



7. A framework for strategic, culturally-sensitive family engagement

The considerations and recommendations listed below are intended to help schools successfully and effectively engage parents from any background, with the goal of improving student achievement.

☐ **Create a team that focuses on family engagement school-wide/district-wide**

Working as a team can enable you to reach more families and help ensure that family engagement strategies can be sustained after the grant ends. To form your team, consider a diverse group of individuals such as parents/guardians, counselors, teachers, administrators, students, parent liaisons, school-based social workers, district-level staff, and other community members.

Effective family engagement must be part of a school-wide effort and must involve district leadership or school principals. Therefore, GEAR UP Coordinators may serve on the school's family engagement team to ensure GEAR UP efforts are coordinated with the school's efforts and that the school's family engagement team considers college awareness and preparation as priorities for their school-wide efforts. However, the focus of the GEAR UP Coordinator's efforts toward family engagement should be on directly serving the GEAR UP cohort's families.

☐ **Identify previous and current successful family outreach at your school and build on this**

Build on success. Talk to staff members and community members to learn about existing efforts and systems that are effectively engaging families at your school. You'll earn respect by showing others you respect and value them.

☐ **Coordinate and communicate with school staff regarding family engagement**

Communicating with school staff about your family engagement plans, especially those who work directly with GEAR UP students, can help you achieve your family engagement goals. Suggestions for communicating with staff about your parent engagement plans and goals include:

- ⚙ Standards for the required, annual "staff orientation to GEAR UP" include providing information about your plans for parent engagement. The powerpoint template provided by the state office includes a slide to be customized to describe your family engagement plans for the year, and your availability as a resource for parents.
- ⚙ Remind teachers periodically throughout the year to encourage parents to contact you as a resource.
- ⚙ Utilize the standard ways that your school communicates updates and information with one another to inform of your family engagement plans *and outcomes* (e.g., "First Tuesday of the month is next week and you know what that means – GEAR UP Taco Tuesday! Our topic this month will be 'College Fit'. Please encourage your students to attend with their parents." Or "Over 100 people attended the GEAR UP Kick Off on August 27th!. Parents seemed very enthusiastic and eager to be involved"). Some schools communicate these types of messages



during regularly scheduled staff meetings, others use email, interoffice mail (notes left in mail slots), or more formal written reporting processes.

- ⚙️ Coordinate with your counseling office on an on-going basis to avoid duplication of services and conflicts in schedules.
- ⚙️ Teachers might consider offering extra credit to students for presenting at GEAR UP parent events. You could even work collaboratively with a teacher, having students complete career exploration projects throughout a quarter that culminate in presentations by students at a parent event.
- ⚙️ As your relationships with teachers, administrators and staff at your school develop, don't be afraid to ask for their support, as volunteers or speakers at your family events.

□ **Actively value and build on families' strengths**

Acknowledge and value “funds of knowledge” – the concept of “funds of knowledge” originally encompassed the historical accumulation of abilities, bodies of knowledge, assets, and cultural ways of interacting (Vélez-Ibañez and Greenberg, 1992). The concept has been expanded to include academic and personal background knowledge, accumulated life experiences, skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts, and world views structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces (Hogg 2011 and Rodriguez 2011). In working to engage families, it is important to value the skills/knowledge the families you serve come with, and build upon those experiences and view them as assets.

Strengthen parent networks – It is common for parents, who may know each other from the neighborhood or because their children are friends, to advise one another, help each other navigate new situations and address school issues, and support one another's goals. During events, workshops, etc., allow time for parents to network, facilitate activities that support relationship-building among parents, and create spaces at your school that are family/parent friendly – such as hallways with photos of families at events or graduations, office waiting areas with inviting visuals in languages spoken in the community you serve, and when possible, toys or books for younger children.

Ask parents to volunteer at your family events – in varying capacities depending on their unique strengths. You could have some parents help with the sign in sheets as people enter, to ensure the sign-in sheet meets GEAR UP's data documentation standards (legible; student name associated with each parent name, etc.). Other parents might help with technology, or present about their careers. Some may be willing to make phone calls to encourage parents to attend your events. Most often people are flattered to be asked as it shows you value and trust them.

