Aligning and Integrating Family Engagement in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Concepts and Strategies for Families and Schools in Key Contexts

edited by
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In education and mental health fields such as psychology and social work, it is informative to consider defined groups as a way of understanding the larger population (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2012). Reviewing the unique contexts of groups provides a way to consider the family engagement process in a deliberate and focused way. The schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) framework becomes the operating continuum for sequencing, aligning, and integrating multiple behavior related practices to stakeholders’ perceptions of the school and community environment. The characteristics and cultural learning histories of stakeholders, implementers, and consumers are integral to PBIS implementation (Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012).

We hope that understanding cultural diversity will help improve youth and family led engagement to improve school climate for three specific groups: youth receiving special education services; Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender (LGBT) youth; and youth involved in bullying-victimization. Family engagement strategies used in specific instances should inform and provide clarity to the broader stakeholder engagement topic, as well as helping to inform school-wide approaches. Further, how school staff and students participate in their own engagement can help address the key context of family diversity and special populations.

We agree with Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, and Marvin (2011) and with authors of other chapters in this e-book and advocate for family engagement that is active, interactive, and dynamic. In each case, engagement is successful if everyone involved is invested in collaboration. This collaboration requires that...
CHAPTER NINE

Family Engagement and Promoting Cultural Competence—Strategies for Diverse Students

The National Association of State Boards of Education (2002) defines a culturally competent school as one that honors, respects, and values diversity in theory and in practice and where teaching and learning are made relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures. PBIS considers that the culture of a school may or may not be in harmony with the culture each student brings to the school (Mathews-Johnson, 2007).

The evolution of public education in the U.S. presents a historical reflection of change, politics, accountability and inclusion. One might liken the unpacking of these experiences to the complexities of unraveling the strings of a quilt. Each section is an essential element to the final body of work. Each section emerges as unique, complex, and different (in its own right) yet necessary for the end result. Still, there is in existence a common thread that is essential in binding and connecting every unique piece. The absence of that thread results in the unraveling of a masterpiece. Education and the theory and practice behind insuring that all families (specifically the children that we serve) see themselves as a critical component in completing the cycle of securing a quality education is perhaps similar. Understanding families and the unique and sometimes complex experiences and compositions that they bring are the most necessary part of the educational experience. As presented in other chapters in this e-book, PBIS practices provide a foundation for inclusion and collab-

align stakeholders are viewed as equally important in the engagement process. In many cases we find that the impetus for engagement lies with school staff (Christenson & Reschly, 2010), which, unfortunately is associated with limited efforts. Often families are unsure of their role in their child’s education or how to best support them. Educators should support a framework to support family-school collaboration, which ultimately should be in the form of an engaged partnership (Reschly & Christenson, 2012) where family members and school staff are co-equals who share responsibility for priorities, plans, and follow-up (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Before discussing needs of the three specific groups of students presented in the above, we review critical issues pertaining to cultural diversity and disproportionality. Recent events across the U.S. have focused educational communities to consider these issues, and a moral imperative for cultural responsiveness in our schools is emerging. Self-determination and cultural competence are key factors in resilience for both students and families (Masten, 2015) and families are helping to create new paradigms of engagement that better reflect their needs. We then examine effective models for youth and family-led engagement to improve school climate. School climate research suggests that improving engagement requires not only viewing young people as the recipients of engagement activities, but as active partners and decision-makers (Yonezawa, Jones & Joselowsky, 2009).
oration for student engagement, behavior, and learning. These practices and systems help to ensure that schools honor diversity, recognize the need for cultural competencies, and engage in implementing best practices to guide student learning (Lewis, 2007; Sugai et al., 2012).

The wide use of the word “diversity” has evolved as a critical and necessary component of student learning in both the public and private education sector. This term, when used while referencing students, is representative of many areas of human existence – race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, demographics, religious orientation and other. Each dimension exists as a component of what has evolved into a much larger list of characteristics that embody diversity (Ugbu, 1992). As educators, researchers, and practitioners we must recognize that we are operating in a time and space where the promotion of cultural competency is a non-negotiable responsibility that must not only be learned in theory, but also taught in practice (see Chavous et al., 2008). Furthermore, there should be accountability for creating a culturally competent learning environment. History and the law have taught us (educators, researchers and practitioners) that we must engage and practice pedagogy with great intentionality, accountability and focus.

