

## BUILDING BLOCK 1:

# MINDSET

*Partnering with families makes a big impact on students, and we want the best for our students. This is just what we do at our school.*

*- Alaska principal*



# BUILDING BLOCK 1: MINDSET

## *Embrace Families as Partners*

**Successful family engagement starts with a mindset that families are equal and essential partners in their children's education. Part of this mindset is a view of family engagement as a continuum, with true partnership as the ultimate goal.**

## Key Concepts and Research

For families to feel truly valued as a partner in their child's education, they need to have a clear role and invitation from school leaders, teachers, counselors, and other staff. Schools need to send consistent and welcoming messages to families.

When we send consistent messages through words, actions, and opportunities, students and families gain trust and feel comfortable defining their own roles as a partner. As one Alaska teacher says, "Be as positive as possible. Assume good will." Embed these beliefs into your practice.

### ***What beliefs foster effective family partnerships?***

The following eight beliefs are adapted from evidence-based family partnership resources. When schools adopt these beliefs, families feel welcomed and supported, and the doors to real partnership are opened.

1. All families have hopes, dreams, and goals for their children.
2. The home is one of several spheres that shape a child and their education.
3. Family partnership is an essential element of education.
4. Family partnership is a process, not a program of activities; it requires ongoing commitment, effort, and resources.
5. Family interaction with their own children is a cornerstone of involvement.
6. Most barriers to family partnership have their root in school practices – past or present.
7. Successful family engagement nurtures relationships and partnerships.
8. Effective family partnership boosts student achievement.

Another important mindset is to understand family engagement as a continuum. Families may start out with small steps, such as coming to a school picnic. This is not partnership, but it is an important start. As schools and families build trust, and as their skills and confidence for partnership increase, family involvement can deepen into a full and equitable partnership.

## FAMILY SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP CONTINUUM

### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

### FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Families talk to teachers at the time children arrive and when they leave at the end of the day.

Families attend meetings.

Families attend meetings. Staff ask questions about the child, his or her family, and home life.

Staff provide resources/ideas for families to use at home and in the community.

Families share suggestions and concerns with staff.

Families and staff work together to create activities that reflect families' cultural traditions

Families and staff share in the development of activities and events over time based on their strengths/interests/abilities.

Families and staff work together to discuss, implement, and share responsibility for a child's learning plan.

### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Adapted from work by Michele Brooks, Joyce Epstein and Karen Mapp.

## Mindset in Action: Evolving Attitudes

**Dan, a longtime Alaska teacher and principal who has worked in rural and urban districts, shared the evolution of his experience partnering with families:**

Early on, I felt like I was in a defensive posture, always needing to justify my choices as a teacher. There are just so many choices and there's always so much you're not able to do, so I think my earliest stances with families were probably a little bit defensive and nervous.

Much later, I came to realize that families are actually giving their best. What they're able to provide for their children is the best they're able to do in that situation in that moment. I try to remind myself when I get a kid coming to school without their needs met that families are doing their best. Whatever that looks like, it's up to us to take it from there and to always assume the family wants the best for their child.

And along with that, I became mindful in every conversation with families who have been impacted by colonialism that there's a whole other story that's gone on. A key is building trust. As an educator, **I am always inventing a new relationship with families, but I am also inheriting relationships that have gone on for decades.**

As I got to know my families, the big realization for me was how many kids are being raised by grandparents

or aunts or uncles and what a rich source of energy and support that group of people can be. They're often not asked to be part of the PTA, what they know, or what they can contribute. Instead, they hear about problems because there's usually a reason why they're the primary caregiver, usually because their families have been under stress and the parent can't be there at the moment.

I truly believe that each family has things to share no matter what their attitude seems to be. So I started wondering, how do we structure our events so they can come and say, *I have something to contribute*, and not just think, *I hope the principal doesn't talk to me about my kid*. Sometimes, when we're planning an after-hours "family fun" event at school, a student might say, *My dad's really good at building; he'll build a miniature golf course*. It's always in my mind that families are people with assets.

