

## Ideas for Engaging Underrepresented Groups: Key Strategies for Working with Specific Groups

Reaching out to traditionally underrepresented groups is an essential step in maintaining the strength of a school's grassroots advocacy. Following are simple steps that schools and parent groups can take to engage and empower *every* family:

1. Reflect on practices.
2. Create effective messaging.
3. Promote meaningful family engagement.
4. Create community connections.
5. Serve as an information resource for parents, families, educators and community groups.

### Reflect on Practices

**Start with a diversity profile** of your families, school and community. In your area, what demographic data are available to help you learn more about school-age children, their families and their neighborhoods? Such information might include income levels, race/ethnicity, family configurations, special needs, religious preferences and geographic distribution. How well does the current membership and leadership of your parent groups reflect these demographics? What other significant differences characterize the children, families, neighborhoods and schools served by your school? Use the **Diversity and Inclusion Worksheet** below.

Then, **define your target audiences**. Which groups are not as well represented in your school structure and practices? Which groups are difficult to reach because of language, geography, cultural perspectives or religious differences, or have been resistant to invitations and outreach?

Then, **inventory your communication resources, opportunities and challenges** in reaching out to these underrepresented groups:

- **Resources.** Consider what outreach resources are available from individual volunteers, your schools, and community groups and organizations: talents, materials, money, time, goods and services. What are the school policies on distributing flyers, displaying posters and using parent listservs?
- **Opportunities.** What prescheduled school or community events provide an opportunity for connecting with every family, including those from traditionally underrepresented groups?
- **Challenges.** Which languages are used in the schools? Do you have translators (paid or volunteer) for each language present in your community? How do you contact local media (radio, television)? Do you have the money, facilities and talent to produce messages in both print and digital forms? Which forms of communication are most accessible and useful for your target audience(s)?

**Other questions to ask** when assessing your school's communication practices include the following:



- Are materials informative, published regularly and accessible by all families?
- Do the school and your parent groups provide opportunities for families and staff to share information in a variety of ways (e.g., email, home visits, phone calls, printed materials)?
- Is it easy and convenient for parents to contact teachers and provide feedback to the school around policies and issues of concern?

### Create Effective Messaging

Effective messaging requires more than just providing clear, accurate and useful information or persuasive arguments for the value of PTA. To be most effective, messages must be adapted to the perspectives, needs and concerns of their target audiences. Groups that have not historically participated in schools may not understand the benefits of participating or may not feel a connection to the issues for which the school advocates. Becoming familiar with what matters most to the families and communities you seek to engage will help you adapt your messaging about the school to these audiences.

Some tips for effective messaging:

- **Begin by asking.** What do these families need to understand about the benefits of their engagement in the education of their children? For those who are not familiar with school structure or parent groups, it may be important to highlight benefits to themselves, their children and the school community.
- **Make and maintain contact.** A primary strategy should be to talk frequently with members of the families or groups you are trying to reach. Personal relationships are critical in making people feel welcome, understood and respected. Maintaining communication is critical; the basis for family involvement will be created not just from an initial welcome but through ongoing interaction. Mentoring underrepresented parents and families can help them understand informal expectations and informal rules. Be careful to be culturally sensitive. Avoid blunt questions about differences, and be vigilant about preconceptions and making inferences.
- **Make messaging a two-way, ongoing process.** Frame your message about your school in ways that relate to the needs and concerns of your target audiences. Put your message in their terms, their language, and the forms they prefer. Ask for feedback and listen carefully. Be prepared to change in response to feedback, to show people that their perspective matters.
- **Remember that you are always communicating.** What you do and how you do it speak as loudly as your carefully crafted messages. Where people sit; who talks with whom; how differences are recognized, respected and accommodated; which differences go unrecognized or are treated as unimportant; and even routine methods of conducting parent group meetings and events can make people feel more or less welcome. For example: single working parents may have different time constraints and child care needs than two-parent working families. How are these differences addressed when planning a parent group meeting or event?



