

Working with Families



Families make real contributions in closing the achievement gap | *Tony Evers*

School board members and educators hear often about the need to involve families in education to help students succeed. At a time when Wisconsin is experiencing large student achievement gaps, more student diversity and growing family poverty, schools recognize that they cannot afford to overlook the real contributions that families make to student learning. But, what works and where to start?

I asked my 2014-15 Parent Advisory Council (PAC) to address these questions. This dedicated group of parents, grandparents, and com-

munity members, representative of the geographic and cultural diversity of Wisconsin's public school students, offered a "parent voice" to gap-closing family engagement strategies put forth by the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force of Wisconsin educators.

Council members met five times during the school year to identify family engagement practices and tips that recognize families as a source of strength and knowledge who deeply want their children to succeed in school. Families are best able to help their children succeed "when schools accept families as they are and make

frequent efforts to know, listen to, and learn from parents," the PAC Belief Statement affirms.

Families are truly educators' biggest allies in working to close achievement gaps and improve student learning. The work of the Parent Advisory Council complements national calls for schools to re-frame family engagement from "random acts" of singular parent events to a systemic strategy integrated into long-term education goals. Family engagement is a critical component of school efforts to ensure that all Wisconsin students graduate college and career ready.

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CONNECT WITH YOUR FAMILIES

School boards can strengthen how and when schools enlist the support of families by:

- Purposefully connecting meetings and communications with families to student learning;
- Structuring conferences and other meetings with families to allow time for families to share information about their children;
- Supporting professional development around culturally responsive family engagement;
- Developing district policies that support administrators' and teachers' efforts to welcome, inform, and get feedback from families; and
- Including family engagement goals in annual school and district improvement efforts.

Following, is a summary of seven practices Wisconsin schools can use to build on the family strengths and diverse cultures that students bring to the classroom. All of the strategies and more are published in the report, *Family and Community Engagement in Promoting Excellence for All*, available on the Department of Public Instruction website at dpi.wi.gov/pacreport. These practices, parent videos, and tips are also woven throughout the Promoting Excellence for All webpages: dpi.wi.gov/excforall.

■ Consider Families and Communities as Experts on their Children

Educators honor the family as an expert on their child to create a sense of partnership, starting with positive contact.

