

Leading and Learning in the School Community: Providers, Principals, and Parents as Influencers

In every school, there are individuals who, because of their position or role, have influence on the aspirations and the day-to-day interactions in the school community. Principals and parents are high on the list of influencers. Each exerts his or her own kind of influence. Principals are the recognized leaders and have formal authority to lead. Families exert influence and often are seen as informal leaders.

When principals and families come together, they can exert powerful influence on both goals and challenges. Principals must ask themselves, *“Can I really achieve what I envision if the teachers and families do not go with me?”* Likewise, parents must ask, *“Can we really create the school community that we envision without daily support from the principal?”*

As we learn to see school personnel, principals, and families as influencers who need each other, three important leadership behaviors help to build the partnership:

- **Whenever possible, chose engagement over management.**

We expect principals to be active instructional leaders, effective administrators, and guardians of the school environment.

Because they hold a position of authority, the way in which principals address these roles creates a style of interaction that impacts the entire school community. Some principals hold the leadership tightly. They interact and communicate with staff and families but make decisions on their own or with a small group of trusted advisors. Many school communities define the principal role as a skilled manager who leads with authority and supports the staff in implementing strategies and practices. Other school communities believe that many situations clearly require management, but they want a leadership style that is grounded in engagement.

Engagement is a shared leadership strategy. It is based on the understanding that staff and families respond differently when they are engaged than when they are being managed. When the school community is engaged, principals learn what might stand in the way of their goals and who might help in taking down barriers. By engaging their school community, principals build allies among both staff and families. Leading change does not have to be a lonely job! Principals can begin to create allies by thinking deeply about management and engagement.

Ideas/strategies for principals to engage stakeholders include the following:

- An [infographic](#) developed by a group of state and local stakeholders working with the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) conveys the difference between managing and engaging stakeholders, including parents. Download the infographic and spend time examining the ways in which management and engagement are described.
- Use the infographic to organize a conversation about engagement in the school community.

Principals must ask, *“Can I really achieve what I envision if the teachers and families do not go with me?”*

- Build relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders in the school community by engaging them often.
- Before the need arises, build the relationship and clearly communicate the issues for which a principal must be able to decide without high levels of engagement.
- Translate the work on school goals and targets into simple activities in which many people can participate. Along with big plans, create little steps that people can take to feel connected to school initiatives.
- Show that administrators value participation by telling members of the school community what they learned by working with them. Communicating value builds allies!
- **Meet people where they are; help them to lead in place.**

When principals make the commitment to be more engaging, they also take on the job of reframing issues in a way that individuals in the school community can understand and contribute.

Not everybody who wants to participate has the background to contribute meaningfully on the content, but they do know how the issue impacts them. Leaders know that it is important to understand this factor before challenges to implementation occur. An active process of engagement in all communication builds this relationship. Over time, parents become more accustomed to their role as learning partners. New leaders begin to emerge and build capacity to take on some of the tasks. Although it can seem overwhelming at first, active engagement becomes much more natural as principals learn how to share leadership and families learn how to contribute. A new relationship depends on behavior change by both the principal and the families.

Parents must ask, “*Can we really create the school community that we envision without daily support from the principal?*”

Ideas and strategies for principals to find and support leaders in the school community include the following:

- Work with their building implementation teams to define activities that allow them to sample and monitor understanding of school goals in the larger school community.
- Post simple, time-limited opportunities for people to respond to questions.
- Tell people what they have learned by working with them and how they used the information.
- Develop infographics to convey complex information simply.
- Co-create infographics with staff and families and help them to become ambassadors for the work by using the infographics they create to explain the initiative within their own networks.

**The Center for IDEA Early Childhood Data Systems (DaSy) and the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) developed a [Data Visualization Toolkit](#) that includes infographics.*

- Be intentional about building the comfort level and the capacity for families to contribute. Cultivate potential leaders who can reach and influence various groups within the school community.

**With family members, visit [Serving on Groups](#) to develop a program to grow family leaders in your school community.*

- **Commit to becoming both a leader and a learner.**

Engaging leaders recognize that they also must be learners. Learning from and with individuals who hold differing perspectives empowers them with more and deeper information from which to make decisions. In schools that are committed to engagement, everyone comes to new interaction as both a leader and a learner.

Ideas and strategies to help leaders learn with their stakeholders include the following:

- Spend time thinking about your leadership style.
- Be aware of your own tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways.
- When things do not go as expected, rethink your approach. How could you have better addressed your own needs and the needs of the group?
- Recognize that titles only go so far in gaining support. Families have their own ideas of who has credibility on the issues.
- Reach out and engage current family leaders. Seek and develop new family leaders.
- Learn to ask probing questions and listen without judging. Find out what school community members think about the issues and why.
- Convene informal groups of staff and families to discuss topics often.
- Develop practices and routines that support the administration, staff, and families in learning from and with each other.
- Remember, not all leaders have titles! Families are assets to a principal.

**To reflect on progress toward engagement, use the rubrics in the [Leading by Convening](#) blueprint (p. 39).*

With support, many people in the school community can learn to contribute and lead. When principals recognize and develop families as assets and allies, they help themselves while they enrich their school community.