

## BUILDING BLOCK 4:

# LINKS TO LEARNING

*Invite parents in to celebrate their children's growth and successes.*

*- Second-grade teacher*



# BUILDING BLOCK 4: LINKS TO LEARNING

*Connect families to classroom content and student outcomes*

**Successful family partnerships are a lever for student achievement and school improvement. When teachers, school staff, and families have shared expectations for students, they can work together to support student learning, goal-setting, and a sense of shared mission.**

## Key Concepts and Research

Effective family partnership is centered on student success. This means the ultimate purpose of partnership is to help each student meet their goals.

Linking families to their students' learning happens when school staff provide a clear understanding of classroom goals and how families can practice, play, and learn together in support of these goals. The research is clear that family involvement in helping a child learn at home bolsters academic success. When families and school staff work together, they reinforce academic and social and emotional learning more effectively.

Research finds that family involvement in at-home learning – for example, through conversations about school, talking about reading, and expressing interest in

a child's personal and academic progress – has significant positive academic impact regardless of income or educational background.<sup>1</sup> Teachers play an important role in connecting families to learning and maximizing family strengths and home time to reinforce classroom learning.

Students, families, and school staff have a critical role in developing shared goals and clear steps. School staff can do the following:

- Demonstrate respect for their students' families and cultures.
- Work collaboratively with families to set goals and foster high expectations for student achievement and relationship-building skills.
- Help students and families outline steps to reach goals.
- Show families what children are learning, and demystify grade-level standards and assessments.
- Identify at-home and everyday activities that support learning goals.

- Use data to show families how their children are doing.
- Offer specific, fun family activities to support academic, social and emotional, and other instructional goals.
- Provide regular updates on current class assignments, semester goals, and objectives as well as ways families can support learning.

**Family partnership is critical for closing the gaps in educational opportunity and achievement between higher- and lower-income students.** These gaps will only be remedied when those closest to students – their families and communities – drive decision-making. As one study states, “Parental engagement boosts student achievement both directly and through other improvements to families’ situations.” A case study of low-income families found that families in a structured program of support “become more likely to make academics a priority, to engage with their children’s schools, and to be focused on sending their children to college.”<sup>2</sup>

Because family engagement is strongly linked to student success, federal law mandates Title I schools, which serve disproportionately low-income communities, establish structured school-family partnerships through “compacts,” or agreements. These compacts can be helpful tools for all schools when linked to learning and focused on building relationships.



## Links to Learning in Action: Partners From the Start



As a kindergarten teacher, Karen understands she is the first school-based teacher for many of her students and families. She works to build skills and confidence in families, not just students, by actively involving families in their children's learning and growth. Early in the year, Karen reaches out by phone to each family to learn about their child's strengths and interests, and about each family's goals for their child. She makes an extra effort to contact all families, using multiple modes of communication if needed. Karen believes it is critical to make positive, proactive contact before reaching out to discuss a behavioral or learning challenge.

To ensure all families have supplies to work with their children, at the start of the year, Karen gives each family a kit with items like a deck of cards, dice, and instructions for age-appropriate math games.

To help families support their children's learning throughout the year, Karen uses a classroom app, a weekly one-page newsletter sent home in hard copy, and short email updates about what students are learning and doing together. This goes to any family member on the approved list of family members set up at the beginning of the year.

These communications focus on what students are learning, with tips for how family members can reinforce these concepts at home. She also asks families to share

pictures and ideas about how they are practicing and having fun learning at home. For example, when students work on measurement, Karen encourages families to let their children measure ingredients while cooking with their family or while working on sewing or building projects around the house. She asks families what other activities they do that use measurement so families can share ideas.

When Karen shares photos, she explains what the students are learning. For example, the caption for a photo of a student holding a worm might say, "Students learned how worms help put nutrients back in the soil," or "Ask your child how worms put nutrients back in the soil." Each newsletter includes a few questions family members could ask their child based on the week's activities, such as, "How did it feel to hold a worm?" or, "Ask your child to compare two characters in a movie you watch together."

