



Tools

September 2016

Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education

Part 1: Building an understanding of family and community engagement

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Overview

The Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education is a four-part resource that brings together research, promising practices, and useful tools and resources to guide educators in strengthening partnerships with families and community members to support student learning. The toolkit defines family and community engagement as an overarching approach to support family well-being, strong parent–child relationships, and students’ ongoing learning and development. The primary audiences for this toolkit are administrators, teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers in diverse schools and districts. Part I is designed to guide educators into building awareness of how their beliefs and assumptions about family and community engagement influence their interactions with families and the community and how knowledge about the demographic characteristics of the families in their schools can inform educators about what might support or hinder family engagement with schools.

U.S. Department of Education

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REL 2016–148

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September 2016

This report was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under Contract ED-IES-12-C-0010 by Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific administered by McREL International. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 1: Building an understanding of family and community engagement* (REL 2016–148). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

This report is available on the Regional Educational Laboratory website at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Overview of the Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education

Family engagement is one of the strongest predictors of children’s school success, according to more than 40 years of steadily accumulating evidence (California Department of Education, 2011; Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009). In some communities, particularly culturally diverse communities, achieving a level of family and community engagement that supports student success is a challenge. The Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education addresses this challenge by bringing together research, promising practices, and useful tools and resources. Its purpose is to guide educators in strengthening partnerships with families and community members to support student learning. The primary audiences for this toolkit are administrators, teachers, teacher leaders, and trainers in diverse schools and districts.

This four-part toolkit defines family and community engagement as an overarching approach to support family well-being, strong parent–child relationships, and students’ ongoing learning and development. Although school engagement often refers to parent involvement, this toolkit broadens the scope to include other family and community members. This definition encompasses existing definitions (for example, in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002) and emphasizes the importance of educators working as partners with families to support students in multiple ways. Toolkit activities can be used with or adapted for diverse groups.

The toolkit offers an integrated approach to family and community engagement. It helps educators understand how their own culture influences their beliefs and assumptions about families and community members and consequently their efforts to engage them in support of student learning. It also addresses how to build a cultural bridge through cross-cultural communication and uses strategies that build trust among families, community members, and the school. In addition, the toolkit helps educators understand how to use two-way communication with families to gather and share information about student interests, progress, and outcomes.

Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific originally developed a toolkit in response to a request from members of the Guam Alliance for Family and Community Engagement in Education¹ for activities and tools to help them effectively engage families and community members from diverse backgrounds. A prior version of the toolkit was published and distributed to alliance members and has been widely shared within Guam. Teachers and administrators at three pilot schools, along with other school and community members, have received hands-on training on each toolkit part’s activities, and the toolkit has been presented to schools and at conferences across the region, such as the Guam Striving Readers Conference in May 2015, the Micronesian Teachers Education Conference in July 2015, and the Guam Family Outreach Conference in November 2015. The toolkit has also been introduced to teacher education students at the University of Guam and is listed as a reference in the Draft Literacy Plan developed by the Guam Department of Education. In addition, teachers have adapted the tools for use in their classrooms, noting, for example, that the Iceberg Concept of Culture activity “helps the students and the teachers recognize the diversity of [their] school cultures” and that it is “a great way to learn more about their students” (R. Abaday, teacher, John F. Kennedy High School, personal communication, May 13, 2016).

The Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education addresses the challenge of achieving a level of family and community engagement that supports student success by bringing together research, promising practices, and useful tools and resources

This version of the toolkit has been expanded for a broader audience. To expand the toolkit for use beyond the REL Pacific Region, the study team identified research and resources, including appropriate activities and tools, by conducting a web and database search (see appendix A for a full list of resources, including a description of how they were identified). Some tools have been adapted, with permission, for use in the toolkit. The toolkit is based primarily on research and supplemented by expert opinion from a variety of sources that address family and community engagement in diverse communities. It is applicable in a variety of contexts—and wherever educators are interested in enhancing engagement of families and community members in support of student learning.

Toolkit contents

The toolkit is presented in four parts. It includes information and activities that reflect research-based family involvement approaches associated with student learning. Each part of the toolkit focuses on an aspect of developing strong partnerships between schools and families and between schools and communities to support student learning. The four parts of the toolkit, published separately, are described below:

- Part 1: Building an understanding of family and community engagement

Educators build awareness of how their beliefs and assumptions about family and community engagement influence their interactions with families and the community and how the demographic characteristics of the families in their schools can inform educators about what might support or hinder family engagement with schools.

- Section 1.1: Reflecting on beliefs and assumptions
- Section 1.2: Getting to know school families
- Section 1.3: Understanding the influence of a cultural lens
- Section 1.4: Acknowledging cultural differences

- Part 2: Building a cultural bridge (Garcia, Frunzi, Dean, Flores, & Miller, 2016a)

Activities focus on tapping into the strengths of families and community members and helping families establish active roles in the school community in support of student learning.

- Section 2.1: Tapping into the strengths of families and community members
- Section 2.2: Establishing roles for building family and community engagement
- Part 3: Building trusting relationships with families and the community through effective communication (Garcia et al., 2016b)

Cross-cultural and two-way communication enhance family and community engagement.

- Section 3.1: Cross-cultural communication in a school community
- Section 3.2: Preparing educators for two-way communication with families

The toolkit is based primarily on research and supplemented by expert opinion from a variety of sources. It is applicable in a variety of contexts—and wherever educators are interested in enhancing engagement of families and community members in support of student learning

- Part 4: Engaging all in data conversations (Garcia et al., 2016c)

Educators learn which student data are important to share with families and community members and how to share such data in a meaningful way.

- Section 4.1: Determining what student data are important to share with families and community members
- Section 4.2: Presenting student data in meaningful ways

Each section includes an introduction, a discussion of key points, and activities for educators to use to understand the what, why, and how of family and community engagement. The activities, which are defined as structured learning experiences that involve discussing, reading, writing, or creating something for a specific purpose, include one or more tools (see appendix A for a description of activity and tool selection). The tools include activity sheets, graphics, handouts, worksheets, charts, scenarios, information sheets, information and note-taking sheets, graphic organizers, planning templates, and note-taking templates. Each activity includes the purpose of the activity, the materials and time needed for the activity, directions, and any other information or handouts necessary for conducting the activity.