## Promote Meaningful Family Engagement

Research shows that there are good reasons to develop family engagement. Across income and background differences, students whose families are engaged are more successful. Parental engagement also has been shown to be an essential ingredient in improving schools in urban, low-income areas.

**Create a strategic plan** for engaging diverse families. The Framework for Family-School Partnerships at [NMengaged.com](http://NMengaged.com) provides steps and tools to support you in reaching out to a variety of families.

## Create Community Connections

Which groups and organizations are active in the neighborhoods served by your school? Not only can partnering with such organizations create greater shared resources and alliances to serve families and schools, but these groups can help connect you with traditionally underrepresented families through their own activities, leaders and members.

Some tips to consider:

- Reach out to social clubs, service agencies, public libraries and parks, civic organizations, foundations, police and fire stations, hospitals, religious organizations and community service groups.
- In deciding which groups to engage, ask yourself: What can these groups potentially bring to a collaborative relationship with our school and district that would be useful, valuable or a resource in advocating for children? Consider the ways that potential partners' missions overlap with the school's goals, as well as any challenges in reaching out to these groups.
- Collaborate with community-based organizations that serve target populations. For example, developing partnerships with organizations that serve diverse families can create important alliances.

## Serve as an Information Resource for Parents, Families, Educators and Community Groups

Families and community groups are more likely to partner with your school when they see the benefits that their involvement provides. Some ways you can demonstrate your value to the school and community include the following:

- Provide information about current issues. Make use of school and/or district position statements and resolutions.
- Distribute information about community resources that serve cultural, recreational, academic, health, social and other needs of families and educators.
- Provide information to the community, including those without school-age children, about school programs, events and needs.
- Empower parents with access to conference workshops and e-learning modules on parenting skills.
- Spread the word about parent leadership and training opportunities.



## Use Key Strategies for Specific Groups

The following links provide information and resources for focusing on specific groups of families. Follow the links for useful ideas and practices to consider for each group.

- [Hispanic Children and Families](#)
- [American Indian/Alaska Native Children and Families](#)
- [Asian American Children and Families](#)
- [Pacific Islander American Children and Families](#)
- [Male Engagement](#)
- [Children in Military Families](#)
- [Children in Foster Care and Their Families](#)
- [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning \(LGBTQ\) Children and Families](#)
- [Children With Special Needs and Their Families](#)
- [Location Matters: Urban, Suburban, and Rural Children and Families](#)
- [Engaging Immigrant and Refugee Families in the Schools](#)
- [\*National PTA Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit, 2016\*](#)

Adapted from <http://www.pta.org/members/content.cfm?ItemNumber=4891&navItemNumber=4909>

Consider use of the **Diversity and Inclusion Worksheet** below.



## A Diversity and Inclusion Worksheet

A school or organization that recognizes diversity values differences and similarities among people through its actions and accountability. These characteristics include age, ethnicity, gender, language and culture, socioeconomic status, among many different things.

When schools respect differences yet acknowledge shared commonalities uniting their communities, and then develop meaningful priorities based upon their knowledge, they genuinely represent their communities. When schools and parent groups represent their communities, they gain strength and effectiveness through increased volunteer and resources to support student success.

Use the worksheet below adapted from the from ***National PTA Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit*** as a guide in reviewing and planning for culturally and linguistically responsive practices in your school community.

Families Represented in the School Community	Identified Gaps in Family Representation	Road Blocks to Family Engagement	Skills, Talents, and other Assets That Could Benefit School Community	What School Staff Can Do to Engage Diverse Families
Describe your community and consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race/Ethnicities</li> <li>• Preferred Languages</li> <li>• Age Ranges</li> <li>• Family Structures</li> <li>• Economic makeup</li> <li>• Education Backgrounds</li> </ul>				



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Adapted from: *National PTA Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit*, 2016. <http://www.pta.org/diversity>

