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Fostering Family Engagement in the School Responder Model

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The School Responder Model (SRM) was developed in response to the use of exclusionary school discipline and court referral to address student misbehavior, practices that disproportionately impact students with disabilities (Fabelo et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Government Accountability Office, 2018). Initially created as part of widespread juvenile justice reform efforts focused on stemming the referral of youth with mental health needs to the juvenile justice system, the SRM is structured to address violations of school rules for students with mental health needs through connection with community-based services and use of restorative practices instead of turning to exclusionary school discipline and school-based arrest (Cocozza, Keator, Skowrya & Greene, 2016).

Successful SRM's are grounded in collaboration between local school, mental health, and law enforcement stakeholders (Greene & Allen, 2017). However, pulling only these stakeholders together is usually not sufficient to support a thriving SRM. It is critical to develop an SRM in a way that fosters family engagement, paving the way for parents and guardians to consent to their children's participation in the process and to be full partners in connecting their children to needed services and supports. Given the very sensitive nature of engaging caregivers when their children are both struggling to follow school rules and coping with mental health challenges, family engagement in the context of the SRM can be especially complex and requires intentional planning and ongoing work.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Research indicates that student and school outcomes are improved through family engagement. Positive by-products of family engagement include improved school readiness, academic achievement, consistent attendance, improved levels of homework completion, improved behavior while at school, better social skills, and

higher graduation rates (Garbacz et al., 2017). Academic performance findings include a positive association between family engagement and student math proficiency and reading performance (Garbacz et. al, 2016) as well as increased test scores and academic perseverance (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Students whose parents have a high level of engagement with school also show more positive attitudes toward school and are less likely to be suspended from school

(Carreón et al., 2005). Overall school climate and academic learning has been found to improve in some schools following an increase in family engagement and family-school collaborations have been associated with decreases in disciplinary incidences and increases in school safety (Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016).

These findings have also been applied specifically to students who have struggled with behavior in school. Randomized controlled trials have found that family engagement specifically related to these students increases student adaptive skills, reduces behavior problems, enhances school engagement, and improves relationships between parents and teachers (Garbacz et al., 2017).

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS

While it is therefore well established that family engagement is critical to positive school outcomes, many of the SRM sites across the country have struggled to foster meaningful family engagement in their planning and implementation processes. As described below, research indicates that there are a variety of reasons that family engagement in schools can be challenging, including: traditional methods of engagement, power imbalances, language and culture differences, lack of resources, and personal attitudes.

Traditional structures used by schools to foster family engagement often rely on one-directional communication from the school to parents (Garbacz et. al, 2016). This communication frequently comes in the form of newsletters, handbooks, and discipline reports. Parent engagement also often takes the form of parent activity in the school. This most commonly includes parent attendance at general school events or parent-teacher association meetings or attendance at parent-teacher conferences. Both one-directional communication and parental involvement in school-centered activities often

lead to narrow and shallow partnerships where parents are viewed as volunteers (Ferlazzo, 2013).

These traditional engagement strategies are often rooted in the philosophy that families should support the goals as defined by the school instead of creating a mutual responsibility between parents and school for supporting student success (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014). These methods can be unsatisfactory for parents. Recent results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016 found that only 54 percent of parents reported being very satisfied with the way school staff interacts with parents, with dissatisfaction growing as students age (McQuiggan & Megra, 2017). Deeper forms of engagement focus on parents as leaders or potential leaders and can develop into broader and deeper relationships between families and schools (Ferlazzo, 2013).

Power imbalances can also present a barrier to family engagement with schools. Educators usually have more power in the school than parents, infusing all parent engagement efforts with power imbalance dynamics (Garbacz et al., 2016). This imbalance can become even more exacerbated for families from different cultures who may be relegated to lower slots of the power hierarchy due to cultural factors such as language, limited understanding of curriculum, and a lack of awareness of their rights as parents (Carreón et. al, 2015). It can be important to intentionally address these power imbalances through efforts such as parent leadership development and educational equalization (Warren et. al, 2009).

Language and culture differences sometimes also present barriers to effective family engagement. The cultural worlds of the parents and the school are assumed to interact only in certain expected ways and those assumptions may not match the cultural norms for people from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Carreón et al., 2005).

Studies have identified a ranges of barriers that relate to these kinds of differences, including:

- Reduced likelihood of parental engagement inside schools for Chinese-American parents than for European-American parents (Georgis, Gokiert, Ford & Ali, 2014);
- Devaluing of cultural beliefs and a lack of sufficient bilingual staff or translators for Latino parents (Hill & Torres, 2010); and
- Frustrating initial attempts at school engagement met with school-imposed limitations for African American families (Hostutler, 2015).

Implementing strategies to overcome cultural barriers often requires resources that are hard to come by, highlighting another significant barrier to effective family engagement. Resources were identified as the top barrier to family engagement in a survey of schools implementing Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (Garbacz et. al, 2017). Respondents in that survey indicated that a lack of time, money, personnel, and multilingual staff were the top barriers to strong family engagement. A study of inclusive parental engagement practices for refugee families found that the use of cultural brokers was the most important part of the program (Georgis et. al, 2014). These brokers were able to facilitate communication with families, provide family support like translating for them at medical appointments, and provide support to school staff in adjusting to new cultural considerations. Brokers were able to take a relational approach with parents, and parents, in turn, became increasingly comfortable both in being at the school and in voicing their concerns and needs at school.

Finally, personal attitudes can also block effective family engagement. Many school staff perceive parents as being disinterested in school activities and engagement when, typically, parents have

minimal opportunities to help make decisions, voice concerns, or effect school change (Carreón et. al, 2005). The cultural barriers described above can result in misconceptions among school personnel that families are not interested, apathetic, or just don't care about their child's education (Rodriguez & Elbaum, 2014). Once personnel adopt these beliefs, they may no longer work to engage parents.