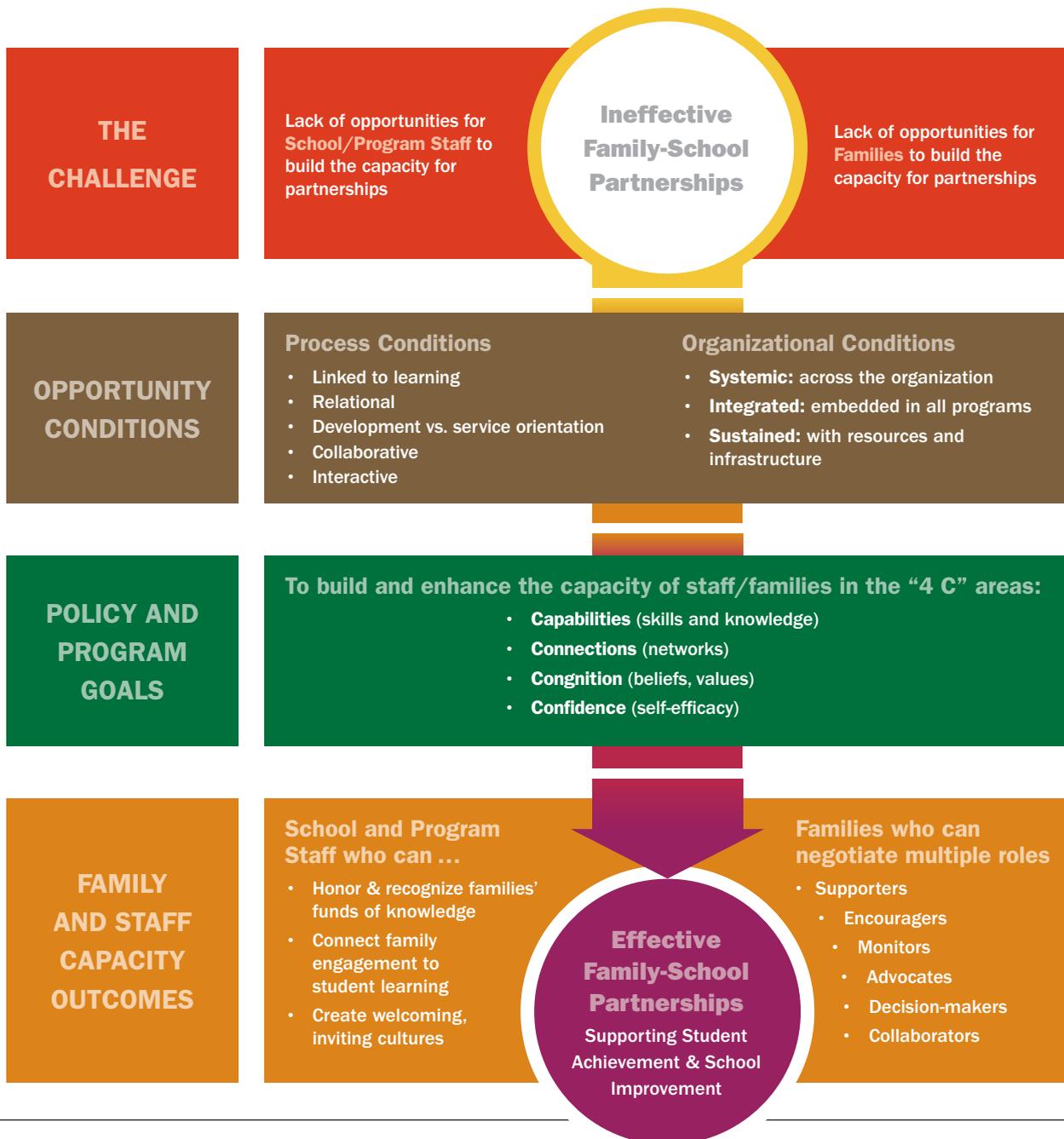
Putting It into Practice: Teachers at the Goodman Community Center 4-year-old kindergarten program in Madison meet individually with parents. Parents share their hopes and knowledge about their child's

strengths and learning styles. Then, parents and teachers identify goals they will work together on for the child to achieve.

■ Family Engagement

Schools build families' awareness of student progress and the importance of academic success in culturally responsive ways and foster positive engagement with educators.

Putting It into Practice: A fall literacy event at Mindoro Elementary



School offers the opportunity for children and families to learn together. Participants visit five classrooms, each themed to a different book. Teachers or family members read a book aloud, make a craft, and enjoy a snack together.

■ Welcoming Environment

Educators make sure everyone feels respected and welcomed at all times. Policies and practices reflect this.

Putting It into Practice: Roosevelt Elementary School in Kenosha personalizes a start-of-the-year event to welcome families. Families receive a written invitation and personal phone call from school staff, a personal greeting from the school principal or school staff upon arriving, and meet other families while sharing a meal. Parents rotate through various informational sessions while children enjoy activities with the physical education teacher. Children and parents re-unite to play ice-breaking games.

■ Community Partnerships

Educators collaborate with community members and leaders to support

future-focused activities and events for students and families.

Putting It into Practice: Black River Falls High School works with the Ho-Chunk Nation to offer a Ho-Chunk and Ethnic Studies course for any high school student. Students hear from and interview guest speakers from the Ho-Chunk community, trace the history of the Ho-Chunk people, and explore the role cultural identity plays in society.

■ Focused Events

Educators plan purposeful events targeting specific cultural and ethnic groups to strengthen partnerships in the school community.