The toolkit can be used to stimulate discussion and increase understanding about family and community engagement—both its importance and how to approach it

How to use the toolkit

The toolkit can be used to stimulate discussion and increase understanding about family and community engagement—both its importance and how to approach it. Some schools might choose to proceed systematically through each part of the toolkit, using each activity and associated tools. Other schools might focus on only one part of the toolkit or only some activities or tools from different parts, depending on the needs of educators and the strength of partnerships with their families and community members. Each part of the toolkit can stand alone or can be used with any other part or with all the other parts for a more comprehensive approach to family and community engagement. Facilitators (for example, school or district administrators) can choose from among the many options the one that is right for their school or district.

Introduction to part 1: Building an understanding of family and community engagement

Enhancing family and community engagement in schools is about building relationships between educators and families and community members. Family and community engagement is not a one-and-done activity. It is an ongoing process of meaningful interaction between schools and families that involves two-way communication and a purposeful focus on supporting student learning.

A number of barriers to family and community engagement pose challenges for educators (Berg, Melaville, & Blank, 2006; Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998; Wherry, 2010). These include:

- Parents' (and other family members') previous negative experiences or interactions with schools (for example, parents did not do well in school or educators told parents only what they should do without acknowledging what they might already be doing).
- Language and cultural barriers (for example, parents or their representatives believe they should defer to educators and not play an active role in education).
- Limited professional development and training of educators in family and community engagement.
- Educators' own cultural beliefs and attitudes.

Barriers can also arise if families have not been exposed to the practices, experiences, and beliefs that are validated by the school culture (Gordon, Rollock, & Miller, 1990). For example, school personnel might assume that all parents and families are familiar with school grading practices, curriculum standards, the value placed on parent–teacher conferences, the methods schools use to communicate with parents (for example, newsletters, websites, and daily folders), or attendance policies. If parents and family members are not aware of these practices, they may need help navigating the system, view their involvement as unimportant (Gordon, 2005), or choose not to participate in family engagement activities.

Description of part 1 sections

Part 1 of the toolkit lays the foundation of an approach to family and community engagement that encourages and supports student learning. It helps educators better understand family and community engagement so that they can overcome the barriers mentioned above. Brief descriptions of the four sections in part 1 are given below.

Section 1.1: Reflecting on beliefs and assumptions

Beliefs and assumptions can influence educators' willingness to support family and community engagement. Activities in this section provide opportunities for educators to understand how their own cultural beliefs may affect family and community engagement.

Family and community engagement is not a one-and-done activity. It is an ongoing process of meaningful interaction between schools and families that involves two-way communication and a purposeful focus on supporting student learning

Section 1.2: Getting to know school families

Understanding the demographic characteristics of the families a school serves can help in communicating with them. The activity in this section helps educators understand how to use demographic data to design family and community engagement efforts that meet the needs of students, families, and the community and how to make best use the resources that families and the community can contribute to the school.

Section 1.3: Understanding the influence of a cultural lens

How culture influences a person's view of others and the implications of culture for family and community engagement are discussed in this section. One of two activities is designed to increase educators' understanding of others' cultural values and behaviors, and the other activity increases understanding of two different world views (collectivist and individualist) and of how they affect one's actions.

Section 1.4: Acknowledging cultural differences

Barriers to family and community engagement and their relationship to cultural beliefs are discussed. The activity in this section helps educators understand how a family's deeply held cultural beliefs might influence family participation in traditional family engagement opportunities in schools.

Part 1 of the toolkit lays the foundation of an approach to family and community engagement that encourages and supports student learning and helps educators overcome the barriers to family and community engagement

Summary of part 1 activities and tools

The activities in part 1 of the toolkit are summarized in table 1.1, including the name and number of the activity and the type of tool or tools (chart, graphic, graphic organizer, handout, note-taking template, or scenarios) included in the activity. Activity numbers include the number of the toolkit part, the number of the section, and the number of the activity within the section (when a section has more than one activity). For example, activity 1.1.1 is in part 1, section 1 of the toolkit and is the first activity in that section.

Table 1.1. Summary of part 1 activities and tools

| Activity number | Activity | Tool type included in the activity |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.1.1 | Thinking about family engagement | Note-taking template |
| 1.1.2 | Exploring cultural influences | Graphic |
| 1.1.3 | Understanding beliefs about family and community engagement | Handout |
| 1.2 | Investigating demographic data and other characteristics | Handout Note-taking template |
| 1.3.1 | Building cultural awareness | Note-taking template |
| 1.3.2 | Understanding salient features of individualism and collectivism | Chart Scenarios |
| 1.4 | Exploring cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement | Graphic Graphic organizer Note-taking template |

Source: Activities were developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific for this toolkit using the sources listed in table A1 in appendix A.

Building a foundation for meaningful conversation

Facilitators need to be aware of how participants may react to activities and how they interact with one another. Some activities could generate tension, anger, and emotional responses; in some cases participants might be uncomfortable with one another or with the topics. It is critical that facilitators establish norms for these discussions, plan for how to respond to emotional responses, and work to build trust in the group before and during the sessions. The following recommendations should be adapted and used with all activities to provide positive support for difficult conversations and interactions among participants:

- ***Establish shared goals and expectations.*** Participants should discuss and understand the benefits of building cultural awareness.
- ***Establish norms of behavior, or group rules, before beginning activities or conversations.*** These norms may be generated by and agreed on by the group. Norms might include attitudes and actions such as:
 - Listening to others' perspectives with an open mind and assume positive intent.
 - Using respectful words and actions toward others, even when there is disagreement.
 - Welcoming contributions from every member and providing positive support to one another.

Facilitators need to establish norms for discussions, plan for how to respond to emotional responses, and work to build trust in the group before and during the sessions

Revisit the group norms throughout the activity, as appropriate. At the close of the activity, discuss how the group did with the norms and make any needed additions or adjustments if the group intends to engage in further activities together.

- ***Establish trust.*** Consider and discuss whether information shared during the conversation should remain confidential. Decide how the group will deal with conflict and follow through on that process.
- ***Ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to contribute.***

Section 1.1: Reflecting on beliefs and assumptions

Many ways of thinking and acting are formed by culture, but individuals may not be aware of their culture's influence on their interactions with others. This is as true of educators as it is of parents, family, community members, and students. For family and community engagement efforts to succeed, educators must be aware of how their own cultural lens affects their views of family and community members as partners in education. This section helps educators reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about family and community engagement and consider how families' cultures might affect their views about partnering with educators to support student learning.

