

A Conversation with Meghan Dunne, Kindergarten Teacher at Anne Beers Elementary School

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What do you think are the most important and effective family engagement strategies you use?

I believe the most important family engagement strategy I use is my homework structure. I have a homework binder for each student that serves many different purposes. The cover of the binder provides key student data, goals for the unit related to this data, and ways for families to help students work towards these goals at home. Inside the binder is our weekly homework, which consists of daily math/ELA practice, penmanship and writing prompts, a reading log, and a chance to practice an important skill with their families. I always share reading data on the binder cover and emphasize the reading log as an important part of daily homework. In addition, the writing prompts in the homework are responses to reading. These are the building blocks of critical analysis. I am also experimenting with sending home book bags with each child that has on-level books for them to read with families. I'll keep you posted on how that goes. Finally, the binders have additional materials in sheet protectors, as well as a pencil pouch, which provide additional practice activities for students to move them towards their unit and yearly goals.

How has the way you've engaged families changed throughout your teaching career? What have you learned?

My family engagement work has changed drastically throughout my teaching career. When I began teaching, my focus was on having strong relationships with families to keep them informed about their child's academic progress. However as I continued to work with families, I realized they are hungry for ways to help their child grow and improve. I learned that families want to work with their children at home, they simply may not know where exactly to start or to focus. I have also learned when we provide guidance and tools, parents will take them and run with them.

What have been some challenges to engaging families and how have you overcome them?

I have certainly met challenges while working to engage families. While all families want to help their children succeed, not all families have the time to devote to this work. Some ways I help families overcome these barriers is to provide resources specifically for times when they can work with their children- such as weekends or before school. I also work with their siblings, grandparents and tutors to help them learn how to best assist their students in their schoolwork. Finally, I provide documents to families to review on their own time, potentially

without their child present. These resources allow families to stay current on student data and activities when it's convenient for them.

Teachers are so busy. Why make time to do this family engagement work?

First of all, I find creating structures and policies to intricately involve families has made my work much more manageable. Homework is something I know I will always provide, so why not create ways to design it to incorporate data and activity sharing with families? Second, I make time to do this work because it is- **hands down**- the best way to invest in my students. We have students for such limited time during the day and families have such potential to extend learning. In addition, they have the power to extend learning and goal setting beyond the one year we teachers have them in class. Families are our students' first teachers and last teachers- partnering with them enhances our students' learning throughout our time with them and then it extends far beyond that.

What impacts have you seen from engaging families? On you? On your families? On your kids? On your school?

I have seen the conversations I have with families *shift* from behavior to academics. I see my families *ask* for more ways to work with their students on specific skills at home, and ask me *specifically* about their student's progress. I see learning extended beyond our 7-hour school day. I see students excited to discuss their goals and activities with their families. I have loved improving my work with families and I look forward to developing it further in the coming years.

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