Culture includes the customs, arts, social organizations and achievements of a particular people including the “way a population uses its natural environmental influences and is influenced by its social organization and values” (Ugbu, 1981, p. 421). Across the landscape of America, issues surrounding race, culture and social perceptions of others have garnered national attention and calls for responsible behaviors and training around race relations, social engagement and appropriate reactions that are proactive and not reactive. This stands vividly clear as a necessity within school settings.

It is generally accepted that the quality of relationships between students and their teachers is important for students’ behavioral outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The increasing enrollment of students from varied backgrounds, cultures and languages has served as the impetus for school districts and school leaders to make every effort to create inviting environments that meet the essential needs of the population that they serve. Strategies and work centered on closing the achievement gap are equally focused on the disparities and inequities around student performance and achievement (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Chochrane, 2008).

Alignment of Culture and Family with PBIS

To understand how culture and perceptions of problem behaviors play a significant role in addressing student engagement on the part of school and families, it is critical to examine a number of related research avenues. Aggressive and disruptive behaviors present formidable challenges for educators and mental health professionals in secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004) and to address these problems requires clear district-wide practices and expectations (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, & Sugai, 2014). The establishment
of clear expectations and accountability systems throughout the school district and across all schools should serve as a best practice for establishing a student and family friendly focus (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Intentionality and persistence are two characteristics schools must embrace to ensure families understand they are needed, invited, and critical in playing a role in their child’s journey through school. The ability to identify and celebrate differences while also addressing concerns around student challenges is the appropriate formula for insuring better outcomes for all parties involved in the learning process (McIntosh et al., 2014).

Best practices for addressing inequities and disproportionalities. In working with school leaders, one should be aware of the cultural competence of one’s school and be a leader in assessing and promoting culturally competent school environments and expectations (Nelson & Bustamante, 2009; Nelson, Bustamante, & Watts, 2013; Nelson, Bustamante, Wilson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Schoolwide expectations “can be developed collaboratively with students, families, and community members, as well as assessed for their congruence with the range of cultural groups in the school” (McIntosh et al., 2014, p.2). School leadership should assess the organizational cultural competence of their school environments and then how to take actions that enhance strengths-based policy and practice will contribute to the provision of academically and socially positive experiences for all students (Nelson, Bustamante, Sawyer & Sloan, 2015).

A strength-based approach is essential in all of these efforts (Saleebey, 2001). Eber (2003) states, “the role of a designated team facilitator is critical to ensure the process is adhered to and that the principles of the strength-based person-/ family-centered approach are held fast” (p. 3). This focus rests on the belief that culturally competent schools should promote academic and social success for all students, particularly those who are at risk of failing and/or dropping out of school, including bilingual students and English Language Learners (Scott & Eber, 2003).

How Principles of Youth Engagement Can Inform Family Engagement

What might it look like for schools to not only see young people as participants, but as active partners and decision-makers when it comes to their experience of wellness and achievement at school? Likewise, what might it look like for school systems to envision their students’ families as equitable partners in the construction of their children’s experience of wellness and achievement at school? Family engagement and school mental and behavioral health has received due attention in the past decade, with many organizations publishing guides, toolkits and web-based resources to developing frameworks and partnership practices (e.g., the Johns Hopkins’ National Network of Partnership Schools, The Harvard Family Research Project). School practitioners are eager to partner with parents/guardians of their students driven by the research that demonstrates these partnerships as pivotal pre-
ventative and promotive factors in young people’s positive healthy development (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007). Although some scholarship has examined how family engagement can positively influence youth participation and academic achievement in schools (Stormshak, Fosco, & Dishion, 2010), and other articles have discussed the role of family engagement in youth violence prevention (Zeldin, 2004), youth engagement is rarely positioned as leading other engagement strategies. Greenberg et al. (2004) importantly note that to enhance school-behavioral health (inclusive of mental health), all engagement efforts need to be coordinated and aligned so the school is activating a cohesive, comprehensive, and consistent approach to all aspects of engagement.

