

School-Based Family Resource Centers: Characteristics of Successful Family Centers and Family Liaisons



Family Centers

A family center can provide a school with an effective approach to engage and inform families. It can be a place where family members can meet, plan, and collaborate with staff and community to support all children's academic and social development.

Family centers located in a central easy to reach location are best but when space is a problem collaboration with the community can provide solutions to finding a location within the community and near the school. Family centers should be nonthreatening places to access resources, and have meetings, workshops, informal discussions, and social exchanges.

Family Centers are just as important in middle and high schools as they are in early childhood and elementary schools. At all levels, they can be a place where families, school staff, students, and community members are welcome and supported. In middle and high school, students may use a family center as place to stop by, seek advice, have a snack, complete an assignment, etc. It is important that the family center information matches the developmental levels of the students, e.g. high schools connect parents with other parent centers at workforce solutions centers, and institutions of higher education.

Common characteristics of successful family centers include:

- A strong commitment from the school and district administration
- Active outreach to hard to reach and less engaged parents
- Careful consideration of schedules, interests and skills of families in design and activities of family center

- Respectful and caring relationships between school staff and families and a tone of collaboration and shared responsibility for student success
- Location easily accessible and Family Center success publicized and celebrated success
- Creative use of available funding through federal, state, and local sources with parent involvement components

Sample activities sponsored by family centers include:

- A Clothing and/or Food Bank with donated clothes and food from local businesses and community partners.
- A Father's luncheon where fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and cousins ate lunch with students, visited classes, and signed up for school activities.
- Lending libraries with sets of information relevant to the age level and interests of families on parenting, student academic achievement, activities to do at home, etc.
- Adult and family literacy programs, ESL, jobs training, GED programs, health education, etc.
- Parent education workshops of topics identified by families and teachers.
- Tutoring, mentoring, and homework programs
- Partnerships with social service agencies, neighborhood businesses, colleges and universities, health care providers, and other organizations

Family Liaisons/Coordinators

Many centers hire coordinators and also operate with part-time staff and volunteers. Centers usually offer parents information about health, nutrition, safety, child development, and school studies and literacy. Some centers also offer referral information about mental health agencies, job listings, food stamp agencies, drug rehabilitation centers, and other social services.

Family involvement coordinators, liaisons, or ambassadors play a critical role in building positive links between parents, students, and school staff in a school community. Family-school coordinators support students and their families in reducing barriers to learning and help students to be successful in school, at home, and in their community.

Roles and responsibilities will vary based on the vision and priorities of a school's programs. Combinations of people, programs, services, and settings can define the qualifications and roles of a family-school liaison.

General qualifications and skills include:

- Clear understanding of class and cultural backgrounds of families and how to bridge culture of school
- Demonstrates respect for ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity
- Communicates (in languages required) effectively with school staff, families, administrators, and students
- Participation in professional development linked to effective practices for building strong school, family, and community partnership programs
- Access to resources and tools available to facilitate program planning, implementation, and evaluation
- Patience with reaching short and long term goals
- Awareness of parental involvement laws, policies, and regulations that apply to the school and/or district

It is important to remember that family engagement initiatives in a school or district cannot be left completely to one coordinator or liaison. Review the following Family Coordinator Sample Job Description that includes seven major tasks along with ideas for activities and programs to carry them out.

Consider the roles and responsibilities in your school and/or district. What are your short and long term goals for supporting family engagement coordinators, liaisons, or ambassadors in your school community?

(Adapted from: Anne Henderson and Karen Parker Thompson of the Alexandria City Public Schools in Virginia.)

Packed with tips from principals and teachers, checklists, and an invaluable resource section, *Beyond the Bake Sale* reveals how to build strong collaborative relationships and offers practical advice for improving interactions

between parents and teachers, from insuring that PTA groups are constructive and inclusive to navigating the complex issues surrounding diversity in the classroom. Henderson, A.T., Mapp, K.L., Johnson, V.R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: The New Press.