Key points

- ***Understanding how a person's cultural lens influences interactions can encourage family and community engagement.*** Differences in thinking stemming from differences in culture can influence levels of parent engagement and interactions—and perceptions of parent engagement—between educators and families. For example, a parent who asks multiple questions about a teacher's instructional approach during a conference might be considered engaged from the teacher's perspective, but in some cultures questioning a teacher is a sign of disrespect (De Gaetano, 2007). And while many parent involvement frameworks assume that parents have the ability to initiate conversations with the school and its staff, language, work schedules, or other barriers may preclude some parents from doing so (Vera et al., 2012). The importance of understanding a person's cultural lens is also reflected in perceptions of parent involvement. A parent who is uncomfortable speaking English may not be involved in the school in ways that are most visible, such as volunteering in the classroom or chaperoning field trips, but may still be involved in a student's schooling in informal ways, such as providing a quiet place to read, supervising homework, and having discussions with students about what happened at school that day (De Gaetano, 2007).
- ***Viewing interactions from families' perspectives helps educators work more effectively with them.*** In working with families, educators can ask themselves guiding questions (Canter & Canter, 1999). Examples are: "If I had a child in school, what specific information would I want to hear from the teacher at the beginning of the year?" Or, "How and when would I want to be approached about a problem?" It is equally important for educators to consider how they will provide information to families in a multicultural environment. Sensitivity to cultural differences will help prevent roadblocks that keep members of the school community from working effectively together.
- ***Educators' beliefs about family and community engagement are critical to their success in working productively with families.*** Families in general—and, in particular, those from cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that differ from the prevailing culture in the school—often wait for guidance from educators before interacting with the school (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Educators' beliefs shape how families interact with them. If educators believe that parents will do little to support a child's education at home, educators may not reach out to the family and will have lower expectations of the student. A family's encounter with educators who hold this belief will likely be minimal. However, if the educator believes that the family is the child's first teacher and that the interactions at

home foster the student’s learning at school, then families are likely to be responsive to interactions with the educator. Educators are in a powerful position to influence the nature of family and community involvement and must first look to themselves if engagement does not occur.

Toolkit activities

- **Activity 1.1.1: Thinking about family engagement.** Initiates educators’ thinking and dialogue about family and community engagement as a foundation for planning engagement activities.
- **Activity 1.1.2: Exploring cultural influences.** Uses a graphic representation of an iceberg to help educators think about and distinguish between the surface and deep aspects of culture and how they influence their interactions with families.
- **Activity 1.1.3: Understanding beliefs about family and community engagement.** Increases educators’ awareness of beliefs and assumptions that may help or hinder strong partnerships between schools and families and community members.

Activity 1.1.1: Thinking about family engagement

Purpose

To initiate thinking and dialogue on family engagement.

Materials needed

Chart paper, markers, copies of the “Thinking about family engagement note-taking template.”

Time

35 minutes.

Directions

1. Post four chart papers with one question written on each one. Number each sheet as 1, 2, 3, or 4 to correspond to the question number.
 1. What is family engagement?
 2. How do families want to be engaged?
 3. What might keep families from being engaged?
 4. What can schools do to increase engagement?
2. Ask participants to individually reflect on these four questions and record key words or phrases on the note-taking template provided (5 minutes).
3. Ask participants to count off from one to four. If there are only a few participants, have them rotate as a group to the charts.
 - Participants start at the chart with the number of their question on it; participants with number 1, go to chart 1 and so forth.
 - At the assigned chart participants record their responses for that question (5 minutes).

4. After 5 minutes ask groups to rotate clockwise to the next chart, read what the previous groups wrote, and add their contributions. Repeat this step until groups have rotated to each chart (15 minutes).
5. When the groups get back to their original charts, ask them to identify three or four key ideas to report to the large group (5 minutes).
6. Ask participants to discuss in their small groups why parent engagement is important. Ask small groups to share their responses with the whole group. Record their responses on chart paper (5 minutes).

Tool: Thinking about family engagement note-taking template

Directions: Record key words and phrases that capture your thinking about each question.

| 1. What is family engagement? | 2. How do families want to be engaged? |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| | |
| 3. What might keep families from being engaged? | 4. What can schools do to increase engagement? |
| | |

Activity 1.1.2: Exploring cultural influences

Purpose

To reveal deep unspoken and unconscious influences of cultural beliefs and actions.

Materials needed

Chart paper, markers, copies of “The iceberg concept of culture graphic.”

Time

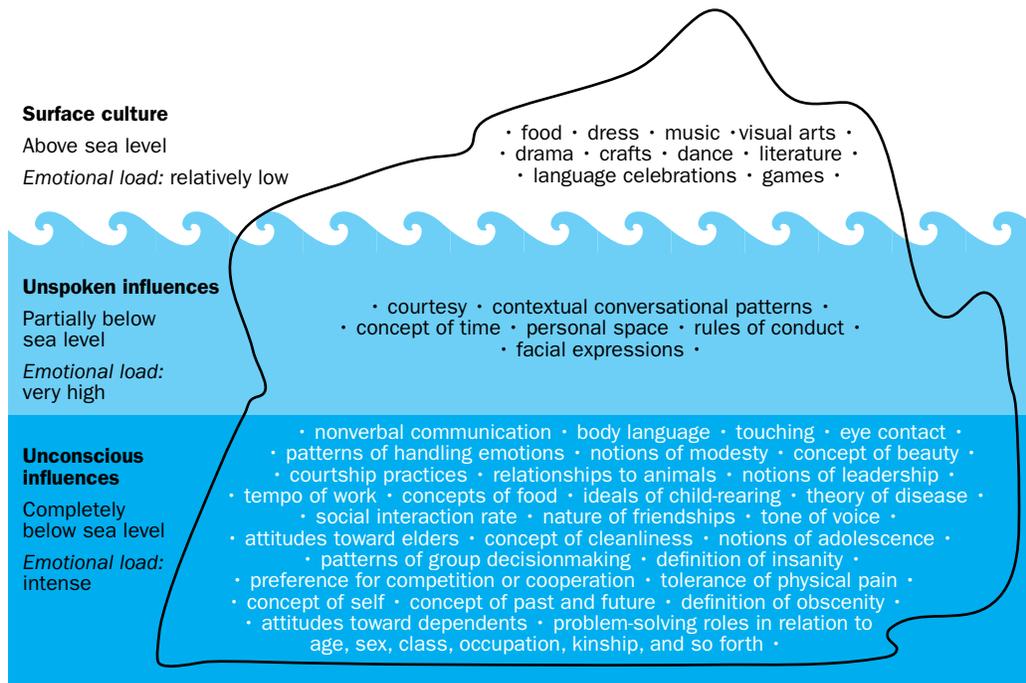
50 minutes.