Consider having a parent advisory board -- The board members can support you with ideas, strategies, and support for getting other parents involved. Again, parents you ask to serve on this



board are likely to be flattered. It will be important to listen to, and heed the advice of this board if you want them to stay active and involved. Communicate with your supervisor prior to setting this up to solicit their suggestions, find out any requirements for establishing such a body within your district, and to ensure administrative support.

Avoid “othering” – “othering” is to view or treat a person or group of people as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself. Examples include describing families you work with, with phrases like *“they don’t understand,”* or telling someone with an ethnic name that *“that is a weird name”*. Instead, use inclusive language such as *“some of our families may not yet be familiar with...”*, or *“I have not heard that name before.”*

Practice awareness of deficit-model thinking, and replace it with empathy, asset-based thinking, unconditional positive regard, goal-oriented thinking.

Examples of deficit model-thinking may include:	Consider a different perspective:
▪ “parents didn’t attend our event because they don’t care” ▪ “parents don’t understand the US education system/values because they are from a different community/country” ▪ “parents don’t speak English so they can’t communicate with the school”	▪ The times we are available to meet with parents do not work well with their schedule. Let’s find an alternative. ▪ Parents have experience in a different education system. What goals and values for their child do we have in common? ▪ It must be difficult to be unable to express your questions and concerns about your child’s education. Who in our school or community can help translate and interpret so that we can communicate with families?

☐ **Build Relationships and Rapport**

Generally, people are more willing to believe information and accept advice from a trusted source with whom they have a relationship than from a stranger. This is particularly true when it comes to advice about their children; when parents know the source of information truly knows and cares about their children, they are more willing to listen. Therefore, begin engagement efforts with the goal to establish a relationship first, then share information and discuss outcomes. These efforts should start as soon as possible upon a student’s enrollment in the GEAR UP cohort/school, as it takes time to develop meaningful relationships. Some ways to establish authentic relationships with families are:

- ☐ **Make positive calls** – at the beginning of a quarter, semester, or school year call families to share positive updates on their students. Make the first call they receive from you a positive one – rather than one of concern about the student.



- **Conduct home visits** – visit families homes to learn about them, who they are, how many family members support the child at home, discuss their aspirations for their child, understand any challenges you can support them with, etc. Always schedule in advance and conduct home visits with a colleague.

□ **Communication and Messaging**

- **Always practice two-way communication** – use every interaction you have with a family to not only provide information (about school, college, their child, etc.) but also to solicit information from them (about their questions, their hopes and goals, their fears and concerns, their expectations of you, for GEAR UP, or for the school as a whole). Invite their participation by asking questions during in-person or phone conversations, soliciting input through surveys or evaluations (**see Attachment 5 for an example**), and having a ‘comment box’ available in your office or the front office/designated family space. Consider conducting polls or surveys via text (one example, related to soliciting input about events, is mentioned in Section 5).
- **Make information and opportunities to communicate accessible** – Ensure all/most families receive the same type and frequency of information to ensure your outreach is equitable. Communicate with families via all platforms available to you- telephone (auto calls AND personalized calls), text message (programmed AND personalized), emails, website announcements, social media, newsletters mailed and sent home with students (**see Attachment 4 for a sample newsletter**), informational letters/mailer (**see Attachment 6 for sample letters**), workshops (one-time and series), one-on-one meetings, small group meetings, and home visits.
- Translate all content to other languages spoken/read in your community.
- Always follow through with parent questions, concerns, or information you commit to researching and sharing.
- In every communication inform parents of the best times and ways to reach you. Provide alternative contacts or numbers outside of those times.

□ **Ensure your engagement strategy is culturally informed**

Every person and family has customs and beliefs that shape their perspectives. While it is impossible to become an expert in every culture, it is important to acknowledge our own culture as well as learn about the culture of our school community. Learn about others by asking with authentic interest and neutral language. Note that previously listed tips in this toolkit relate to relationship-building and communication. It is through the foundation of relationships and communication with families that culturally informed practices can grow.