Karen uses student-led conferences to help children and their families learn to talk about their goals and academic growth. They all talk as a team about the next steps to support and encourage the student's learning.

Years later, Karen says, parents will often tell Karen they are more engaged in their children's learning because of the habits and skills she helped foster early on. She is always gratified when families seek her out at their student's high school graduation or other milestones to share stories of their students' successes.

# Analysis: Partners From the Start

## WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

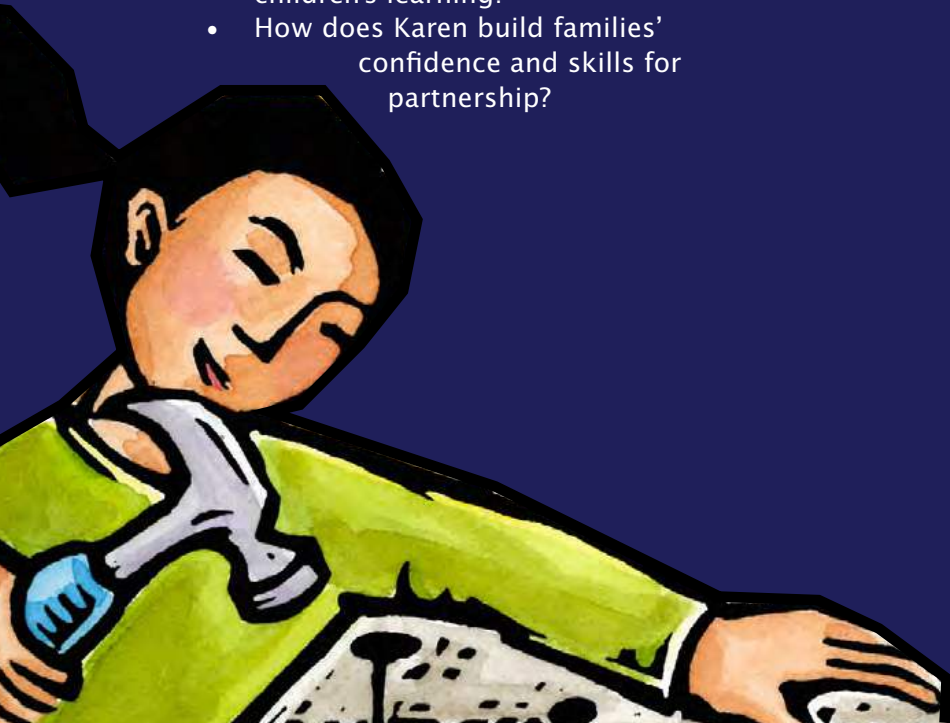
- How does providing simple supplies support families?
- Why does Karen reach out to families before there is a need for intervention?
- How does Karen show she values families?
- How does Karen link families to their children's learning?
- How does Karen build families' confidence and skills for partnership?

## WHAT MORE COULD KAREN DO TO LINK FAMILIES TO THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING?

- How could Karen ensure opportunities for families to provide meaningful feedback?
- How could Karen partner with families to co-create (create collaboratively) classroom newsletters, videos, and other celebrations of student learning?
- How could Karen partner with her colleagues to support family links to learning within her school?
- How could families share with each other some of the activities they are doing with students at home?

## PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- How might the ideas and practices in this case study apply to your school or classroom?
- How do you connect parents to your classroom and student learning?
- How do you show families you value their role?



# Tools and Strategies

**Below are some example tools and strategies to link families to learning. Use the space at the end of this chapter to write down your own strategies to establish a shared vision and to link families to learning objectives.**

**ALASKA TIPS:** Alaska school staff and families suggest the following for linking family partnership to learning:

- Understand why school is important for each student and family in a way that fits their goals.
- Place students in the driver's seat with student-led parent-teacher conferences.
- Invite families to participate in school and in out-of-school learning activities.
- Provide ideas and opportunities to read, learn, and play as a family.
- Seek feedback and suggestions from families to build stronger links.
- Share specific information about what students are learning and how it is connected to key education standards.
- Offer regular opportunities to discuss student progress, learning objectives and ways to help.
- Help families practice asking questions by having each meeting start with families asking questions about their children or the classroom experience.

