



## Step One: ENSURE SHARED MTSS AND FSCP KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE WHAT, WHY, WHO, WHEN, AND HOW

### Demonstration Partnering Stories from the Field

Stories help people think about how new ideas or shifts in practice can be applied to their day-to-day lives. As stakeholders shift to family, school, and community partnering, it might be helpful to begin collecting their own stories. A strategy might be to share ideas in faculty or PTO/PTA meetings, or have a venue where both families and educators highlight positive experiences – such as a link on a website or an entryway bulletin board. Stories can lend courage and practical guidance during times of change. They can celebrate successes and demonstrate challenges. These stories are categorized by level but most have implications for all families and educators. These stories have been shared by Colorado stakeholders during the past six years or taken from the literature and in some cases, are a combination of experiences.

#### High School

- After hearing about the value of family-school partnering, a high school chemistry teacher reported that he had gone to his building administrator and asked about the possibility of putting the topic “on the agenda” for his professional learning community (PLC). Although she seemed skeptical, saying that high school students should be emancipating from their parents and developing their own sense of responsibility, the principal allowed the teacher to try the discussion with his colleagues. The professional learning community thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity and now has partnering “on the agenda” for every meeting. Representatives from different departments share homework ideas and home-school communication strategies they are implementing. After several months, the group requested formal professional development opportunities to learn more about the research and strategies that are known to be effective.

During the second year of including the topic regularly in professional learning sessions, the PLC members decided to invite some family members monthly so as to offer their viewpoints and add a family perspective to school documents websites, and communications. The PLC also developed a “student advisory panel” that guided them in understanding the adolescent perspective. Through collaborative decision-making, it was determined that there was a need to incorporate some partnering data collection and analyses so as to better understand the effectiveness of their partnering practices. The PLC members surveyed families and students about how they perceived school-family partnering was working since they had been implementing some specific, intentional strategies around technology, communication, and homework. Several students mentioned that they now had more positive and interesting discussions about school with their families. One student was quoted as saying, “Yeah, it gives us something to talk about at dinner”.

- A high school math teacher asked every student to bring his/her parents’ preferred email or method of communication to class as a homework assignment. She then made



email group lists of families and students for each period. She emails once or twice a week with class information on homework, concepts being taught, and asks for comments and questions. The student is always copied so they are in the “loop”. If the family doesn’t have email or prefers another communication venue, the information is provided to them in that way. The teacher reports that homework assignments are almost 100% completed (significant change from the year before) because when she has a concern about a student, she is able to problem-solve with the parent quickly, efficiently and collaboratively.

- A high school foreign language teacher had been thinking about leaving the teaching profession. She was discussing this issue with her supervisor. The supervisor suggested that maybe she could start her year by calling every parent and leaving a brief message about herself, class, interest in sharing information, and invitation for families to call with questions, concerns, or positive news. She had 150 students, but said it took her less than an hour a day for one week. She reported having had many of the families saying “thank you” for the opportunity to talk and responding with input or questions. The students were often surprised, but seem pleased “in their teenage ‘not admitting it’ way”. She said that this became her best year and she planned to stay in teaching. She will continue this practice every year.

## Middle School

- A seventh grad teacher, who is an active advocate for family partnering within her school (always observed bringing up the topic in meetings and informally with colleagues), was asked to describe her approach to communicating with families about homework, supporting learning at home, how her classroom works, and if there are academic or behavioral concerns. Specifically, she was asked why she contacts parents, for what reasons, when, and how. The comments provided by this teacher represent several principles of effective communication and partnership skills in addition to sharing about how important families are to student success.

First, she mentioned that she ensures she has the preferred method of communication for every family and that they have received a partnering message describing how she will be initially contacting them to learn more about their shared student and how they can together support the student’s success. She contacts every family at the beginning of the year.

Then she related the following about her actual conversations if there are concerns:

- The student and his or her learning are at the center of all communications.
- Communication remains at the level of the issue and does not become personal.
- Concerns, not problems, are described.
- Parents are experts and critical to the success of the school’s efforts.
- Contact is made early, before the concerns emerge or escalate.
- Positive messages are conveyed at the beginning of and throughout the contact.
- The communication is constructive and not punitive for the child.
- Perspective taking is encouraged.