Attitudes also shape the way school personnel view the role of parents. Research shows that family engagement is most effective when there is mutual respect and support between the family and the school (Hostutler, 2015). Much of the research also emphasizes that these positive relationships are the essential foundation to effective family engagement with schools (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Greene et. al, 2017). One-directional communication and incentives, such as meals or prizes, do not hold the key to engagement efforts. Parents' feeling of belonging in the school environment is critically important and a school climate that supports positive relationships with and a feeling of belonging among parents often requires a shift in the school's attitude toward parents (Baker et. al, 2016). Effective family-school partnerships are grounded in attitudes of shared responsibility for educational outcomes, collaborative problem solving, value and respect for differences, and responsiveness to everyone's needs (Hostutler, 2015).

FOSTERING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE SCHOOL RESPONDER MODEL

While there are many barriers to effective family engagement with schools, some SRM sites have implemented successful strategies. One such strategy was implemented by the school district in the City of Schenectady, New York and is consistent with research that has shown

that establishment of a reliable and trusting relationship with at least one school actor lays the groundwork for a more fulfilling school engagement experience for parents (Carreón, 2005).

Established during the 2016-2017 school year, the Schenectady SRM involves an Emergency Response Team (ERT) that comes together to identify and address behavioral health needs for students who have broken a school rule that is serious enough to warrant long-term suspension. Parents are members invited to participate as part of the ERT and they are offered the services of the parent advocate beginning with the first ERT meeting. (Robinson & Ciaravino, 2018)

The parent advocate plays a critical role in Schenectady's SRM. In fact, review of first year SRM data showed that students whose parents were engaged with the ERT were more likely to successfully complete the SRM process and to avoid a repeat significant behavioral infraction than students whose parents were not engaged with the ERT. The parent advocate's function is to support families through the SRM process and even beyond. She completes assessments, speaks to groups of parents to grow their familiarity with her, explains the SRM process, helps families connect with outside resources that they may need (such as housing supports, food pantries, and social services), hosts a community-based agency in her office twice a week to offer resources to families, conducts home visits, and facilitates a weekly parent focus group.

Perhaps as important as these varied support functions is the attitude of the parent advocate. She believes in working with families in a non-judgmental way, connecting them to supports that provide relief from stressful situations, creating individualized plans for each family to meet their unique needs, and helping parents to feel that they count and are important. While the parent advocate services are optional for families, the parent advocate will spend time

personally reaching out to families who are not initially responsive, making phone calls and trying to connect with them in-person at their homes. This kind of relationship building between parents and the parent advocate allows for deeper relationships to form.

A different parent engagement strategy was embraced by Connecticut's SRM, called the [School Based Diversion Initiative](#) (SBDI). While the SBDI model did not initially focus on the need for family engagement, it soon became clear that families are critical to making the connection between schools and community-based services for their children (Greene et. al, 2017b). Coordinators of SBDI turned to partnership with a community-based family advocacy organization called FAVOR to help bridge an apparent gap between schools and the families they were trying to reach. This kind of community-based organization partnership has been shown to be an effective facilitator of family engagement in other school settings (Warren et. al, 2009) and it has effectively enhanced the family engagement work of SBDI.

FAVOR's SBDI family engagement efforts focused on fostering family-friendly attitudes among school personnel through the provision of presentations that brought the lived experience of parents of children with mental health needs to life for school personnel (Greene et. all, 2017b). FAVOR staff were accompanied by a Parent Champion at each presentation to offer her personal experience. These presentations were incorporated as a part of the school's professional development structure and were an important tool used to humanize the experience of parenting a child with mental health needs for school personnel and to help school personnel find the strengths in families. These opportunities even sometimes provided a forum for school staff to share their own similar lived experience, further bridging the gap between school personnel and parents.

Finally, some SRM sites have worked to shift away from more traditional family engagement efforts and create new paradigms that offer partnership with and support for parents. For instance, the Schenectady SRM planning team included a parent representative from the outset. The parent was an equal member of the team and was able to help the team plan and conduct larger community focus groups and a parent survey during the planning process in order to elicit a broader range of family perspectives. She was able to provide a consistent parent voice in all team planning conversations, bringing a family perspective into the development of the process (National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, n.d.). A new SRM site in New Orleans, Louisiana is developing a new paradigm rooted in offering supports and resources to parents. Their SRM plans include hosting one family engagement event during each six week marking period. The events will be geared toward providing supports for families and will include automated reminders for parents before the event and a follow-up resource with information from the event for parents who were not able to attend.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings described above and the on-the-ground experiences of SRM sites all support the notion that family engagement is a critical component of an SRM and it warrants targeted attention from the outset of SRM planning through day to day implementation. Sites that want to foster family engagement should consider adopting the following practices:

- Include family representatives around the SRM planning table from the outset;
- Acknowledge that effective family engagement will likely require new efforts that reach beyond traditional methods used by

schools and a change of perspective that welcomes families as equal partners;

- Design new methods to support non-traditional methods of family engagement, such as: partnering with a community-based organization to foster family engagement, using parent peers or a parent advocate to provide support to families, providing professional development to school personnel that humanizes the family experience, and dedicating resources to overcome language and culture barriers;
- Solicit parent feedback on existing school structures for meeting student mental health needs; and
- Regularly ask parents of youth who become involved in the SRM about feedback on the SRM process.

While family engagement requires these kinds of intentional, ongoing, and focused efforts, it can also lay the foundation for student success in the SRM process and in overall school performance. Additional discussion of family engagement in the SRM process can be found in [two podcasts](#) developed by the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice.

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