



TOOLKIT TOPIC 4

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*Enhancing  
Student Success  
through Family  
and Community  
Collaboration*

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## *Enhancing Student Success through Family and Community Collaboration*

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Family and community collaboration is crucial for school and student success; the benefits are supported by research that demonstrates its positive impact on academic achievement, attendance, and behavior. Involving families and communities enriches students' learning experiences by providing support, resources, and diverse perspectives. Collaboration between schools and families, particularly in the context of special education, ensures individualized plans for students, promoting consistency and success. Teaming and collaboration among educators, families, and other stakeholders foster a cohesive approach to student development. However, systemic mistrust, especially among marginalized families, poses challenges that must be addressed through positive, proactive communication; mutual respect; and a commitment to student success. Effective communication strategies tailored to individual families help build trust and understanding, laying the groundwork for successful collaboration and improved student outcomes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Family and community collaboration is essential for the success of schools and students. Research shows that involving families and communities in schools positively impacts student achievement, attendance, and behavior.<sup>i</sup> When schools collaborate with families and communities, students are more likely to perform well academically and improve student outcomes.<sup>ii</sup> This is because families and communities can provide students with support, resources, and guidance that complement what they learn in school. In addition, schools can work with families and communities to encourage positive behaviors, such as attendance and punctuality, and discourage risky and harmful behaviors, such as drug use and delinquency. Working with families and communities enables schools to encourage more community members to become involved in supporting education by bringing a wide range of perspectives and experiences into the classroom, which can enrich students' learning experiences and help them develop a better understanding of the world around them. This also leads to more significant community investment in education, benefiting all students.

*Just one suspension in ninth grade increases the chances that a student will drop out of school.*



As noted by [ISBE's Parent Guide](#) (2020), family and community involvement can positively and powerfully impact student outcomes. Families know the student best and are more aware of their child's needs. Families and the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team must collaborate to develop an individualized plan for the student. Full understanding of the agreed upon behavioral plan at school is necessary for consistency and success.

As a parent of a 16-year-old boy with autism, I have mixed emotions regarding special education teams. My son has come a long way over the years, but still has so much to learn. If a teacher does not have a child with a disability, it is difficult for them to comprehend what the family and student are going through. Parents are often made to feel like their child is “difficult,” or “a burden,” for the school-based professionals. Once, I asked a teacher how my son was doing. This teacher replied, “He’s as good as he’s going to be.” Can you imagine how that felt as a parent?

~ Christina, mother of Chase

## TEAMING AND COLLABORATION

Teaming and collaboration allow families, school-based professionals, administrators, and other staff members to support student learning and growth. When educators and parents work together as partners, they share responsibility and create essential opportunities for children to develop social, emotional, and academic competencies. Partnering can lead to a more cohesive and coordinated approach to teaching and learning. The word “team” assumes a common purpose or unifying goal, in this case, the well-being and education of the student.

Families require validation of their roles in that pursuit and support in exercising their rights. Family members engaging with school administrators in pursuit of a free and appropriate public education bring to the encounter their own previous experiences with schools, which may themselves have been traumatic or adversarial. Family members may feel judged as parenting or custodial failures because a student's challenges may result in poor academic performance or behavioral issues. They may be highly conscious of their social status during these negotiations. The greater the distance between their perceived social station and that of the administrators and school faculty with whom they interact, the greater degree of initial distrust there is likely to be. All these factors impact the cohesiveness and, thus, the effectiveness of the student's support team.

Families have the right to bring other people to the meeting. These can include community service providers, advocates, lawyers, friends for moral support, etc. Families may require assistance to understand and utilize their rights under the law. Advocates who may explain or assist family members in exercising those rights can form an invaluable resource for marginalized families. Having other people present may serve various interests for the student and the student's families, such as participation in the discussion, presentations, note-taking, questioning, or simple presence. Rights that one does not know how to exercise effectively are not particularly meaningful. Families should be informed of their right to have others present, especially in the role of advocate. Parent training in behavioral supports and counseling can be added to an IEP as related services<sup>iii</sup> when such assistance would help a student achieve the goals specified in their IEP.