- Good listening skills are important.
- Follow-up contacts are made.

“Before I begin, there is one assumption that drives all of my dealings with families. I believe that parents are my most important assets as a teacher. In addition, there are two things that I always think about when contacting a parent. First, I believe that all parents do what they believe is the best for their child . . . We may not agree with their opinion or action, but they do their best. Second, and perhaps most importantly, I try to think about how I would want a teacher or adult to handle the situation if this were my child (how would I want to be treated, and how would I want my child to be treated?).” She also tracks all of her contacts and regularly summarizes her data and shares with her school leadership. She asks for feedback from families twice a year and uses this to continually assess her effectiveness. (adapted from Christenson & Sheridan, 2001)

- A middle school MTSS individualized problem-solving team, including a student and her single-parent father, was meeting to brainstorm ideas about supporting positive behavior and homework completion. The family was from Russia and had been in the United States for two years – both father and daughter spoke English. The father shared that the daughter was a concert-level violinist and practiced with a teacher approximately three hours a day. No one at the school knew about this. The father then shared that the student’s mother had been killed while holding her daughter’s hand during a Russian political uprising about four years earlier. No one at the school knew about this either. The school had been considering a special education referral, but with the new information decided to partner with the family around a specific home-school-home support plan. The father began to cry and thanked the school staff for “caring so much about my daughter and me - no one had ever done that before”. The student cried and said it was so important that “my father came to school and could understand what it was like for me here.”

## Elementary

- An elementary teacher has “learning open houses” once a month when families can come and share in a learning experience with their students. The topics and time vary, sometimes beginning at 7:00 in the morning or over the lunch hour or after dinner so as to offer choices to the families as to what might work best for them. The students are very successful at “helping their families to attend and participate” as she has an average of 99% family attendance. Family members can include extended family, siblings, and/or friends or neighbors who the family sees as supporting the student. The family members take away tools to support learning at home and report liking the “small” feel of the event as they meet other families and their student’s classmates. The teacher always asks for feedback and has adjusted her events accordingly. As a result of the feedback, she now includes an interactive question and answer period within each session and has several family members who help her plan and facilitate the meetings. The teacher describes this process as “including the families in the classroom community”. An important data point for her has been significant growth in the times families contact her when there might be important information to share from home or if questions about homework or what a student might be learning or if concerns, so



there can be early intervention. Another positive result has been the decrease in office discipline referrals and behavioral challenges observed in her classroom.

- An elementary principal encourages teachers to have a “come early” or “stay late” day once a week so that they can connect with families who are bringing or picking up their children at the school day care. The teachers then can take “flex time” on another day. The school has many working families. This has become a well-publicized and highly utilized communication venue for families and teachers. The strategy provides teachers more flexibility and the families feel that the school truly wants their partnership.

## Early Childhood

- A first-time father brought his child to a day care/pre-school setting and picked him up every day. The site had developed a strategic, outreach program to help families feel connected to each other and to the school which involved sharing written information and putting links on its website about the importance of families in their child’s education and learning. The father realized that he didn’t seem to have time to read and educate himself, but knew that it would be important. He reported feeling guilty in that he kept seeing messages about their efforts and hadn’t taken advantage of the opportunities. He asked one of the teachers if he could have a conference for the purpose of sharing ideas with him. The teacher agreed and they set a time to meet early one morning when the father was dropping off his child. She reviewed partnering information and options that existed for supporting learning at home and at the setting, including participating in activities in the classroom whenever worked for him. They decided to follow up in a month to see how their ideas were working and if there were questions or concerns. The father felt informed, valued, and guided in his efforts – in a way that seemed most beneficial to him. He was able to think about a plan for his child’s educational support in working with the center – and felt less guilty about his time challenges! The meeting was an “ah-ha” for the teacher who realized that the “human touch” might be needed to meaningfully invite families to partner and that it might be strategic to offer this to every family. She brought the idea to the center administrator and this was strategically implemented, with 100% family participation.

More information on how to compile and share partnering stories is available from the Harvard Family Research Project: *Create Your Own Toolkit: Building Your Family Engagement Skills and Knowledge*. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/professional-development/create-your-own-case-toolkit-getting-started>

## References

Christenson, S. L. & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.