

BUILDING BLOCK 5:

I always had clear roles for families, but I realize now I did not actually think of them as a true partner. These were my expectations and requests. I realize now there are ways we can both decide how to work together to support each student.

- Alaska teacher

SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE





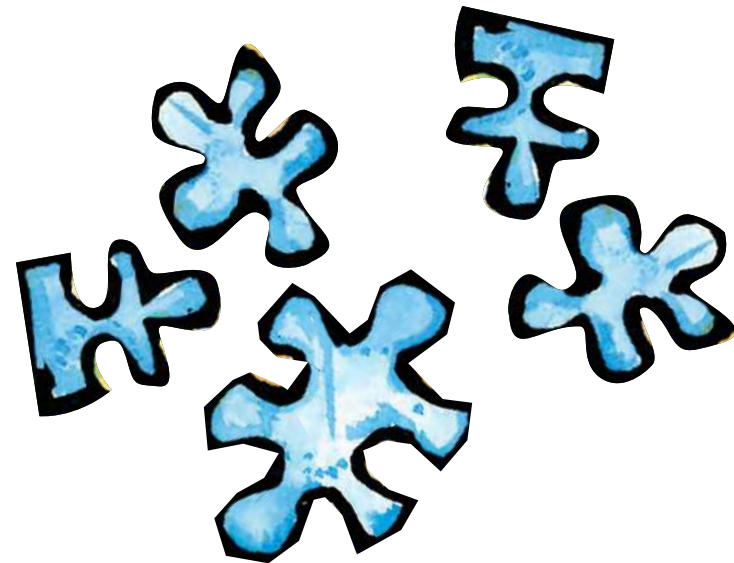
BUILDING BLOCK 5: SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

Build family and staff capacity to work together

Families and staff often want to work together more effectively but don't know how. Successful partnerships build the skills, confidence, and capacity of both partners. Through training and specific opportunities, staff and families can build the skills and confidence they need.

Key Concepts and Research

A growing recognition of the critical role families play in their children's educational success has led to greater interest in family partnership. However, families and staff don't always know how to work together as true partners. Experts say family partnership requirements are often built on the flawed assumption that the educators and families who are expected to partner have the skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems needed.¹ In reality, these skills need to be taught and nurtured. The good news is that *partnership skills can be learned, and confidence can grow through practice and success.*



Skills and Confidence in Action: A Parent's Growth

When Laura's son Rob was 3, friends told her about a local preschool where families are expected to volunteer in the classroom, help with fundraising, keep the classroom supplied and organized, and participate in decision-making. Laura liked the sound of it, but she wasn't sure she had the skills and experience to contribute. A friend insisted she didn't need any, so she signed up.

The lead teacher, Mrs. Jones, shared child development information with parents, including developmental milestones and ways to create rich learning experiences for students in and out of the classroom. She took time to ask parents what she should know and understand about their child and their family. Laura felt like Mrs. Jones really wanted to learn from her and that, as a mom, she was really a part of her child's education. It was the start of meaningful two-way communication. Laura's confidence to engage with teachers as partners grew.

When Rob entered kindergarten, he and Laura both had to adjust to a new teacher. The first week of school, Laura visited the classroom and noticed all the students of color, including Rob, were in the back sharing a table. Laura's own experience as an Alaska Native in the school system, where at times she felt like a second-class citizen, came back to her. She debated whether to say something to the teacher, to go to the principal, to air her grievance on social media, or to just keep quiet.

Her experience in co-op preschool helped her decide to talk to the teacher first. She wanted to provide feedback in a solutions-oriented way. Laura emailed the teacher, Mr. Smith, with her observation along with some information on her own background and on implicit bias, or biases we don't notice. Mr. Smith asked to meet with Laura. The teacher said seating was not based on race, but he was open to feedback and agreed to change the seating chart. He later thanked Laura for helping him become more aware of the experiences of students from historically marginalized communities and how his actions could make a difference.

Laura felt it was important to have Alaska Native family members visible in the classroom and school, and she volunteered regularly. Her skills and confidence continued to grow. The principal noticed her dedication and asked her to join the school's Site Council, a staff-parent advisory body. After several years serving on that body, she ran for and won a seat on the school board.

"It all started in my son's preschool," Laura says. "I would never have seen myself on the school board when Rob started preschool, but each experience helped me feel that I could contribute and needed to contribute."