Directions

1. Organize participants into groups of four or five people.
2. Explain that the groups will use “The iceberg concept of culture graphic” for this activity and pass it out.
3. Ask each group to select one of the unspoken or unconscious influences from below the water line in the iceberg graphic (5 minutes).
4. Invite participants to share an example with their group of how they have demonstrated the selected rule from the perspective of their own culture (15 minutes).
5. Tell each group to designate one person to stay at the table to share examples from the group’s discussion of how group members demonstrated the selected cultural influence. Give a signal for the rest of the group members to move to other tables to hear ideas from other groups. Members of each group should go to different tables (10 minutes).
6. Ask groups to return to their original table and take turns sharing what they heard about how the influences selected by other groups had personally affected others (10 minutes).
7. Facilitate a whole group discussion using the following questions, and record responses on chart paper (10 minutes):
 - What did we learn from one another?
 - How might what we learned from one another affect classroom practices?
 - How might what we learned about deep cultural influences affect our interactions with families?

Tool: The iceberg concept of culture graphic

Like an iceberg, the largest share of cultural influences are below the surface.



Source: Based on Indiana Department of Education, Office of English Language Learning and Migrant Education (n.d.), p. 29. Used with permission.

Activity 1.1.3: Understanding beliefs about family and community engagement

Purpose

To raise awareness of beliefs and assumptions that may help or hinder school, home, and community engagement.

Materials needed

Chart paper, markers, a copy of “Statements of beliefs and assumptions handout” for the facilitator.

Time

20–35 minutes.

Directions

1. Ask participants to form two circles, an inner circle and an outer circle, with each person in the inner circle paired with a person in the outer circle.
2. Read aloud one of the statements from the “Statements of beliefs and assumptions handout.”
3. Ask participants to tell the person opposite them whether they agree or disagree with the statement and why.
4. Invite a few participants to share their thoughts about the statement with the large group and ask if others have comments about the statement.
5. Have the outer circle rotate clockwise one person creating new partners for discussion of the next statement. Continue the rotations for four or five statements (5–7 minutes per statement for steps 2–5).
6. Have participants return to their small-group tables to discuss the following reflection question and record responses from each group on chart paper (10 minutes):
 - How does what you learned about your beliefs and assumptions affect your work to engage family and community members in meaningful ways?

Tool: Statements of beliefs and assumptions handout

Select statements from the list below and read them one at a time to participants, asking participants to share with the person opposite them in the inner- and outer-circle configuration whether they agree or disagree with the statement and why.

1. All students in our school are motivated to learn.
2. All students can learn.
3. Parents in this school help their children become successful in school.
4. Families are motivated to help their children achieve in school.
5. Speaking multiple languages in the home strengthens our students' success in school.
6. Our students come to school ready to learn.
7. Home life provides many opportunities that foster learning.
8. The community supports the school and the students who attend it.
9. All parents have the ability to effectively partner in their children's learning.
10. School, families, and the community must work together for effective learning to occur in our school.
11. Educators have high expectations for all students.
12. Families have high expectations for their children's success in school.

Section 1.2: Getting to know school families

This section builds awareness of the demographic characteristics of a school or district's broader community as well as of its students and their families. Demographic data provide information about the characteristics of a group, such as their race/ethnicity and primary spoken language. Examining demographic data assists educators in tracking patterns across populations and subgroups. It increases understanding of families in a school or district and illuminates key information about them to support planning for strengthening family and community engagement.

Key points

- ***Examining demographic data about families helps educators understand how to engage them as partners in support of student learning.*** When educators know the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of their students' families, they have a better sense of what supports families might need to engage with the school. For example, for some families it might be necessary to translate newsletters and other communication from the school, provide interpreters at meetings, or hold meetings in the community rather than at the school. Knowing the economic status of the school's families alerts the educators to the types and timing of activities that might be appropriate. For example, if both parents have more than one job, it could be difficult for them to attend meetings, volunteer in classrooms, or participate in other structured activities at the school. Educators could plan ways for families to provide support at home—for example, by reading to students, listening to students read, and playing educational games provided by the school. To encourage families to attend meetings when they can, the school could provide child care—and perhaps food—and hold meetings at various times during the day and evening to accommodate families' schedules. Because of limited financial resources, families may not be able to provide educational experiences outside the home, such as trips to museums. To support families, schools might arrange such experiences with support from the community. For example, a local bus company might provide free or reduced price transportation or a local business might pay the entrance fee to a museum for families who cannot afford it. Knowing more about families' characteristics also helps educators identify and tap into families' expertise and experience.
- ***Examining demographic data about the community helps schools identify and use resources that can support family and community engagement.*** Understanding the demographic characteristics of the community can help educators identify cultural organizations and leaders who might help them connect with families to encourage engagement and support. For example, community businesses that employ graduates of the school might be willing to let their employees volunteer at the school, provide translators, sponsor events, offer scholarships to students, or share expertise in other ways.

Toolkit activity

- ***Activity 1.2: Investigating demographic data and other characteristics.*** Increases educators' awareness and understanding of the demographic data available to them and how these data can be used to understand families and the community.

It also helps them understand that this information can be used to support decisions for planning family and community engagement initiatives and activities.

Activity 1.2: Investigating demographic data and other characteristics

Purpose

To deepen understanding of how examining demographic information about students, their families, and the community can inform family and community engagement efforts.

Materials needed

Copies of the “Examples of student, family, and community characteristics handout” and of the “Using data to inform family and community engagement note-taking template.”

Time

25–35 minutes.

Directions

1. Organize participants into small groups.
2. Distribute the “Examples of student, family, and community characteristics handout” and the “Using demographic data to inform family and community engagement note-taking template.” Ask small groups to discuss the following questions and record their responses on the note-taking template (15–20 minutes):
 - What demographic data do we have or can we obtain to deepen our understanding of our school’s families and community?
 - What questions might we answer using these demographic data? (Questions could include: What percentage of our school’s families speak primarily a language other than English at home? How often do families read to their children? How do our families’ income levels compare with the income level of the community as a whole? What percentage of parents or guardians have some college education?)
 - How might answers to these questions influence our family and community engagement efforts?
3. Ask one or two small groups to share their responses. Invite other groups to share their responses if they have anything different to add (10–15 minutes).

Tool: Examples of student, family, and community characteristics handout

Student

- Race/ethnicity.
- Primary language.
- Grade level.
- English language proficiency.
- Gender.
- Participation in special programs (for example, Title I, Indian Education, or special education services).
- Eligibility for the federal school lunch program.
- Social service support.
- Daily rate of attendance, by teacher, period, or subject matter.
- Truancy rate.
- Reasons for absences.
- Tardiness rate.
- Mobility rate.

