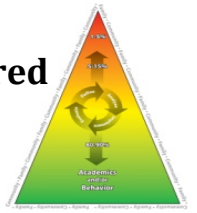




Preparing Colorado Educators to Partner with Families in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports: Study Summary



Background

In 2009, Colorado's Department of Education (CDE) received a multi-year State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant focus is to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities through the development of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports that integrates Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) efforts across the state. The present project is associated with one of the seven goals of this multi-year grant, specifically Objective 5.5, which focuses on increasing future educators' meaningful participation with families in this statewide reform initiative. Initially, a literature and web-based background analysis was undertaken to assess the current status of preparing educators to partner with families in Colorado. As this process proved inconclusive, a faculty survey was developed to assess current practices in educator preparation in regards to engaging parents/families and to identify possible next steps in supporting professional development on this topic. During the spring of 2011, the survey was sent to the program directors of Colorado Institutions of Higher Education accredited to prepare future educators. The study context, description, results, and related recommendations are described below.

Rationale and Context

Shift to Family-School Partnering Practices. In the last decade, several important factors have contributed to a shift in the ways that families and schools work together to ensure student success. Both NCLB and IDEA 2004 mandate accountability for student outcomes, using research-based practices, and engaging with families as full partners in assisting in their children's learning. In addition, 40 years of research has highlighted the importance of family partnering in improving student outcomes. (Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Marzano, 2003). Sample findings are:

- Programs and interventions that explicitly engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement, as are those related to supporting families with specific skill development.
- Student attributes directly related to achievement, such as effective learning behaviors and beliefs about education, are directly influenced by family-school partnering in students' learning.
- Specific home and "out-of-school, coordinated" actions which improve student achievement are as follows: (1) frequent family discussions about school; (2) families encouraging their children regarding schoolwork; (3) providing resources to help with schoolwork; and (4) supervision of homework, TV viewing, after-school activities.

Table 1: Examples of the Shift From Traditional Family Involvement to Family-School Partnering (Colorado Department of Education, 2009).

TRADITIONAL FAMILY INVOLVEMENT	FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Parents only</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Family, which includes student, parents and/or other caregivers in a child's life</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools have the primary responsibility for educating students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families and schools share responsibility for a child's education; each has unique knowledge and skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-initiated, one-way information sharing, often about problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing, two-way communication about successes, concerns, homework, data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured volunteering at school (often fundraising events) with a small group of parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting specific, coordinated learning between home and school for every family

Preparing Future Educators. With the increased knowledge of family-school partnering influences on student achievement and the resulting practice shift, researchers have begun to focus on how future educators are prepared to successfully enact such practices. This is a challenging area of study due to the variability in state licensing requirements, institutional coursework, and administrative structures, as well as to numerous challenges in the higher education system, including crowded curricula, departmental and faculty independence, and limited resources (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011).

Survey Description

The electronic survey was developed using researched topics relating to family-school partnering and previous studies tapping educator preparation programs. The definition of family-school partnering was taken from the RtI Implementation Rubrics developed by the Colorado Department of Education (2010). The overall goal was to capture current pre-service trends, practices, and preferences in how educators are being trained to work with families in Colorado. The survey was sent to 43 program chairs at Institutions of Higher Education that were accredited to prepare general and special education teachers, administrators, and related service providers. These leaders were then asked to forward the survey on to their faculty. 38 surveys were returned, representing 63% of the programs, thus providing for some assurance in the representativeness of the results. Limitations of the survey were as follows: "infused" was not specifically defined, thus leaving interpretation open to respondents; the unclear survey distribution at the discretion of program chairs and response rate may limit generalization; and emails and leader names were obtained from institution websites, which sometimes resulted in misinformation.

Findings

The survey had three primary objectives and specific findings are given for each.

Objective One: *To determine the current status and identified course offerings designed to prepare future educators to partner with families.*

- The vast majority of respondents indicated that family-school partnering topics were infused (70%) versus taught as a standalone course (17%), with one person reporting both (3%), and 10% reporting not teaching this topic.
- The three most frequently cited current topics were on the foundational aspects of family-school partnering and the three least frequently cited topics were those related to specific academic and behavioral coordinated learning between home and school.

Table 2: Most and Least Frequently Reported Course Content Across Respondents

Most Frequently Reported Course Content	Least Frequently Reported Course Content
1. Building Relationships with Families (93%)	1. Designing Effective and Interactive Homework with Families (14%)
2. Creating Welcoming Environments for Families (80%)	2. Home-School Academic Strategies (Reading, Math, Writing, Content Areas) (28%)
3. Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families (79%)	3. Home-School Behavior Strategies (Organization, Work Completion, School Attendance) (28%)

Objective Two: *To assess higher education faculty views, professional interests, and perceived information needs regarding educator preparation in family-school partnering.*

- Most faculty (80%) reported familiarity with current research and believed their students would feel “somewhat” or “very prepared”.
- Slightly over a third of the respondents (38%) reported having training in their own graduate work; more special education and related service faculty indicated this than general education or administration.
- There was an almost even division between those who thought a standalone course was “very” or “somewhat important” (49%) and those who indicated it was “a little” or “not at all important” (51%).

Objective Three: *To identify preferred content and venues to deliver family-school partnering resources that can be used to guide future professional development efforts.*

- Over 40% of the respondents indicated they would like more information on all 20 of the listed research-based family-school partnering topics.
- The two most requested topics were “Research supporting the impact of family-school partnering on academic outcomes” (80%) and “Research supporting the impact of family-school partnering on social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes”(68%).
- The majority of respondents requested more information on including families in the two key initiatives in the Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports; 64% wanted to know more about Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and 56% indicated the need to know more about Response to Intervention (RTI).
- The three types of venues identified as most helpful for sharing information and developing future partnering coursework were: websites (80%); webinars (69%); and information at meetings or conferences (62%).

Recommendations

It is suggested that the information found in this study be used to inform professional development efforts and future research needs in fostering future educator knowledge and skills in effectively partnering with families. Recent Colorado legislation focusing on educator effectiveness and early literacy has specifically mandated the participation of families in student learning, adding to the relevance of this work.

Short-Term:

1. Provide every Colorado educator training program with the results of this study and an invitation to both provide feedback and participate in future shared learning opportunities.
2. Create an easily accessed website with sample course syllabi and organized annotated resources related to the most requested topics from this study.
3. Invite higher education faculty to participate in state professional development opportunities on family-school partnering and implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (PBIS and RtI); these could be existing webinars, face-to-face trainings, and online courses.
4. Share results, resources, and suggested actions with various existing councils, legislative bodies, and professional organizations so as to unify efforts in supporting the ongoing work of preparing educators to team successfully with families in improving student achievement. The State Advisory Council on Parent Involvement in Education (SACPIE) should be included in these efforts.

Long-Term:

1. Create a state-wide interest group or community of practice (CoP) of higher education faculty to explore sustainable practices for institutions such as linking and aligning coursework, identifying standards, developing feedback loops, and further researching current pre-service and practitioner knowledge and skills in the family partnering arena.
2. Develop a webinar (or series) focused on family-school partnering which targets higher education faculty and practicing educators in the field.

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