It does, however, take commitment and reflection. Right now, we are really working on getting our school site council to be more reflective of our school demographics – to get Alaska Native families, Filipino families, and lower-income families on our site council. Our equity committee believes that if we can get a few more people involved in leadership from all parts of our school community,





then we can learn new ways to make decisions collectively. Additionally, others might also see them and think, *Oh, look! There is an invitation and role for me here too.*

**Our team keeps coming back to what draws our families in, what our community values.**

I've noticed that the more arts integration, ceremony, and celebration we do, the more families we draw in. Dance, music, art shows, and food are huge. Sharing and celebrating gets all kinds of families into the building, and that's a big step to building trust, building relationships, and becoming real partners in education.

**DEVELOPING COMMUNITY MINDSET:  
BABY RAVEN READS**

*"The Baby Raven Reads program at Sealaska Heritage Institute not only promotes early literacy but the idea of involving parents in their child's education by reading a book as well. It's a simple and positive way to set expectations. It shifts a perspective of education from schools being solely responsible to 'We are all responsible for this child's education.'"*

-SOUTHEAST ALASKA TEACHER

# Analysis: Evolving Attitudes



## WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- How does Dan view his own evolution and growth as an educator?
- What beliefs does Dan hold about families?
- What does Dan notice about families at his school that do not fit the traditional mold?
- How does Dan try to welcome the contributions of all families and caregivers?
- What does Dan observe about what the community values?
- What does Dan believe about relationships?
- What does Dan mean by "inherited" relationships?
- How does Dan's mindset translate to action in his school?

## WHAT ELSE COULD DAN DO?

- How could Dan help others in his school adopt a more open mindset toward families?
- How could Dan and his school engage families and the community to help structure events to be more welcoming to all?

## PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- What do your students' families look like?
- What assets might they have to offer that are being overlooked?
- How might you acknowledge inherited relationships while inventing new relationships with families?
- How do you avoid responding defensively to families?



## Tools and Strategies

**Alaska educators share strategies for building positive relationships with families:**

### SELF-ASSESSMENT OR SMALL-GROUP

**DISCUSSION.** How strongly do you agree with each of the eight statements listed above? Which do you think are most important? Which do you find hardest to internalize?

1. All families have hopes, dreams, and goals for their children.
2. The home is one of several spheres that shape a child and their education.
3. Family partnership is an essential element of education.
4. Family partnership is a process, not a program of activities; it requires commitment, effort, and resources.
5. Family interaction with their own children is a cornerstone of involvement.
6. Most barriers to family partnership have their root in school practices – past or present.
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**SEEING STRENGTHS.** Individually or in small groups, study the following picture. What do you see? [include or adapt drawing of apparently chaotic home environment]



Now look again. Look for signs of learning or educational tools, such as reading materials, art, creativity, or celebration of children and family. How many can you identify?

Discussion: How does this exercise apply to families in our schools? How can we look for and find strengths in every family?

**SUGGESTED RESOURCE:** [Video](#): Three Georgia principals describe mindsets and key strategies for family partnership (5 minutes).<sup>1</sup>

## Signs of Success and Growth

- There is willingness by all parties to communicate about difficult issues without fear of backlash or judgment.
- There is ownership on all sides – school staff and families feel invested in what is happening at school.
- Families and students say they feel welcomed in the school.
- There is a sense of unity and collaborative problem-solving between the school and family, no “blame game.”
- Relationships are characterized by trust and confidence; schools and families believe all parties have students’ best interests at heart.
- Families and students say the school is inclusive, and they feel they are a valued part of the community.
- School staff say families in their community are doing their best and want the best for their children.

## Reflection Questions

Consider your school and community. You may want to discuss these questions with a colleague or community member, reflect on them on your own, or journal about them.

- What messages does my school send families? Are they consistent?
- How do we talk about family partnership in my school?
- What assets do families in my community have to offer?
- How can I learn more from families in my community?
- How do I build a spirit of collaboration and trust?
- How can I expand on that?
- What beliefs help me open up to family partnership?
- Of the eight beliefs listed in this chapter, which are hardest for me to adopt? Which are easiest?