Putting It into Practice: In Superior, Northern Lights Elementary School's Diversity Council brings together parents and caregivers from all walks of life to meet and to talk about their families, how they feel about school and education, and ways they can work together to help children learn. The council also sponsors school and community events to build awareness of their efforts.

■ Communication with Families

Schools establish two-way communication systems with families, develop strategies to involve families and community in learning, and allow families and community a voice in decision making. School staff inform families about the intervention process and meet with families of students referred for intervention.

Putting It into Practice: A survey of families in the Pecatonica Area School District showed many parents employed beyond district boundaries used resources in neighboring communities. As a result, the district re-structured before-and after-school programs and 4-year-old kindergarten to fit with parents' job schedules. In addition, the district offered child-care programs during school breaks and holidays.

■ Community Schools

The school hosts resources and systems to meet student needs, such as dental services, medical access, and fitness programs. Families can access school facilities beyond the school day.

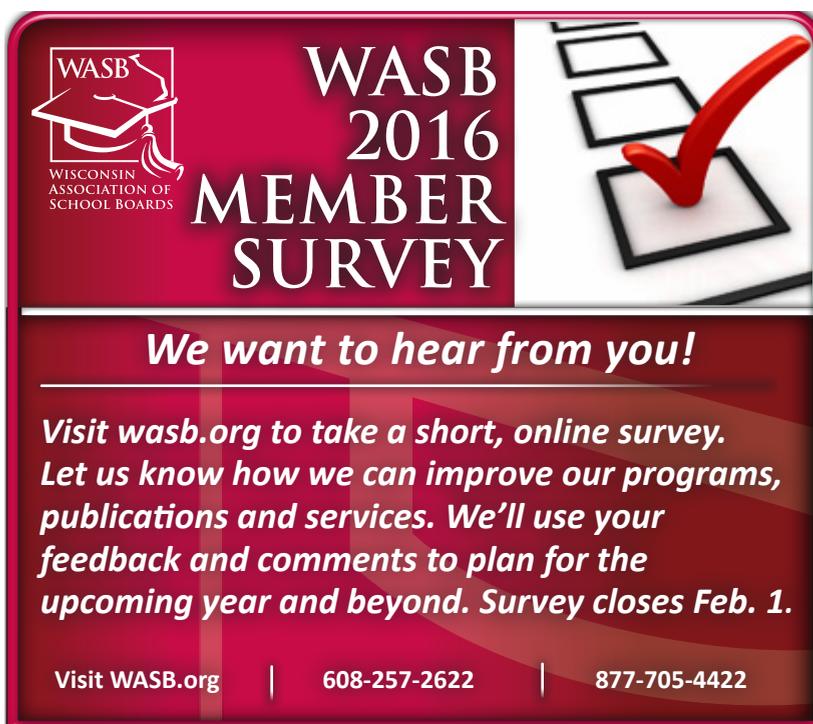
Putting It into Practice: Northern Lights Elementary in Superior hosts the Northern Lights Family Resource Center, which partners with community organizations and businesses to offer parent education and early childhood programs, community events, and family support and information referral services.

■ Reach Out

I encourage school board members and educators to explore the Parent Advisory Council report, part of the *Promoting Excellence for All* website at dpi.wi.gov/excforall.

Ask parents, grandparents, and community members what they need to support children's learning, then act on their suggestions. Let's take advantage of the many gifts that families bring to children's learning by enlisting their help in closing achievement gaps. We can't do it without them. ■

Tony Evers is the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.



The graphic features the WASB logo (Wisconsin Association of School Boards) on the left, a checklist with a red checkmark on the right, and the text 'WASB 2016 MEMBER SURVEY' in large white letters. Below this, it says 'We want to hear from you!' and provides instructions to visit wasb.org for a survey. At the bottom, it lists contact information: Visit WASB.org | 608-257-2622 | 877-705-4422.