Family

- Family's primary language.
- Family size and composition (for example, siblings, grandparents, or others living in the home).
- Nature and frequency of adult participation in school events.
- Nature and frequency of adult support of student at home.
- Education level of parents.
- Parent/caretaker employment.
- Household income.

Community and business

- Community employment figures.
- Number of business and other community organizations that provide support.
- Nature and frequency of businesses' and other community organizations' support.
- Nature and frequency of volunteer services.

Source: Adapted from Dean & Parsley (2010). Used with permission.

Tool: Using data to inform family and community engagement note-taking template

| What demographic data do we have or can we obtain to deepen our understanding of our school's families and community? | Do we have these data? (yes or no) | If no, can we obtain these data? (yes or no) | What questions might we answer using these demographic data? |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | | |
| How might answers to these questions influence our family and community engagement efforts? | | | |
| | | | |

Section 1.3: Understanding the influence of a cultural lens

People view the world through the lens of culture—a system of beliefs, customs, and behaviors that are filtered through their experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). It is important for educators to understand that their cultural lens may differ from the cultural lenses of families in the school community and to recognize that those lenses are equally valuable. This section helps educators understand that their own cultural backgrounds influence how they communicate and view others' communications. Understanding this idea helps educators interact more effectively with families and community members from differing backgrounds and build effective partnerships.

Key points

- ***Understanding cultural norms and beliefs can help educators overcome challenges in interactions between people with differing backgrounds.*** Individualism and collectivism are contrasting cultural value systems that influence communication, learning, and family or community engagement in schools. Individualism focuses on the needs of the individual. Individualistic cultures foster independence, individual achievement, self-expression, individual thinking, and personal choice. In collectivist cultures, people determine their identities largely through interactions with the community. Collectivist cultures foster interdependence, group success, adherence to norms, respect for authority, and group consensus.

Contrasting the systems of individualism and collectivism is not meant to stereotype cultural behavior, but rather to provide insights on how contrasting values can make a difference in child-rearing, school, and classroom practices (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). No culture or society can be characterized as entirely one or the other, and even within a particular ethnic group people reflect differing values depending on their experiences. Schools normally reflect the predominant culture of the society, which can lead to challenges when educators interact with people whose backgrounds differ from their own (Hollins, 1996). Whether the school reflects an individualist or a collectivist cultural lens, educators benefit from having knowledge of and sensitivity for the other perspectives.

- ***Developing cultural competence helps educators ensure that families have successful experiences with the education system.*** Cultural competence—the ability to work across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects each culture—is one of the most valuable skills educators can have (Hanley, 1999). Those working toward cultural competence must first look within themselves for a deeper understanding of their own culture and then understand the culture of the people they serve. Then they must act on that understanding to provide more effective programs and services (Gay, 2000; Hanley, 1999).
- ***As students and their families enter new schools for the first time, they may need time for acculturation to the school system.*** Many cultures see children's primary role as being contributing members of a family unit (Trumbull et al., 2001). These cultures value dependence on a core group and require that people be responsible for their behaviors and avoid, at all costs, shaming themselves and their family and community (Hofstede, 2002). If the school culture does not reflect

these views, educators will need to work with families to help them understand the school system and how everyone can support children's learning and success in school.

Toolkit activities

- **Activity 1.3.1: Building cultural awareness.** Increases educators' cultural awareness of themselves and others so they can apply cultural understanding in their work.
- **Activity 1.3.2: Understanding salient features of individualism and collectivism.** Examines key characteristics of individualism and collectivism in one's own culture and in other cultures. It serves as a platform for discussing examples for cross-cultural communication strategies.

Activity 1.3.1: Building cultural awareness

Purpose

To increase understanding and appreciation of others' cultural values and behaviors.

Materials needed

Chart paper, markers, copies of the "Cultural awareness note-taking template."

Time

45 minutes.

Directions

1. Ask participants to name the country or region of origin of their family and to record responses on chart paper (5 minutes).
2. Ask participants to preview the "Cultural awareness note-taking template," reflect on the questions, and jot down their reflections in the "Personal reflection" column (5 minutes).
3. Have participants form pairs and share their thoughts on the questions. Record partner's reflections in the appropriate column (15 minutes).
4. Have participants return to their table groups and discuss the following questions, recording any new insights from the discussion in the section on new insights gained from group discussion in the "Cultural awareness note-taking template" (10 minutes):
 - What did you learn from one another?
 - How did you increase your understanding and appreciation of others' cultural values?
 - How will this new understanding and appreciation affect how we work together in the future?
5. Ask a few participants to share their responses noted in on new insights gained from group discussion in the "Cultural awareness note-taking template" and encourage other participants to comment (10 minutes).

Tool: Cultural awareness note-taking template

| Questions | Personal reflection | Partner's reflection |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Name something that represents your culture to you. | | |
| <hr/> | | |
| What about your culture or ethnicity makes you proud? | | |
| <hr/> | | |
| What is one thing people believe about your culture that is not true? | | |
| How would you help someone better understand this part of your culture? | | |
| <hr/> | | |
| New insights gained from group discussion | | |

Activity 1.3.2: Understanding salient features of individualism and collectivism

Purpose

To consider personal cultural views and foster conversations about understanding and appreciating others' cultural values and behaviors.

Materials needed

Chart paper and markers for five groups, copies of the “Salient features of individualism and collectivism chart,” and copies of the “Salient features of individualism and collectivism scenarios.”

Time

70 minutes.

Directions

1. Distribute copies of the “Salient features of individualism and collectivism chart” and ask participants to preview the information and discuss it with their group. Ask groups to share their comments or questions about the chart with the large group (10 minutes).
2. Have pairs read the first of the “Salient features of individualism and collectivism scenarios” about an educator and parent encounter and discuss which features of individualism and collectivism might be a factor in the interaction. Ask a few pairs to share highlights from their discussion (5 minutes).
3. Have pairs read the second scenario about preparing for a field trip and discuss which features of individualism and collectivism might be a factor in the interaction between the wildlife docent and students during the in-class preparation session. Ask a few pairs to share highlights from their discussion about the influence of individualism and collectivism on the interaction (5 minutes).
4. Have participants number off from one to five and form five groups. Assign one of the five statements for “Individualism” and “Collectivism” from the “Salient features of individualism and collectivism chart” to each group (5 minutes).