Laura believes her involvement helped her children. "They see that I'm comfortable and confident in the school, and that makes them feel it's a place where they can feel confident and at home too."

Analysis: A Parent's Growth

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- How does Laura change in her confidence and engagement with the school system?
- How does a positive early experience with Mrs. Jones set up Laura for an expectation of two-way partnerships with school staff?
- How does Laura's experience with Mrs. Jones prepare her to engage with Mr. Smith?
- How might Laura's experience shape her children's experience in school? How might it shape other parents' experience?

HOW CAN THESE KINDS OF SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE BE FOSTERED MORE BROADLY?

- For families who do not have an experience like co-op preschool, how can school staff help build their confidence?
- What can teachers do to make sure more parents like Laura feel they have a meaningful role to play?
- What can principals and other school staff do to ensure all families feel they can contribute and provide feedback?

PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- Have you had a difficult conversation like the one Mr. Smith had with Laura? How did you respond?
- How do you help parents gain skills and confidence to partner?
- What do you need to strengthen your own capacity to partner meaningfully with families?



LEARNING TOGETHER

The Anchorage School District coordinated a day “of learning” for families and school staff to build shared skills and understanding on trauma engaged schools practices.

*All 66 elementary schools invited parents, community members, and business partners into the schools to learn together.

*The training used a series of videos developed by the district and its partners to serve as a springboard for meaningful conversation.

*Schools provided lunch to create a welcoming atmosphere, and to give participants opportunity to build relationships and keep the conversation going over a shared meal..

Tools and Strategies

There is a wide range of ways to build confidence and skills in families and school staff.

FOSTER SKILLS AND HABITS EARLY: Parents As Teachers² is a family support program that can serve families from pregnancy until their child enters kindergarten. The program provides child development information, parenting support, and community resource referrals to support family well-being. Alaska has programs in many communities across the state. According to program evaluations, in addition to benefits to children of enrolled families, parents gain skills, habits, and confidence that can help set up successful family partnership throughout their children's school years. The program helps foster the following:

- Parents improve their parenting knowledge and skills.
- Parents are more involved in their children's schooling.
- Families are more likely to promote children's language and literacy.

Other home-visiting programs in Alaska similarly help build families' confidence and skills as well as lead to better outcomes for children.

HELP FAMILIES FIND THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK: Some families say they avoid school because they do not believe they have the power to make change. One strategy to help combat this is to help families develop questions and identify their top priorities. These

activities can be in groups or one-on-one and can be led by parents, staff, or community members. One engaging 20-minute activity focuses on developing questions and advocacy.

1. Propose a topic or solicit a problem.
2. Brainstorm questions.
3. Look at questions and make them open-ended and closed.
4. Choose the top three questions.
5. Think about whom to ask and what action the responses might lead to.
6. Prioritize one or two as a group or individual to move forward.

Example: A student is being held back. As a caregiver, what questions do you have? Which are your best questions? Whom will you ask? What action do you want to take?

The Right Question School-Family Partnership Strategy³ can be a resource for this process. The Right Question Institute explains, "When educators integrate the development of parents' questions into their practice, the focus shifts from teacher-driven conversations to a process where parents help set the agenda and identify information they need." The process involves several shifts summarized below.



Shift away from doing this:	Shift toward doing this:
Telling families what they should know.	Providing a process to ask questions and meet family/ student needs.
Asking families at the end of a conversation, “Do you have any questions?”	Setting aside time at the beginning for families to produce questions, set the focus of the conversation, and strategize about how to use them.
Telling families what they should do.	Providing a structure for families to think about and name what they can do.

This process focuses on developing two skills: asking important questions and participating more effectively in decisions. Working with families and staff to develop questions as well as practice when and where to use the questions can allow caring adults to support each student, monitor their progress, and advocate effectively when necessary.

CULTIVATE MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS: Dialogues, hosted conversations, or other social technologies can be used to generate “conversations that matter” on a wide variety of topics. These conversations are based on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges.”⁴ Models for cultivating meaningful conversations include First Alaskans Institute’s ANDORE project and World Café.