**FAMILY COMPACTS:** Title I districts and schools are required to establish programs and procedures for meaningful family engagement. These include a written parent and family engagement policy developed jointly with parents and family members of children in the district.

A review of compacts in Alaska showed that most schools and districts have compacts that reinforce the dynamic of schools as rule-makers and families as followers of those rules and expectations. Creating a compact with families can be a real opportunity for conversation and an opportunity for families to become an integral part of the team in reaching school improvement goals.

Schools and families can create compacts that include strategies and opportunities to:

- meet school goals and academic standards,
- link high-quality curriculum and instruction to place and cultures,
- offer home support for learning connected to curriculum,
- reinforce student responsibility for learning,
- participate in activities to build partnerships,
- develop opportunities for meaningful input from families, and
- establish methods for two-way communication about student progress and supports.

Family partnership compacting resources:

- Alaska Department of Education provides an overview and sample forms.<sup>3</sup>

- The National Education Association provides a Quick Brief on Family Engagement in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.<sup>4</sup>
- Texas offers a manual on Five Steps to Success for Developing School-Parent Compacts.<sup>5</sup>
- Linking to Learning With School-Parent Compacts, by The Harvard Family Engagement Institute, offers tools for ensuring family partnership is truly centered on student learning.<sup>6</sup>
- Video resource: Link It to Learning: Concrete Tips for Making Family Engagement Happen includes a 7-minute video with expert Karen Mapp.<sup>7</sup>

### ACADEMIC PARENT-TEACHER TEAMS:

This national research-based model of family-school partnership is built on the idea that schools can thrive when families and teachers work together as genuine partners to maximize student learning inside and outside of school.<sup>8</sup>

- The Anchorage School District has participated in this program and created a video about the experience.<sup>9</sup> The narrator notes, “Children are more successful when they see families and teachers working on a common goal.”

### HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD SUCCEED IN SCHOOL?

- *Look at books or read with your child every night.*
- *Create a quiet space for homework. Help when you can.*
- *Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep and is ready each day.*
- *Model problem-solving with the teacher or principal instead of talking negatively about the school.*
- *Encourage your child to discuss things about their day.*
- *Ask for strategies and activity ideas to practice at home.*
- *Let school staff know the best way to communicate with family members.*
- *Practice new academic knowledge and social and emotional skills.*
- *Ensure your child is responsible for their actions and their goals.*

- Adapted from Alaska Gateway School District's *Migrant Education newsletter*, which includes tips and games.

*Do I get to learn as a parent a new tip or tool, or practice something that helps support my kids' learning? ... Do the teachers get to hear from me about what I know about my kid that might help them be a better teacher to my child?*

- Karen Mapp,  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Signs of Success and Growth

- Teachers and school staff believe that ...
  - to help students reach their goals, we need to partner closely with their families.
  - it is our job and responsibility to partner closely with families to support student achievement.
- Teachers and school staff want to know and understand each student's and family's goals.
- Teacher school staff offer families ...
  - regular, personal invitations to visit the school and classroom and engage in their child's education.
  - ongoing, individualized communication about their child that is positive, actionable, and linked to student learning.
  - opportunities to contribute to communication vehicles, such as newsletters, and celebrations of student success.
  - regular, meaningful avenues for families to ask questions and provide feedback.
  - frequent updates in accessible formats on what students are learning and how the curriculum is tied to education standards and student goals.

## 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 beliefs do I hold about a family's role in their student's success?
- What tools and opportunities are there for families to talk to their child about school?
- What questions do I ask families about their students?
- How do I use that information to motivate each student?
- How do I systematically and consistently support families in working with their students?
- What tools, activities, and agreements do we set to work on school improvement goals together?
- How do our families' knowledge and values tie into academic and social content?
- How can I help families communicate high expectations to their students?
- How do I set students up to share progress with their families?
- How can I help families who may feel intimidated by school help their children set high academic goals? What new ways could I use to empower families to partner in their students' success?