For the purpose of understanding how principles of youth engagement in the context of PBIS can inform the way in which schools might partner with families, we define youth engagement as the overarching term that captures the concepts of student voice, expression, leadership, and consultation. Many continua have been widely adapted to assess the quality of youth engagement, providing opportunities to self-assess to redirect. The organization THRIVE\(^1\) offers a continuum of youth involvement, arguing that organizations (e.g., schools) can be youth-guided, youth-directed, or, ideally, youth-driven. We believe the same can be applied to families. Additionally, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative\(^2\) builds off a continuum of adult attitudes (Lofquist, 1989), arguing that adults see youth as objects, perhaps as recipients, and ideally as partners. Since research has demonstrated that self-determination and competence are key factors in resilience (Masten, 2015; Ungar, 2013, 2015), institutions have begun recognizing that students are often not allowed to actualize their resilience. For example, students are often perceived by adults as “too young” to have agency or are not knowledgeable enough, or that young people are simply uncaring or disinterested in matters related to their schooling experience (Fletcher, 2015; Isralowitz & Singer, 1981). In the same time period (1990s), youth engagement scholars were challenging schools to become more student-centered (and less test-centered) and PBIS emerged as a framework to proactively establish a positive school culture and establish behavior interventions and supports for all students to achieve social, emotional and academic success (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Notably, however,

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2. See http://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/ for more information about the initiative and the available tools to help assess adult attitudes in regards to working with youth

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There’s a radical – and wonderful – new idea here…that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. It’s an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously.


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Aligning and Integrating Family Engagement in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): Concepts and Strategies for Families and Schools in Key Contexts
youth (students) and families have not been involved as equal partners in the development and proliferation of student supports and services efforts like PBIS.

As emphasized throughout this e-book, we are now at a cultural inflection point that recognizes the power of service recipients (students and families) – a shift from being passive receptacles of care to empowered partners in their own wellness and achievement. The youth engagement field is moving from a unidimensional definition of youth engagement – where its sole purpose was cognitive learning and academic achievement – to a multidimensional interpretation that sees the benefit of youth engagement beyond academic gain and recognizes that youth engagement benefits the whole child (Yonezawa, Jones & Joselowsky, 2009). With this understanding, PBIS can help engage youth and families as equal and equitable partners in achieving these whole child benefits that stem from the understanding that a child’s physical, mental, behavioral, social and academic outcomes are all interdependent and mutually influencing (Allensworth & Kobe, 1987; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1992; Valois Lewallen, Slade & Tasco, 2015).

Culturally, we have seen an attitudinal shift from one that positions students and families as disconnected and/or uninterested in their education (without examining the schools’ role in that experience) to a more holistic perception that young people and their families are not disinterested in education per se, but rather the kind of education they are offered. This shift is often noted as the move from “parental involvement” to “parental engagement,” a shift from school leadership’s deficit based to strengths-based attitudinal mindset (Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016; Ishimaru, 2014). We often hear families referred to as receivers, rather than partners. For example, one of the main tenants of PBIS is to connect school systems with families (Muscott et al., 2008b), and often the verb that follows is “including” families throughout the process. However, what might it look like to partner with families? What would it be like to co-construct what interventions are delivered at each tier? What would it be like to co-determine “expected” behaviors or co-define what “positive” behaviors look like? How can family engagement practices for support systems like PBIS share outcomes?

**Continuum Models of Quality of Participation**

As previously mentioned, PBIS aims to connect schools with families, but typically refers to them as “including” families in the process, rather than engaging them as equal partners. Thus, this continuum of adult attitudes toward youth also appears applicable to the school-family context.