- **First Alaskans Institute’s Alaska Native Dialogues on Racial Equity (ANDORE)** project. With the aim to foster racial healing through engagement in community conversations across Alaska on equity, ANDORE strives to create open dialogues so communities can move toward increased

understanding, healing, and growth. To achieve this goal, the project elevates stories and experiences through community conversations and seeks to advance practice and policy solutions that will help achieve racial equity. Tools available include the following:

- Dialogue agreements – an approach outlining parameters to maintain respect among participants and creating a supportive atmosphere in dialogues
- Host guide – details the components necessary to host a successful community dialogue
- General project scope presentation – outlines the project aims
- Powerful questions to stimulate dialogue on racism – prompts to encourage group dialogue during community conversations
- Sample dialogue flow – to carry out an orderly dialogue and ensure that each voice is heard
- Sample model for hosting dialogues on racism and racial equity – an outline for hosting difficult dialogues

- **World Café.** Models for cafés for parents include Parent Cafés, Community Cafés, and Caring Conversations. These conversations can help families dig in to a problem practice in the school or district and look for root causes rather than Band-Aid solutions. For example, if someone has a toothache and takes aspirin, the toothache may go away temporarily. However, if the tooth is rotting, the problem won't go away until the rot is found and addressed. In the same way, certain problems at school won't improve until the root cause is identified and addressed.

The Association of Alaska School Boards and other organizations across the state offer trainings on community dialogue, café-style hosting, and facilitation.

ALASKANS SUGGEST DECISION MAKERS...

- Recognize families' expertise by asking families to help you to get to know and understand your student; they are the expert on their own child.
- Ask families what's working well for their student and celebrate successes or achievements.
- Incorporate family content into each lesson plan; create everyday opportunities to practice content at home and ask for suggestions from families.
- Work with families to create a shared vision and goals for each student, and then reflect and improve on your processes.
- Learn facilitation techniques and interactive technologies to support opportunities for families and school staff to learn together about developmental growth and relationship-building.
- Consider the best ways for families to have meaningful input in developing educational priorities; create advocacy structures, joint learning opportunities, and peer support.
- Build comfort and relationships with families, which will take time, practice, and making the most of our social networks.
- Ask families what role they might like to take on in or outside the classroom to share a skill, tradition, or story.
- Provide opportunities for families and school staff to share up-to-date information on student growth in both academic and social skills.
- Learn about mental health supports and other services that might be needed by families in your community. Refer and connect families to these services.
- Ask families what partnership strategies are working for them.
- Encourage families who might be willing to get more involved.
- Share successes and techniques among school staff to encourage schoolwide family partnership successes.



Signs of Success and Growth

- School staff have a partnership mindset and believe all families have something to contribute.
- School staff feel confident encouraging and partnering with families in families' multiple roles.
- Families feel comfortable asking questions of school staff and feel they have opportunities to ask.
- School staff and families are looking at ways in which families are moving from involvement to real partnership.
- Families take on meaningful roles in designing family partnerships, teaching school staff and students, and collaborating to help students achieve goals.
- There are multiple opportunities for families to fully engage with their own child's learning, with school staff, and with school improvement efforts.
- Families believe they can communicate effectively with their child's teachers.
- Families have a plan of action when it comes to their children's education.
- Families feel they can effectively monitor their child's education and ask questions to get answers they need.
- Families believe their values and priorities are considered in family partnership opportunities.

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.

- In what areas do you and your school team want to build family partnership skills?
- What opportunities do staff have to learn more, get coaching, or refine skills?
- What practices can schools put into place to reflect on what has been working and what has not been having the impact needed?
- What are key areas in which families might help make decisions in your classroom or school?
- What opportunities exist for school staff to build their family partnership skills?
- What opportunities are there for families to practice their student support and school improvement skills?
- What do you do well? What do your families do well?
- What mindsets are you and your colleagues working to develop? What mindsets are families developing?
- Who in your school has used effective approaches to family partnership?
- What key issues would families like to address?

- What family-to-family supports are available for families to mentor and support each other? How might these be strengthened?
- How do families learn about advocacy and decision-making roles?
- How can other partners in the community, such as tribes, churches, bingo halls, and other organizations, support activities that build confidence in specific skills?
- What questions, activities, and tools can you offer families?
- What facilitation skills might be helpful for you (e.g., right question training, dialogue hosting, parent café skills)?

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

*Not all families are able to come into the school. This can be because of work, childcare, documentation, language barriers, or other reasons. How can you involve these families?

*Lack of reliable internet access can be a barrier for some families. What other methods can you use to reach families?

*English is not the first language for some families. Who can be a resource to effectively reach these families?