## **POSITIVE PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Positive, proactive communication between schools and families is essential to build trust, establish clear expectations, and promote student success. Frequent and effective communication — whether through phone calls, emails, or online communication apps — is essential for families and school-based professionals to share information about children's progress, needs, and interests.

This ongoing dialogue ensures that both parties are informed about student behavior, achievement, discipline expectations, and the steps needed to meet those expectations. Regular exchanges of information help in establishing and reviewing shared goals through a mutual decision-making process. Clear and concise communication minimizes misunderstandings, helping parents grasp school expectations and giving school-based professionals a better understanding of family expectations.

Effective communication can occur in various settings and formats, but the key is to find the right approach for each student’s family. Positive communication, especially in the initial stages, sets a constructive tone for future interactions, even when discussing more challenging issues. Initial conversations should focus on listening to families (with questions like “What should I know?”) to help to ensure they feel heard and involved. Fostering this positive and inclusive communication can enable families and school-based professionals to build a solid foundation for collaboration throughout the school year.



## **SYSTEM MISTRUST**

It is essential to acknowledge that the distrust of many families -- especially marginalized families -- toward the school system is based on experience. They are painfully aware of the disparities in power and the distribution of resources embodied and reproduced in our educational structures. Their mistrust of the system is not a product of ignorance or a cultural pathology but a reflection of a lived reality. Anyone in the role of “school official” thus begins the relationship at a disadvantage if there has been initial distrust or miscommunication. Reestablishing parent-school ties through frequent, effective communication, demonstrated respect and investment in the student’s success; and ethical behavior is possible.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Mr. Ewe's Insights

Bringing representatives of various invested community agencies or resources to a student's IEP meeting can be life-changing for a family. I have witnessed what is possible when social workers, law enforcement representatives, the courts, or dedicated advocates from within the school system who know their way around an IEP and special education law are present to join the conversation. The knowledge and resources of these informal consultants may help to resolve problems. In addition, they may have insights and experiences to offer that are entirely outside the expertise of the other experts gathered at the table.

The creativity provided by the diversity of viewpoints and experiences at the table can provide fertile ground for the kind of innovation and coordination that can generate new insights and possibilities for the student and their family. For example, I have watched as families and school districts wrangled over transportation and scheduling expectations, only for social service representatives to point out the existence of funds or other sources of support that could provide gas for school-related transport or even the purchase of a used car. Likewise, I have seen Local Education Agency representatives learn information in IEP meetings that later impacted how they interacted with the student in the community and prevented potential arrests/violence by defusing tension that would otherwise accompany misunderstandings of the student's effect or behavior.

I have seen (and sometimes been) the special education professional at the table whose experience and creativity provide workarounds for intractable dilemmas. It may be as simple as bringing awareness of area resources or previous solutions to similar issues ("Two years ago we purchased a communication board/built a sensory corner/developed a check-in/check-out system that...") that may provide more economical or practical solutions to challenges that the district may find too expensive, complex, or intractable to remedy at first glance. Such advocates ensure that the rights of families and students are respected. I've had to insist on more than one occasion that districts follow the law in (for example) providing the IEP in the parents' native language when the district insisted it would be "too burdensome" to do so or "remind" administrators of the laws governing suspensions and manifestation determinations for special education students they had decided to punish in defiance of state and federal law.

Families may choose relatives or community members to participate in the IEP meeting as cultural resources. Having family members, representatives of the family faith traditions and practices, or other community members present can provide an invaluable education for the school personnel and administration, who may not otherwise be familiar with cultural or religious contexts or alternatives. This can be especially valuable when the behavior being addressed has connotations or meanings that may differ in the student culture from those of the dominant classroom paradigm (i.e., ideas about body language, eye contact, degrees, and forms of deference in dealing with adults, people of other genders, status, etc.)

## KEY TERMS

### Teaming

Partnering with families, school-based professionals, administrators, other staff members, and the student to collaborate to support student learning and growth.

