Taking Steps for Success: Developing Effective Family-School Partnerships within Rural School Districts

Presenters
Jennifer Geibel, MS, CCC-SLP
Kelly Opatt
Kirsten Wolfe
PaTTAN’s Mission

The mission of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) is to support the efforts and initiatives of the Bureau of Special Education, and to build the capacity of local educational agencies to serve students who receive special education services.
Our goal for each child is to ensure Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams begin with the general education setting with the use of Supplementary Aids and Services before considering a more restrictive environment.
Learning Objectives

- Examine barriers to the engagement of families in rural areas
- Discuss family engagement development strategies within rural districts
- Explore reduplication and expansion techniques for building family-school partnerships
- Reflect upon family engagement strengths and needs within participants’ LEAs
Family Engagement in Rural America
Why Family Engagement?

“At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child’s success is the positive involvement of parents.”

Jane D. Hull, former governor of Arizona
Benefits of Family-School Partnerships

Reduced drop-out rates and higher graduation rates
(Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006)

Increased student achievement
(Hill & Tyson, 2009)

Reduced absenteeism
(Sheldon & Epstein, 2007)

Better attitudes towards learning
(Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004)

Fewer behavioral problems
(Caspe & Lopez, 2006)

Better student-teacher relationships
(Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008)

Improved trust in schools
(Payne & Kaba, 2001)

Increased cultural competence
(Marschall, 2006)
Strengths of Rural Schools in Family Engagement

• Schools are often central within rural communities
• Centrality provides many opportunities for community communication and participation
• Teachers and administrators are often highly accessible and may work with smaller number of students
• “Everyone knows everyone else”
Barriers to Family Engagement in Rural Communities

Isolation and geographical barriers (Beloin & Peterson, 2000)

Poverty and lack of resources (Lowe, 2006)

Culture of family uncertainty and mistrust (Owens et al., 2007)

Logistical barriers (Beloin & Peterson, 2000)
What Is an Intermediate Unit (IU)?

- Educational agency in Pennsylvania, which typically provides district support *regionally*, encompassing several districts
- Purpose of an IU is to provide cost-effective instructional and operational services to school districts, charter schools, and even non-public schools
- Collaborative relationship allows for joint purchasing efforts for high cost items
- Permits the provision of instructional support in a variety of educational topic areas
Getting to Know Riverview IU6

• Supports the needs of seventeen rural school districts and three career
• These districts serve approximately 23,000 students from Pre-K to twelfth grade
• Promotes IU-based classes within other LEAs, as well as APSs
• Covers a wide geographical area of 3,200 square miles
Beginning the Journey: Increasing Family Engagement in Riverview IU6
Why Family Engagement in IU6?

• Acknowledgement that family-to-school partnerships were weak in the region
• The understanding that family engagement needs within rural districts are complex
• Development of strategies to overcome logistical and demographical barriers
Barriers to Family Engagement in IU6

- Lack of resources
- High poverty area
- Inadequate transportation
- Geographically-large region
- Widely varying school cultures
Strengths of IU6

- Teachers live and work in the same communities
- Familiarity and rapport between teaching staff and community members
- IU6 has a strong presence within all districts and IU6 classrooms are housed within all areas
- IU6 administrators were very supportive of increased involvement in family engagement
- IU6 supervisors and teachers are very motivated in regard family engagement
- Data is collected and evaluated to determine the best means of engaging families within IU6
The National Network of Partnership Schools

- Developed in 1996 to assist educational organizations in engaging families
- Based on Joyce Epstein’s research into types of parent participation
- Involves goal-oriented action-planning based on the already existing school improvement plan
NNPS Grant Though PaTTAN

- Applied for grants through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)
- Joined the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS)
- Completed action planning and selected goals
- Implemented activities in several LEAs
Challenges to Goal Identification

- Planning for a diverse geographical and demographical area
- Determining what data to use in action planning
- Learning how to start small and work up
- Identifying the most motivated teachers to be leaders within their LEAs
Identified Goal Areas

Goal #1: Increase math skills

Goal #2: Increase literacy skills

Goal #3: Increase positive behaviors

Goal #4: Promote collaboration between school, family, and community
Continuing the Journey: Establishing Family Engagement Activities
Goal #1: Math

The Activities

- Family Game Night
- TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) Math
Goal #2: Literacy

The Activities

- Bingo for Books
- Family to School Literacy Project
Goal #3: Behavior

The Activities

- ACV Family Event for PBIS
- Positive Note Cards Home
Goal #4: Community

The Activities

- Parking Lot Family Project
- Volleyball Night at ACV
Featured Activity – Bingo for Books

