



COMPACT TOOL #5:

OUTREACH TO FAMILIES

Teachers tell us that reaching out to families and engaging them in activities at school is HARD. Schools that do this successfully create what is called a Joining Process -- one that welcomes families, honors who they are and what they can contribute, and connects them to teachers and to what their children are learning and doing in class.*

Before families will step in and help with academic skills, they need to feel comfortable, invited, and able to do what we ask of them. It's not just what we do, but how we do it. Here are some strategies that schools in Connecticut and elsewhere are using to reach out and engage families.

Welcome families and make sure they feel fully invited

- Greet families outside the building in the morning and afternoon as they drop off and pick up their children. Make a personal connection, and remind them of the upcoming Literacy Luau. It's especially meaningful if the principal is out there, too.
- Recruit families to evening events as they are picking up their children from the after-school program. Offer books and a pizza dinner.
- Do more than just send out flyers, call families with a personal invitation. (Parents say when they get flyers, they think the invitation isn't really for them.) The family coordinator can make a contact list. Divide it up among the principal, parent group leaders, teachers, counselors, the Assistant Principal, and literacy and math coaches.
- Do a "Welcoming Walk-Through" to make sure your school is warm and friendly to families and visitors. (The Connecticut State Department of Education offers training and materials on how to organize and conduct a walk-through.)
- Organize a "buddy system" to draw parents to learning activities. Parent "buddies" reach out to new families, stopping by their homes to welcome them to the school and offering to accompany them to the next Family Friday. This is a natural job for the school PTA/PTO.
- Whatever you offer, make sure it's fun. Don't call it a Compact Meeting -- think of something enticing, like a Math Safari, Book Talks, or Author's Tea. Put on some music or ask local musicians to play. Have a conversation, not a presentation.



Honor families and ask for their ideas

Honoring means a number of things -- showing respect, listening to their ideas (and acting on them), thanking families for their contributions large and small, removing barriers to their participation, and interviewing them to learn more about who they are and what they can offer (See the surveys in Tool#2-A for examples).

- Organize a “community walk” in the afternoon or on a weekend, to meet and greet families where they live. Ask parents who live in those neighborhoods to lead the tour. Students and families love this signal that the school really cares and wants to know them better. When schools in Middletown, CT did neighborhood walks, the teachers passed out books and information about the school, inviting families to attend the upcoming open house
- Translate materials into families’ home languages and be sure there is someone who can interpret at all meetings for families.
- Have events and activities at times and places that are convenient for families. Ask families what works for them. Have an ice cream social in a local park, or offer coffee with the principal in families’ homes.
- Invite the whole family and offer fun learning activities for children. Serve food so families don’t have to prepare a meal before they come.
- Involve families in planning activities for parents and use their ideas. They will know what will attract their friends and what’s the best evening for an event. Recognize their expertise. Ask parents to lead the meeting or organize a workshop. Parents may step up to call and recruit other parents, host house meetings, conduct and tally a survey, organize childcare, and form car pools for workshops,

Connect families to what their children are learning

- Hold exhibitions of student work and show parents how to use a rubric to assess its quality. Ask students to explain what they learned from doing a project or assignment.
- Make home visits to find out children’s talents and interests, explain what’s in the compact, and leave learning materials families can use with children.
- Invite parents to observe in class and learn how teachers set up the classroom for learning.
- Open a Family Center – create an inviting place to gather and lend learning materials and games. Stock up on information about colleges and post secondary training programs.
- Send home interactive homework assignments and learning kits each week, along with a folder of graded student work.

* The Joining Process is a concept developed by Karen L. Mapp. Mapp, K.L. (2003). Having Their Say: Parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children’s learning. *The School-Community Journal*, 13, 35-64.