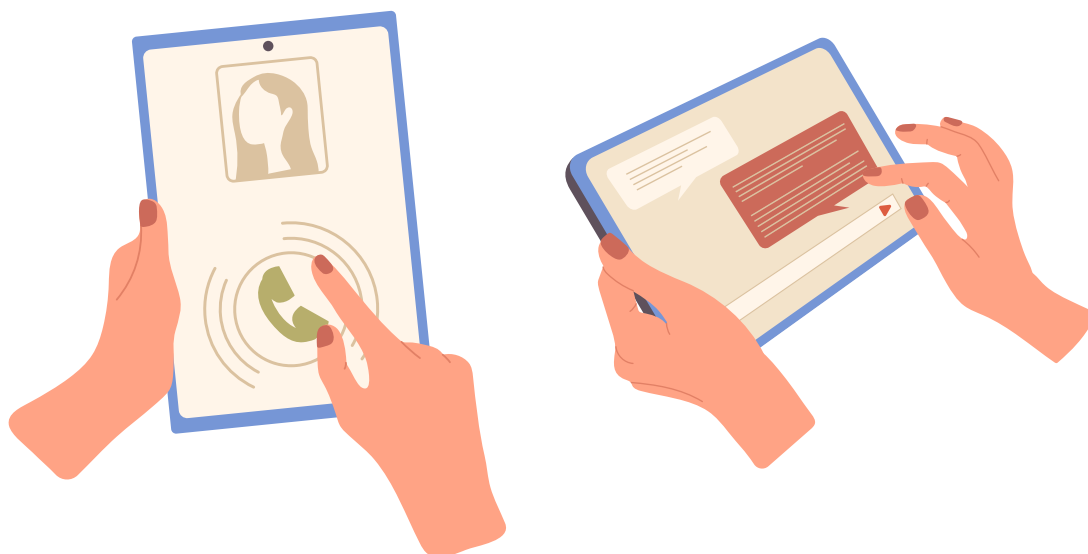
## BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

### COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILY/GUARDIANS

Establish a system with the student's family for communication. Communications should highlight positive events and experiences and not be used to only share information on the student's undesirable behavior.

#### Examples of Communicating with family/guardians:

School staff can maintain communication by means of the schoolwide system, emails, texts, phone calls, home-to-school notebook, etc. For students who might require more frequent communication, consider a home school checklist that is developed in partnership with the family. Examples provided in Appendix C. If restrictive interventions such as time out or restraint have been used, the school must make reasonable attempt to notify the student's parent or guardian on the same day the event occurred.



#### Non-Examples of Communicating with family/guardians:

Telling a student you are going to call home while a student is engaged in a challenging behavior as a threat.

## BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

### PICTURE EXCHANGE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM (PECS)

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is a widely used augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) method designed to assist individuals with limited or no verbal communication skills in expressing their needs, wants, and thoughts. PECS employs the use of pictures or visual symbols as a means of communication. The PECS process begins by teaching the individual how to exchange a picture card for a desired item or activity. The communication partner (e.g., parent, teacher, therapist) initially prompts the individual to hand over a specific picture card, representing their desired item, to the partner. The partner then immediately honors the request and provides the desired item. Once the individual grasps the concept of exchanging pictures, the PECS training focuses on expanding their communication skills. This includes teaching them to be more independent in selecting and exchanging appropriate picture cards to express their needs, wants, or thoughts.

#### Example of a PECS:



#### Non-example of PECS:

Icons or pictures within a student's schedule in a classroom are not PECS. PECS is a formal communication system that requires formalized training to implement.



## BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

### PARENT TRAINING

Training the parents to help them become more of an active participant in their child's intervention. This allows interventions to be utilized within the home environment helping to increase generalization of skills/behaviors.

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## VIDEO RESOURCES

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TO ACCESS ADDITIONAL VIDEOS

**Staff, Community & Family Collaboration video:**



## RESOURCE LINKS

- » [ISBE Parent Guide on Educational Rights and Responsibilities](#)
- » [DHS PUNS Brochure](#)
- » [Equip for Equality](#)
- » [Wright's Law](#)
- » [ISBE Catalog of Supports and Resources](#)
- » [Assistance for Families to Keep Children with Disabilities Living at Home | Family Matters Parent Training and Information Center](#)
- » [ISBE Family Engagement Framework Guide](#)
- » [ISBE Advocacy Resource](#)

This is not an endorsement nor an exhaustive list of possible resources. Please consult with your individual district, Regional Office of Education, and the Illinois State Board of Education for additional resources. [Illinois State Board of Education](#)

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## ENDNOTES

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