Tool: Salient features of individualism and collectivism chart

| Individualism | Collectivism |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Fostering independence and individual achievement | 1. Fostering interdependence and group success |
| 2. Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, and personal choice | 2. Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority and elders, and group consensus |
| 3. Associated with egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles (for example, upward mobility) | 3. Associated with stable, hierarchical roles (such as gender, family background, and age) |
| 4. Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life | 4. Understanding the physical world in the context of its meaning for human life |
| 5. Associated with private property and individual ownership | 5. Associated with shared property and group ownership |

Source: Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000. Copyright WestEd. Used with permission.

Tool: Salient features of individualism and collectivism scenarios

Scenario one. As a female European American teacher reports to an immigrant Latino father that his daughter is doing well in class—speaking out, expressing herself, taking an active role—he looks down at his lap and does not respond. Thinking that perhaps he has not understood, the teacher again praises his daughter’s ability to speak out in class and explains that it is very important for children to participate orally. Looking even more uncomfortable, the father changes the subject. The teacher gets the impression that this parent is not interested in his daughter’s school success, and she feels frustrated and a bit resentful. Toward the end of the conference, the father asks, with evident concern, “How is she doing? She talking too much?” The teacher is confused. This parent does care whether his daughter is doing well, but why doesn’t he understand what she has been telling him?

—Excerpted from Trumbull et al. (2000), p. 1.

Scenario two. Before Ms. Altchech’s fourth-fifth grade class took a field trip to the Ballona Wetlands to learn about the habitat of many animals and plants within a few miles of their Los Angeles school, a wildlife docent came to prepare the class for the visit. “What do you know about hummingbirds?” he asked. Ms. Altchech knew he was looking for “scientific knowledge,” but her students began telling stories about their own experiences with hummingbirds. The docent was clearly frustrated with the responses he was getting, and on his next (and final) visit, he “let two stories go by,” as Ms. Altchech puts it, until another child began her own story. “No more stories,” he insisted. Thereafter, the students were required to confine their comments to scientific observations about birds, other animals, plants, and the environment. The room became silent, and students’ responses to questions virtually ceased.

When the docent left, Ms. Altchech invited her students to tell their stories. “They needed to—in order to draw on their own experiences, which usually included family members,” she says. She constructed a simple T-chart on the blackboard, putting key phrases from the children’s stories on the left side and helping them extract the scientific content to be recorded on the right side of the chart. Then she helped students use “scientific discourse” to talk about what they knew. For instance, she used a student’s observation that “the hummingbird’s wings moved so fast” to introduce information about the bird’s high metabolism and feeding habits.

—Excerpted from Trumbull et al. (2000), p. 6.

Section 1.4: Acknowledging cultural differences

When families face cultural, language, and economic barriers, the student achievement gap widens (Rathburn, West, & Germino-Hausken, 2004) and support from family and community becomes even more important. This section provides information and an activity to help increase understanding of how the needs and experiences of families should guide the development of family and community involvement.

Key points

- ***Students' learning is improved when educators understand and honor the attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs of their culture.*** Doing so indicates that educators are using a cultural lens that captures more than the culture's superficial aspects, such as major holidays, mode of dress, specific foods, and family customs. Educators who understand and honor a culture pay attention to how it might affect teaching and learning, social interactions within the class, cultural values that respect learning by observing, and norms that value individual decisionmaking.
- ***Effective family and community engagement rests on relational trust between families and educators.*** Relational trust between families and educators is the foundation for engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mapp, 2003). Building that trust depends on understanding the barriers that influence engagement and mutually valuing families' contributions to student learning. These barriers include:
 - *Language.* When little or no English is spoken in the home, parents and family members may feel awkward visiting schools because they have difficulty expressing themselves and understanding what is being communicated.
 - *Realities of family life.* Parents and family members have multiple home and job responsibilities that can conflict with the timing of school meetings and events.
 - *Views on family role in education.* Some parents new to a school may be reluctant to approach the school because in their home culture people view educators as authority figures who are not to be questioned. Similarly, in some cultures, there is no expectation that parents play a role in school decisions.
 - *School experiences.* If parents had negative school experiences when they were students, it may be difficult for them to view school as approachable (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).
- ***Understanding how various cultures view education and schooling practices can promote family and community engagement.*** Research suggests that some teachers discount or misinterpret beliefs and practices rooted in cultures other than their own (Auerbach, 2011) and thus can mistakenly assume that diverse populations place a low value on education (Olivos, 2012). Parents from Chuuk, who were involved in a study of culturally responsive parent involvement, offer an example of just such a misinterpretation (Stoicovy, Murphy, & Sachuo, 2011). These parents stated that a good education was a high priority for their family, even though they had relatively little contact with teachers or administrators. They said that they teach their children to be morally good and obedient and to listen to what older people teach them so they can respect and obey their teachers when they go to school.

When educators understand that cultures may differ in their approaches to schooling, they can appreciate these differences and avoid conflicts between home and school that discourage family engagement. For example, there may be different views about what should be included in the school curriculum. Family members might value teaching about cultural values and the importance of taking care of family members, while the school curriculum will focus almost entirely on academic content.

Toolkit activity

- **Activity 1.4: Exploring cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement.** Increases educators' understanding of how their own cultural values operate in the school and classroom setting and how to apply their understanding of students' cultures to engage appropriately with parents, family, and community members.

Activity 1.4: Exploring cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement

Purpose

To apply knowledge of deep cultural influences to traditional family engagement opportunities in schools.

Materials needed

Copies of “The iceberg concept of culture graphic,” “Exploring deep cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement with school graphic organizer,” and “Exploring deep cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement note-taking template.”

Time

75 minutes.

Directions

1. Ask participants to form groups of three.
2. Tell participants that they will use “The iceberg concept of culture graphic” for this activity.
3. Ask each group to select three deep cultural influences from the “Unspoken influences” or “Unconscious influences” sections of the iceberg graphic that might affect family engagement in schools (5 minutes).
4. Direct participants to figure A of the “Exploring deep cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement in school note-taking template.” Ask participants to write one of the three rules they selected in each box in the figure (10 minutes).

