of the child that a teacher may not be seeing. Many teachers strive to have their classrooms feel like a home away from home for their students, but it's impossible to overlook the fact that students leave at the end of every school day. The study done by Strickland and Kyzar showed that participants of the 2018 study saw teachers being open to parent suggestions as helping incidents; this helping incident was identified by ten separate parents in the study. Parents in the study showed examples of times that their insight proved to be beneficial for the child in the classroom. One parent described an interaction they had with a teacher that referenced previous practices related to challenging the child that the teacher was not previously made aware of (Strickland et al., 2018).

After school sports are often an exciting part of a child's experience in the community; much like students work on the same team when they partake in after school activities, parents and educators make the most progress when they work on the same team. In terms of PBIS, teamwork looks like consistency across the environments that students encounter in their day to day lives. Often, the implications of the home setting are often forgotten, but including the home environment in PBIS procedures increases the effectiveness and longevity of support systems for students (Garbacz et al., 2016). One strategy, is for the presence of a forum where educators and parents can share what is and is not working for the student, whether it be through meetings or

set methods of communication. Another strategy, presented by Garbacz, is creating a school environment and community that reflects the priorities of the family-school partnership. This includes clear signs and directions within a school so that parents do not feel lost and the space feels like somewhere they belong. A successful partnership brings attention to the same values and expectations at home and at school; this consistency is beneficial for a child learning certain expectations and doesn't create a divide between what is expected at school and home. Consistency comes into play in the community atmosphere in multiple ways.

One easy way to foster consistency and understanding is repeating designs and logos on materials so they become familiar to families. Helping families become familiar with school materials and procedures is also described in a partnership enhancing strategy presented by Carassco in a 2010 edition of *REACH*. Carassco describes the benefit of providing family members with skills through training and education. Benefits described in the issue include parents receiving skills that can be used daily with their children during times like homework help after school, a platform is created to empower minority families and provide a voice in the school community, and reported feelings of parents feeling closer to their children and more capable and confident in their ability to help their children (2010). This increased feeling of ability and confidence due to successful communication is restated by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)` brochure series called *Classroom Tips*. These brochures are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development Program. The brochure titled *Building Parent Teacher Partnerships* lists the benefits of adequate communication for both students and parents. These benefits include the ones aforementioned as well as additional benefits such as: noticeably increased instances of willing parent support, more

regular student attendance, and higher levels of student motivation (American Federation of Teachers).

Another strategy that provides parents with a stronger sense of responsibility in their child's education as well as giving them a larger, more concrete role in the school community is addressed by Durisic and Bunijevac in a 2017 CEPS journal. Durisic and Bunijevac proposed the role of a parent involvement coordinator; this is someone who's main focus is on keeping communication open, clear, and consistent with parents so that parents can be truly engaged. This point person provides various benefits to the school community. Major benefits include taking the stress of scheduling volunteers, making sure important dates reach every parent, and answering questions about dates from the teacher and creating a role in the community that allows a parent to be more engaged and strengthen the community of the families in the classroom. Durisic et al. emphasizes the importance of bringing family into classroom, not just waiting in the office to pick up a child for an early release. (2017).

Regardless of the specific mode of communication, partnerships benefit from consistent and regular communication that provides families information about what they can do at home. In schools implementing PBIS, inconsistent implementation of specific behavior support strategies and practices can hinder communication between home and school, especially related to behavioral concerns about a student (Strickland-Cohen & Kyzar, 2018). Consistency when implementing practices is crucial; creating consistency across environments in a child's life is important, which is why parents and teachers need to be working on the same team towards a common goal. One specific communication-related hindrance to partnerships pointed out by parents who took part in the Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar (2018) study was a delay in feedback about student problem behavior or insufficient information being provided to the family about

specific behavioral incidents. One family member from the study stated, "If it takes two or three days for me to be aware of the issue or for [the teacher] to respond [to a question in the daily planner], then that's two or three days that the assignment is late now…" (Strickland et al., 2018, p.17).

Conclusion

The implementation of PBIS practices is exemplary for phrase "consistency is key." Quick and consistent feedback can turn hindering incidents into helping incidents. In a world where timeliness means so much, it can sometimes be difficult for busy individuals, whether it be family members or educators, to respond in a timely manner. One strategy that can be used to ensure feedback is consistent and apt is addressing communication with a "planned approach" (Graham-Clay, 2004, p. 127). When teachers have a set plan for communication that includes various methods of communication that fit each unique family, the gap between what a parent knows about their child and what the teacher knows about the student will begin to close. Graham-Clay states that communication "occurs within the context of ongoing exchanges" and should be "as informative and interactive as possible" (2004, p. 126). Utilizing communication methods with a systematic approach can ultimately change communication in partnerships for the better, positively impacting children in the process.

When trying to enhance partnerships, it's crucial to determine what families want and are wishing for. Qualitative interviews such as the one completed by Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar are effective ways to obtain critical information for flourishing partnerships. Knowing the helping and hindering incidents of the parents in a community gives partnership direction; much like a plant will grow towards the sun, a partnership will grow if teachers and parents can find a common goal. This idea of a common goal is represented in the three main categories of wants

and wishes from the families in the Strickland-Cohen and Kyzar study: teamwork, trust, and communication (2018). These three categories can be addressed using a variety of evidence-based strategies aimed at enhancing partnerships. Each partnership is unique and requires the implementation of different strategies. Further research could be done to see the long-term effectiveness of the strategies used and more qualitative interviews could be held to see if the wants or wishes of families has changed.

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