- Partnered with a district staff members
- Reached out to local organizations to have information tables and provide activities
- Purchased books for the event and found community business to donate snacks, paper products etc...
- Recruited students to call bingo, work at the food stands, and read the literacy tips
- Provided magnetic literacy tips for families to take home
### How Did It Go? – Bingo for Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Worked</th>
<th>What Didn’t</th>
<th>How We Can Improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Printed math/literacy tips for families  
• Involved students in bingo calling (not just adult-led)  
• Strong community support | • Transportation or time of day may have contributed to small turnout  
• Finding money to purchase books and prizes  
• District administration support | • Increase district teacher participation in order to build capacity for them to become activity leaders |
Featured Activity – Night Bag Project

• Partnered with a local teacher to plan a community/school activity to provide book bags for children in the foster care system
• Bags included books, blankets, stuffed animals, etc.
• Students asked for donations from community businesses, community members, churches, etc.
• Students and families came into the classroom for Book Bag Packing Day
How Did It Go? – Night Bag Project

**What Worked**

- Brought families and students together to receive donations and create comfort supplies for kids entering into emergency foster care

**What Didn’t**

- Sustainability: Being able to secure donations to fill the backpacks year to year

**How We Can Improve**

- Secure community partners to provide ongoing donations (CYS presentation, IU point of contact, etc.)
- Build capacity of additional key people identified to oversee the activity
Featured Activity – Community Volleyball Night

• Partnered with a school to host Special Olympics teams
• Contacted community agencies to attend and provide information regarding assistance for students with disabilities
• Advertised in the community for teams to sign up to play
• Identified Global Ambassadors to discuss their personal experiences
• Contacted the school districts cheerleading squads to perform
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Worked</th>
<th>What Didn’t</th>
<th>How We Can Improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Multiple teams participated (ACV HS students & teachers, neighboring districts’ students/teachers, community agency teams, RIU6 team) | • Only 3 community agency info tables confirmed | • Allow more time for planning/contacting teams/community agencies  
• Provide more literature regarding community organizations |
Featured Activity – Parking Lot Project

• Student drivers apply to paint a parking spot
• Students and families must sign contracts that student will maintain good attendance, behavior etc. in order to keep their spot
• Money collected from this project will fund school PBIS
• A “reveal” of the artwork will take place at a school-wide PBIS event in the beginning of the school year
## How Did It Go? – Parking Lot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Worked</th>
<th>What Didn’t</th>
<th>How We Can Improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Identified as an area of need in SPP  
• District administration support | • To be sustainable, there is a student fee (which may deter involvement of some students) | • Plan earlier  
• Advertise more to drum up enthusiasm  
• Reduce participation fee? |
Activity: How Would You Do It?

• Choose one of our featured activities and discuss it in a group.
• Consider how you would change this activity based on the demographics of your LEA.
• What barriers could you foresee experiencing?
• What strategies might you use to assist in this experience?
Keep on Walking: Reduplicating and Expanding Family Engagement Success
# Tips for Implementation and Expansion

- Define resources early on
- Determine what donations are needed
- Identify key people (administration, teachers, staff)
- Work with community partners
- Utilize the professionals you have access to
- Set goals and create timelines
- Recognize the strengths and needs of families within your district
- Be mindful of who is completing which task
- Be flexible with times, locations, etc.
Expanding Advertisement for Families

- Establish a Family Engagement Website
- Provide flyers in home-to-school folders
- Post live from events to attract additional participants
- Advertise on local radio
- Use the Remind App
- Pair up with parent network social media sites
Spreading the Word to New LEAs

- Advertise at Special Education Contact Meetings
- Share at Administrative Team Meetings
- Report out at Superintendents’ Advisory Council
- Liaison with LEA organizations

- Establishing Google Docs and LiveBinders to share
- Host a collaborative event for multiple LEAs
- Establish a Family Engagement Webpage
Building Capacity Among LEAs

- Develop checklists and timelines
- Provide online resources
- Identify individuals motivated to do the work
- Customize activities based on the needs of the LEA
- Personally consult with interested administrators and teaching staff

Activity: Bingo for Books

Checklist for Success

- Identify teachers/staff to coordinate the event
- Determine day/time
- Reserve a location/room
- Contact Scholastic for discounted books (bingo prizes)
- Reach out to local organization to set up information tables (local libraries, literacy projects, etc.) and maybe even provide an activity for students/siblings
- Ask for donations for snacks, paper products, door prizes, etc.
- Obtain bingo equipment (cards, chips, game)
- Ask for someone to call Bingo (set students to help!), work the food table, and to read literacy tips
- Print/laminate literacy/math tips for families to encourage meaningful reading strategies at home (we put ours on magnets so families could put them on their fridge)
- Establish a team to set-up/clean up
- Advertise (flyers, home-to-school folders, phone calls home, social media, free radio spots, etc.)
Activity: Taking It Further

• Consider an activity that is already working in your school district OR choose an activity from the Promising Practices site

Discuss with a group how you might expand or reduplicate your chosen activity in different locations, venues, etc.

Think of the people who might be important to this activity, as well as protocols you might have to create for successful reduplication
Contact Information

Jennifer Geibel
jgeibel@pattan.net
412-826-6843

Hope Warner
hwarner@riu6.org
814-573-1550