

A dark brown, textured book cover is centered on a wooden surface. The cover features the title "Community and Family Partnerships" in a bold, gold-colored sans-serif font. The text is arranged in two lines: "Community and" on the top line and "Family Partnerships" on the bottom line. The book has a visible spine on the left side. Two gold-colored corner protectors are attached to the top-right and bottom-right corners of the cover. The wooden background has a natural grain and some darker spots.

**Community and
Family Partnerships**

About the MA DESE Family-School Partnership Initiative (FSPI)

- Opportunity for districts to use the updated *Massachusetts Family, School, and Community Partnership Fundamentals (Version 2.0)* to reflect on family-school partnership and receive training, coaching, and strategic planning support to strengthen district systems for working collaboratively with families/caregivers.

About the FSPI Reflection Process

SMI Methods – District Support

- Three cross-district meetings with the four districts/schools participating in the Fall 2021 cohort.
- Four focus groups with district stakeholders: family members/caregivers, students grades 5-12, and teachers and frontline school staff. Focus groups also included a short three question poll.
- Three meetings with our district FSPI team to:
 - Reflect on family-school partnership in the district;
 - Do a team Fundamentals reflection;
 - Review focus group themes; and
 - Identify implications for the next stage of family-school partnership work: “low hanging fruit” (one immediate priority) and longer term priorities

Focus Group Questions - Examples

Family Members / Caregivers

- What makes you feel welcome in your child's school? What would help you feel connected or valued?
- What's working for you in your partnership with the schools now? What's challenging?
- During the pandemic, what differences did you experience in your relationship and interactions with school? Are there things your child's teacher or school did that you would like to see continue?

Teachers and Frontline Staff

- What does strong family-school partnership look like in the classroom, across school, and at home?
- What's working for you in your partnership with families now? What's challenging?
- During the pandemic, what have you learned about school and family partnership? Are there any changes or innovations you made this year that you think are worth saving?

Students

- How do your family members interact with your teacher(s) and school staff? What do you see them doing or talking about together? (school events, meetings, etc.)?
- What do you think school staff and your family members should talk about or do together? How do you think they should work together to support you?
- Tell us if there's anything you like or don't like about the school's interactions with your family and what you would like to see changed if you don't like it?

SMI's Big Questions

1. What about family-school partnership seems to be working well? Where are we hearing consensus or varying viewpoints about this?
2. Have there been any innovations during the pandemic period – strategies families and staff find valuable and want to keep?
3. Thinking of the five Fundamentals overall, where is there an opportunity to improve or build deeper family-school partnership? What observations and thoughts can we offer about the next stage of work?

What is working with families (Staff Feedback)

- Open and honest communication.
- I send quick weekly updates to parents each Friday. While I don't think 100% of the parents read them, having a routine helps me keep up, and helps parents who are interested know when to look for information from me.
- There are some great supportive parents, however a lot are not invested in education. During COVID and with the HUGE learning gap, parents need to be even MORE supportive of their child's education.
- I have always openly communicated with my families; even when the conversation is a difficult one.
- There is an open line of communication in my partnership with families.
- Biweekly updates of what is going on in our grade level. Email with any concerns about student progress, work or behaviors.
- Although there is some support from families, I do not feel as though there is much collaboration.
- My weekly newsletters sent home by email. Also, my weekly checklist sent home with each student.

Themes from families/caregivers

- Family partnership is predominantly defined in connection to parents attending school meetings and events or responding to teacher outreach.
- Seems easier to define and do family partnership at elementary level; secondary harder to figure out.
- Most parents are happy with the relationship they had with their children's teachers.
- Technology is a must - COVID availability (for families) via zoom was wonderful. Pandemic proved that; afraid now that kids are back in the schools the connections will drop off.
- Principal blogs very helpful - Superintendent phone call was great.
- Some expressed frustration with how engagement is offered. “The old ways of engaging - open house, curriculum nights, etc. - just not enough, you think the schools would understand that as no one shows up.”
- Families want to feel connected to the schools – not always easy:

Themes from Students (4-8)

- Overall – their parents feel welcome in school and parents like going there.
- Students discussed that “COVID times” felt “not so good” but they felt supported by family members and teachers working together.
- Students liked seeing parents and school working together and would like to see them in the classroom more – i.e. They want parents to know what they are doing in class so that they can discuss at home.
- Lots of communication from schools to parents - but not sure it's about important things - more it's about unimportant things.
- Student voice missing as the 3rd leg of the triangle with families and teachers - not when things are going poorly - but to discuss how to make things work better for all.
- Overall “we think our parents feel good about their school even though there is room for improvement in communication etc.”

Themes from Staff

- Educators think parents who do not engage - either have given up or see it as the schools job. Very defined roles - schools responsible for education - parents responsible for everything else.
- Educators would like to know the vision/priority of family engagement/partnership.
- Teachers are concerned about the lack of direction or expectations for family engagement.
- Teachers note there is confusion/ambivalence about who is responsible for what kinds of family engagement.
- Teachers have learned more about families during the pandemic, but also feel overwhelmed as they recognize the level of need some families have. They are not sure what to do about this.
- Teachers believe that family engagement should change depending on the age of the students.

SMI Observations

- There's a bit of a status quo culture: we/schools give you/families information we think you should have. In some ways, one-way communication is working for some staff and families. It's a lot of work to do something new/different.
- Individual staff have a family partnership strategy related to their own classroom or area of work but the district/school's overall vision, purpose and approach to family partnership isn't clear yet (what would a family's experience working in partnership with the school look like, feel like?).
- There is no district or school level system for collecting stakeholder (parents, students, staff) input and feedback that can inform family partnership work - which is critical data for any school or district to have and regularly review, analyze and respond to.
- Not sure leadership team, nor teachers, feels a sense of urgency around family engagement work – lots of competing priorities.
- Most adults we spoke to (teachers/parents) felt like parent/teacher conferences are not valuable as currently offered.

SMI Observations

- Adults we talked to mention that grade level engagement goes down as students grow up. A **mindset shift** (with effective strategies) would be to accentuate that we need this partnership (between families and schools) no matter what age or stage our students are – the content might change, but the partnership should not.
- As far as we could tell, staff report, there is no PD for teachers on what is age/stage appropriate parent/family engagement.
- Additionally, teachers could not articulate a clear vision, nor regular routines and rituals in the district for parent/family engagement
- As schools and as a district you are asset rich, but utilization poor – the parents we spoke to have a lot to offer – skills, experience, viewpoint, mindset etc. - How can you use families as assets?
- Most parents/families view things with a relationship and partnership lens, rather than a communication/information lens. More than anything, they value a respectful, line of direct conversation and supportive interaction between family members, student and teachers.
- Students often reflect back the quality of relationships parents/families have with the school in their attitudes about the school.

Recommendations & Action Plan

1. What is our Vision
 - a. Create a vision for what partnerships mean and should look like
2. Collecting data via surveys
 - a. Use Panomara Survey for families, students, and staff to gather data on what we can be doing better
3. Increasing volunteers in schools
 - a. How can increase opportunities for parents and the community to be a part of the school day and community
4. Revamping Open Houses and Conferences
 - a. Establish a committee to look at how we can revamp open house and conferences to better meet the needs of all

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QUESTIONS