Some examples of culturally informed practices include:

- Scheduling events to avoid/considering cultural holidays
- Using inclusive language (consider diversity of races, ethnicities, abilities, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic experiences).



- Selecting a space/room on the school campus for events that is accessible (close to parking, with access to ramps or elevators, etc.)
- If and when appropriate, selecting meeting places for school meetings or workshops that are closer to where most families live, or close to public transportation stops. These places can include elementary schools, public libraries, community centers, etc.
- Collaborate with community members who can inform culturally relevant practices in your community.
- For more detailed information on Cultural Awareness practices visit:
<https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/uploadedfiles/guide-to-cultural-awareness-iii>

☐ **Link every interaction to a goal**

Ensure that every conversation, event or activity with and for families (outside of relationship-building conversation, which has its own goal) has a clear goal and includes three components:

1. Share what you would like families to know. For example – importance of postsecondary education, career pathway information, financial aid information, admission requirements, their child’s accomplishments or goals, their child’s need to improve academically and/or behaviorally. (In other words, your objective is to provide specific content. For example, “The Sweet 16 courses your child should complete in high school are...”)
2. Inform families that their involvement is important and key to achieving the desired outcome (their child’s success). (In other words, your objective is to demonstrate you value them and to affirm their importance. For example, “As a parent, you are so important in ensuring your child takes the right courses to achieve their goals.”)
3. Inform families of what they can do specifically at home to support their child in achieving specific desired outcomes. (In other words, your objective is to make a call to action by the parent, and to clearly outline their role. For example, “Here is a list of the 16 classes. Your child will register for classes in February, so after that date, check-in with her/him to see if he/she picked the ones that I highlighted on the list. Call me with questions that may arise.”)

☐ **Plan events with families’ needs in mind – their time, schedule, interests**

- Incentivize family participation by including student participation as presenters, greeters, volunteers, etc.
- Schedule events during a time of day that works best for your community. Some families may work in the daytime so evening events may be best. Other communities may have evening work, so mornings are best. Consider hosting the same type of meeting/event multiple times (morning/evening/weekends). Another consideration is for seasonal work. If families typically have work seasons for some months, schedule most major meetings/events around those months.
- Consider the length of time families are available. If time is limited, schedule short check-ins during drop-off or pick-up times before and after school.
- When hosting events on campus: reserve a space that is appropriate in size, includes necessary technology, and is accessible to all; reserve and clearly mark parking that is



closest to the meeting place; create and display posters/signs that guide parents to the right room; solicit support from greeters to guide families to the meeting room; arrange for childcare by student volunteers with an approved teacher/advisor; serve food if the event extends over a long period of time or if the event occurs during a typical meal time, with State Office approval. *Arizona GEAR UP Event Standards provide other relevant requirements for GEAR UP events.*

☐ **Share relevant content with families (college-readiness)**

The college-readiness topics that are most important for families to be familiar with when their children are in 8th and 9th grade are:

- GEAR UP defines ‘college’ as any type of education after high school, which may include a trade school, community college, or university
- The importance of postsecondary education
- The admission requirements for public universities in AZ and that the classes students take in high school all matter
- The various forms of financial aid available, emphasizing that college can be affordable, while also covering what it costs
- Grades and attendance are important because they may help their child get into the school of their choice, and may help earn them more scholarships. The meaning of GPA and how to calculate it.

Most importantly, share with families that:

- Regardless of specific information parents know/don’t know about their child’s current school or college requirements, it is important that parents share with their children *every day* that they value education and that they have high expectations (for their academic abilities, the goals they will accomplish, and the positive impact they can have in their school community now and, more broadly, later in life).

When sharing college access information be sensitive and aware that parents might not be excited about their child going off to college until they understand the process and the motivation behind this goal as well as how this aligns to their values and customs. Remember that parents may have various jobs and careers so be aware when using examples of jobs that are more or less desirable and expressing the idea that college graduates are ‘better-off.’ Use facts to encourage a college-going culture and do not minimize experiences of those without college-degrees.

☐ **Get More Ideas**

An effective family engagement strategy that supports a college-going culture is specific to every community. For an example of an 8th or 9th grade family engagement plan for the year, see the outline in **Attachment 7**.