

Bridges Not Barriers

Strategies for Family Partnerships



Why It Matters

Research consistently shows that strong family–school partnerships lead to better student outcomes—higher attendance, stronger academic performance, and more positive perceptions of school by students and families. However, many schools struggle to build and sustain authentic, equitable, and meaningful partnerships. This guidance is organized around three key barrier categories (systemic/institutional, self-regulation, and meeting families where they are) and offers strategies to address them.

Systematic and Institutional

These are obstacles embedded in school structures, policies, logistics, or institutional culture that limit effective partnership.

Common Barrier	Strategy	Try This
Communication gaps	Survey families early & often	Ask about communication modes (text, email, calls) childcare needs, access to devices, ideal meeting times, and hopes/dreams for their child
Restrictive school schedules	Offer touchpoints	Newsletters, text messages, school website, social media, or mailed updates
Power imbalances	Build community through shared experiences	Host events like art exhibits, clean-up events, family-school fairs, and/or technology workshops
Limited or no staff professional learning	Train staff	Provide staff training and coaching on family engagement use tools such as the Dual Capacity-Building Framework

Meeting Families Where They Are

This category reflects the need to adapt to the diversity of family contexts, circumstances, and needs.

Common Barrier	Strategy	Try This
Unpredictable / shift work schedules	Flexible participation options	In-person, virtual, asynchronous modules; multiple dates and times
Cultural mismatch or lack of culturally responsive practice	Hire family liaisons	Think cultural brokers — who serve as bridges between home, school, community
Families facing crises (housing, food, etc.)	Partner with trusted organizations	Libraries, Community Centers, Food Banks, Diaper Pantries
Dual-language learners or limited English proficiency	Translate or adapt materials	Ensure translation and cultural relevancy and not over simplified
Educational materials that don't meet families' needs or interests	Solicit and act on family input in school decisions	Ensure families have meaningful influence

Barriers Tied to Self-Regulation

These refer to students' and family members' challenges with attention, behavior, emotional regulation, or other developmental/behavioral constraints that can make participation more difficult.

Common Barriers

- Behavior or emotional challenges in students
- Family or student stress or crisis
- Attention or executive function difficulties
- Overwhelm or burnout in parents/caregivers



When addressing barriers tied to self-regulation schools may need to use a combination of strategies to build the bridge with families.

Strategy	Try This
Start relationship building early	Create rapport before challenges emerge
Invite Family Stories and Voice	Deepen understanding of child's background through activities like life maps, "get to know you" activities, and home narratives
Co-create norms and expectations	Meet with families to talk about the classroom routines and create expectations together
Co-develop intervention plans	Bring families in as equal partners rather than unilateral decision-makers to help create the support plan
Workshops tailored to families' needs	Provide workshops and talks to support stress management, behavior strategies, or executive function support

Get Started, Get Better



Assess – Conduct a family engagement survey or audit.

Plan – Form a small family–school action team to co-design engagement strategies.

Communicate – Send consistent, two-way messages using multiple formats.

Support – Provide translation, childcare, and transportation when possible.

Reflect & Adjust – Collect feedback and celebrate success stories.

References

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