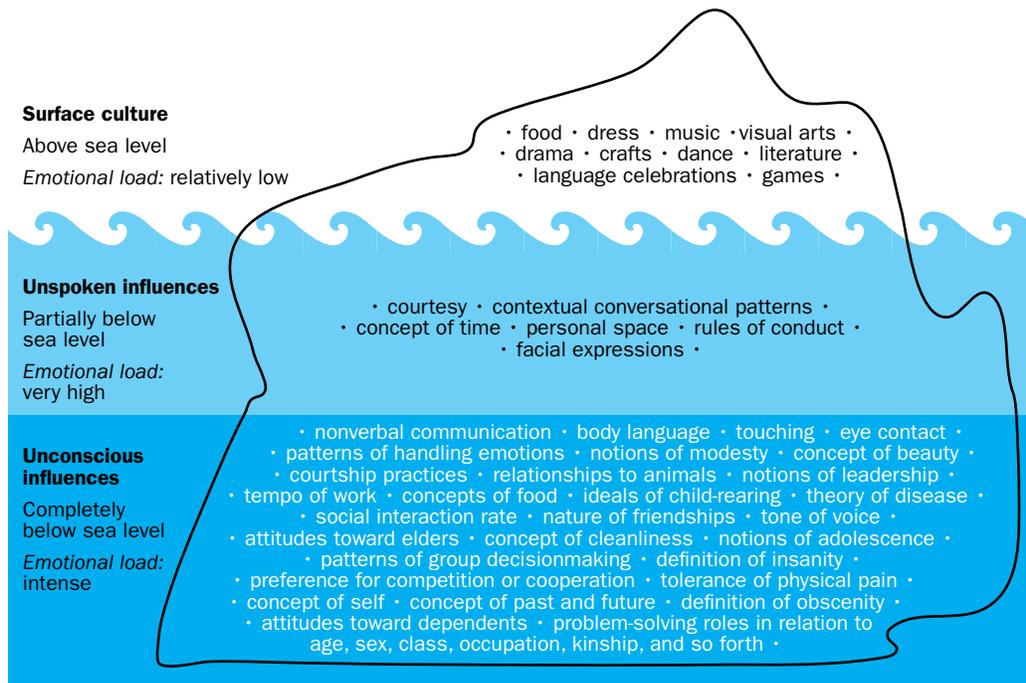
5. Ask the groups to discuss the impact of these three deep cultural influences on family engagement in parent–teacher conferences and record key words or phrases from their discussion in the comments box in figure A (15 minutes).
6. Then ask the groups to repeat the process with figures B and C (25 minutes).
7. Ask the groups to answer the reflection questions (below and on the “Exploring deep cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement note-taking template”) and be prepared to share their insights with the large group (10 minutes).

Reflection questions

- What cultural influence dominated your conversations?
 - What strategies might the school use to address the impact these deep cultural influences have on family engagement?
 - What will you do differently in the next two weeks to change your family and community engagement efforts as a result of this work together?
8. Finally, ask the small groups to share highlights from their discussions (10 minutes).

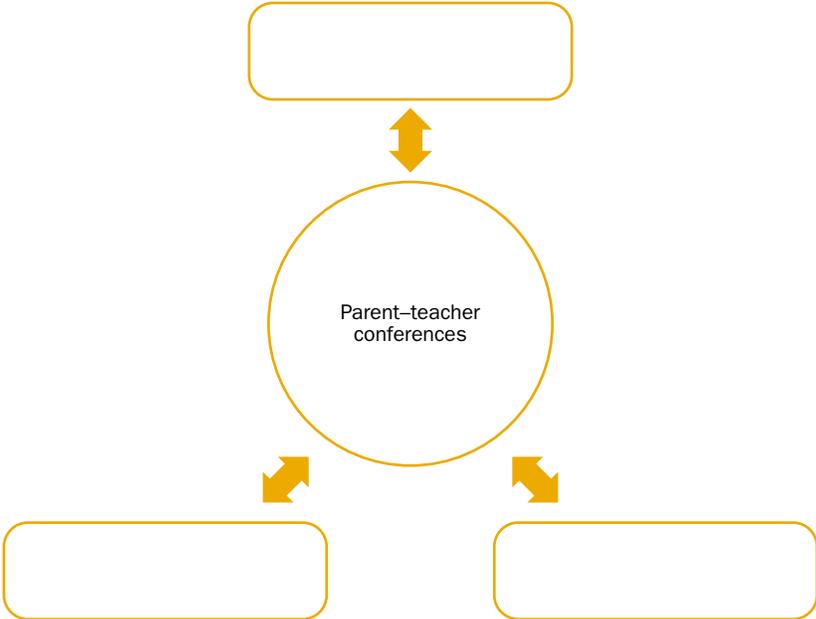
Tool: The iceberg concept of culture graphic

Like an iceberg, the largest share of cultural influences are below the surface.



Source: Based on Indiana Department of Education, Office of English Language Learning and Migrant Education (n.d.), p. 29. Used with permission.

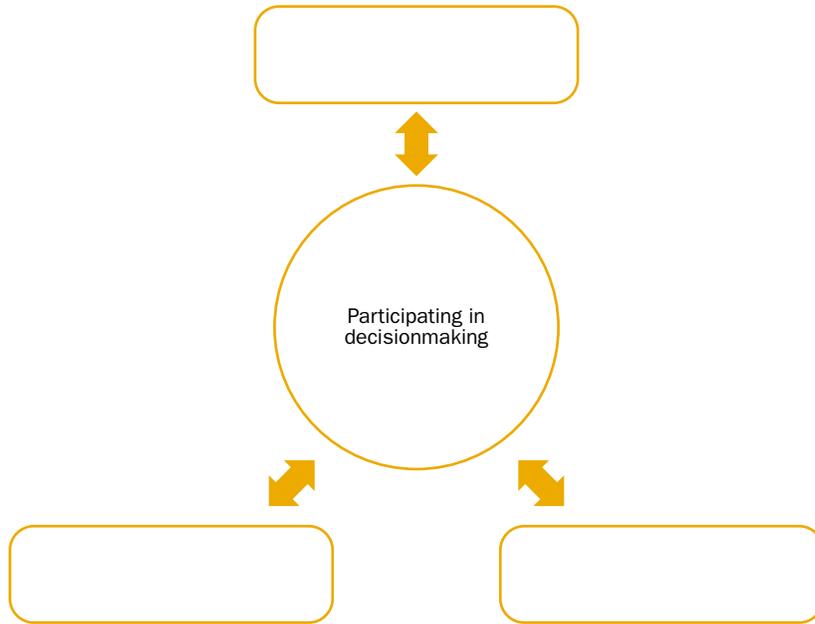
Figure A. Impact of deep cultural influences on parent–teacher conferences



Comments

Source: Adapted from the “Trilateral school level” activity in McREL International (2012). Used with permission.

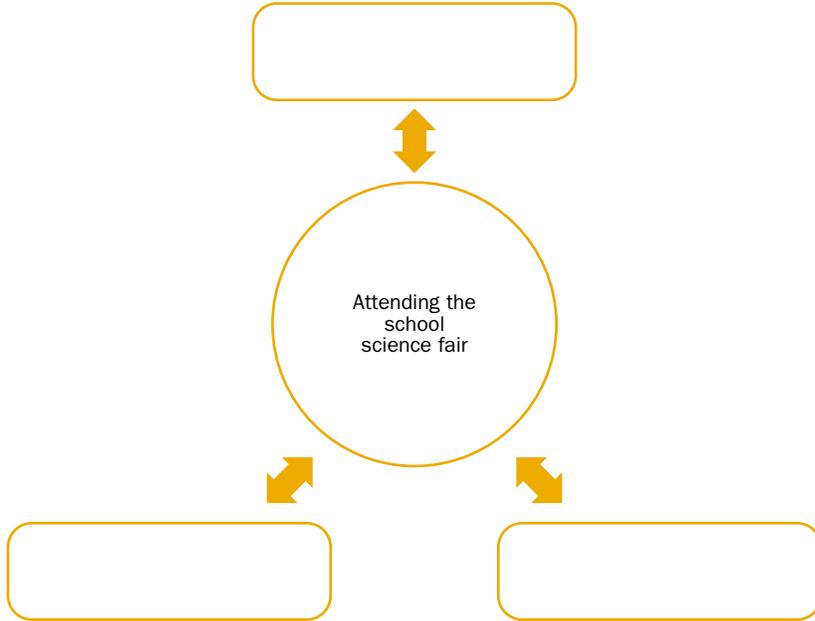
Figure B. Impact of deep cultural influences on participating in decisionmaking



Comments

Source: Adapted from the "Trilateral school level" activity in McREL International (2012). Used with permission.

Figure C. Impact of deep cultural influences on attending the school science fair



Comments

Source: Adapted from the "Trilateral school level" activity in McREL International (2012). Used with permission.

Appendix A. Activity and tool selection

The Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education was originally developed to provide activities and tools to help educators in the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific Region understand why and how to engage parents, families, and community members from diverse cultures, specifically in Guam. REL Pacific developed a toolkit for schools in Guam in response to a request to help them more effectively engage all their families, not just those from a particular economic or ethnic group.² Like many schools on the U.S. mainland and in the REL Pacific Region, Guam's schools have an increasingly diverse population.

To expand the toolkit for use beyond the REL Pacific Region, the study team identified resources with appropriate activities and tools by conducting a web search using ERIC, Google, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Education Journals using the following search terms: parent engagement, parent involvement in the REL Pacific Region, cross-cultural communication with families, building trusting relationships with parents in the REL Pacific Region, Micronesian education, indigenous learning, cultural competency with families and communities, cultural beliefs and assumptions, community partnerships, parent information resource centers, federal policy parent engagement, and access and equity for families. The web search focused initially on publications released after 2000. Because this focus yielded few publications related specifically to the culture and context of the REL Pacific Region, the search was expanded to 1990. Additionally, the study team reviewed websites of nationally recognized centers, including the Center for Study of Social Policy; Center on Innovation and Improvement; Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships; Harvard Family Research Project; McREL International; National Center for Parents with Children with Disabilities; National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education; SEDL; and WestEd. These sites were accessed to review their resources and to identify commonly referenced websites that might also serve as resources.

In reviewing the resources, the study team looked for appropriate activities and tools. It adapted some activities and tools and developed others to fit the topics in each section of the toolkit. These activities and tools reflect the study team's experience working with a variety of schools, including those in the REL Pacific Region, on the U.S. mainland, and in Canada. Each activity in part 1 is listed in table A1 along with a description of how it was adapted or developed and its source.

Some activities and tools developed by the study team are based on general group processes (such as inner and outer circle and carousel brainstorming) for exploring people's knowledge or beliefs about a topic or for generating ideas. Some are based on existing work, such as "The iceberg concept of culture graphic" in activities 1.1.2 and 1.4 and figures A, B, and C in the "Exploring deep cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement with school graphic organizer" in activity 1.4.

Taken together, the activities in the toolkit provide many avenues for educators to enhance their understanding of family and community engagement in education and their ability to involve families and communities as partners in supporting student learning.

Table A1. Development of activities and tools in part 1 of the toolkit

| Activity number | Activity name | Development | Citation |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.1.1 | Thinking about family engagement | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed this activity and the associated note-taking template. | na |
| 1.1.2 | Exploring cultural influences | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed this activity using an existing graphic as the tool that is the focus of the activity. | “Iceberg concept of culture,” Indiana Department of Education: Office of English Language Learning and Migrant Education, (n.d.) <i>Resource Guide for the Content Area Teacher</i> , p. 29, Used with permission. http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/elme/resource-guide-content-area-teachernew.pdf |
| 1.1.3 | Understanding beliefs about family and community engagement | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed the statements included in this activity that uses a common process for engaging groups in conversations. | na |
| 1.2 | Investigating demographic data and other characteristics | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed this activity and the associated note-taking template. The handout with the list of demographic data is adapted from materials developed by McREL. | “Examples of demographic data.” Dean, C., & Parsley, D. (2010). <i>Success in Sight Module 2, Segment 2.2—Using data to take stock</i> , p. 40, Denver, CO: McREL International. Adapted and used with permission. |
| 1.3.1 | Building cultural awareness | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed the questions and note-taking template that are part of this activity. | na |
| 1.3.2 | Understanding salient features of individualism and collectivism | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff developed the activity that includes a chart and scenarios developed by WestEd. | “Salient features of individualism and collectivism,” Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Greenfield, P. M. (2000). <i>Bridging cultures in our schools: New approaches that work</i> , p. 3, table 1. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Copyright © 2000 WestEd. Used with permission. |
| 1.4 | Exploring cultural influences on traditional family and community engagement | Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific staff adapted this activity and existing graphic organizers (figures A, B, and C), which were developed by McREL, and incorporated a graphic developed by the Indiana Department of Education. | “Iceberg concept of culture,” see source for activity 1.1.2. “Trilateral school level activity,” McREL International. (2012). <i>Balanced Leadership: School Level Leadership, Overview Session</i> , pp. 40–43, Denver CO: Author. Used with permission. |

na is not applicable.

Source: Developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific.

Notes

1. Alliance members include administrators and teachers from Guam Department of Education schools and faculty from Guam Community College and the University of Guam who work with K–12 schools.
2. A prior version of the toolkit was published and distributed to Guam alliance members for use within the REL Pacific Region; this version of the toolkit has been revised and expanded for a broader audience.

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