The shared apex for the majority of youth engagement continua is to work towards a culture of youth-adult partnership; thus, we are working toward a culture of family-school partnership. This partnership is defined as collaborative relationships between school staff, parents and other family members of students at a school in which mutual trust, respect, shared decision making and responsibility are foundational (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Zeldin and Collura...
(2010) define youth-adult (or student-educator if one desires to position the role of the stakeholders over the age of the stakeholders) partnership as a relationship that implicates both youth and adults in work that holds a shared, purposeful and intentional outcome, argued to be the most central aspect to authentic youth engagement. To note, these youth engagement frameworks are parallel to the context of family engagement, especially when arguing that a partnership implies critical action of both parties; neither the young person nor the family is a passive actor but rather an active collaborator. For example, Chovil’s (2009) Family Model of Care (based on Spragins’ [2007] Family Centered Practices work) posits that family engagement is the umbrella term that not only supports family participation and involvement, but more importantly, family empowerment. In fact, “families are active participants in all aspects of services and involved in decisions about care. Familismo (family-centered) in mental health contexts refers to family support and shared decision making when working with professionals” (Olvera & Olvera, 2012, p 79).

These continuum models of quality participation have been widely used in non-profit organizations, in relation to student leadership, but rarely applied to the context of youth mental health and/or service access. We aim to offer a model of how the concepts of youth – adult partnership can be applied to family-school partnerships in the context of student support services, like those represented in PBIS.

Applying Concepts to Practice: Behavior and Mental Health Referral Pathways/Systems

PBIS offers schools a tiered framework through which services and evidence-based practices are selected and applied within a data-driven process to promote and support student behavioral, emotional, and social well-being (see Chapter 3). Often, this includes schools developing and implementing formal or informal referral pathways – systems in which adults identify students based on data from screening or adult reports of various student concerns and then referring students for supports or interventions within the school or to outside community providers (Ikeda, Neesen, & Witt, 2009). Referral pathways are defined as “the series of actions or steps that begins at the moment a person in the school or local community identifies a mental health-related concern in a school-aged young person” (O’Malley et al., 2015). Referral pathways offer an entry point for schools to model authentic youth-adult partnership, or in this case, family-school partnership. Referral pathways can either continue to perpetuate systems where decisions happen to youth and/or their families, or if constructed through a youth-empowered and family-driven lens, can shift to systems created for and with youth and families.

We offer another popular model of youth engagement as the most helpful tool because it explicitly unpacks what a family-school partnership might look like. This model is Hart’s Ladder, originally developed by Roger Hart in 1997 and adapted by youth development theorist, Adam
Fletcher in 2008. Using Hart’s Ladder, schools and school systems can self-reflect to gain deeper understanding about the nature of youth-adult, and in this case, family-school partnerships. The model describes eight rungs of participation in a partnership; the bottom three rungs demonstrate non-participation and the upper five rungs delineate active participation. In Table 1, we adapted Hart’s Ladder to what it might look like in the school behavioral health and wellness context for youth and families. The model’s original rungs are delineated in the column “Quality of Participation or Consent.” Hart’s model uses participation as the measured quality, and in the context of school referral pathway identification and interventions we use consent.

Table 1. Adapting and Applying Hart’s Ladder to Youth- and Family-Driven Behavioral and Mental Health Referral Pathways/Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of Participation or Consent</th>
<th>Rungs of Youth Voice</th>
<th>Rungs of Family Voice</th>
<th>Rungs of Family Voice</th>
<th>Wellness &amp; Support Systems</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Youth Driven</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family Driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Young people and adults share decision-making</td>
<td>Young people have the ideas, set up the project and invite adults to join them in making decisions throughout the project. They are equitable partners.</td>
<td>Family members have the ideas, set up the project and invite school site leadership to join them in making decisions throughout the project. They are equitable partners.</td>
<td>Young people actively identify their own wellness and support system needs, approaches, and services and invite adults to partner with them throughout the process. Any adult action is youth-centered and responsive.</td>
<td>Families actively identify their own [student’s] wellness and support system needs, approaches, and services and invite school site leadership to partner with them throughout the process. Any school action is family-centered and responsive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Young people lead and initiate action</td>
<td>Young people have the initial idea and decide on how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available and trust in the leadership of young people.</td>
<td>Family members have the initial idea and decide on how the project is to be carried out. School site leadership are available and trust in the leadership of families.</td>
<td>Young people initially identify a/their wellness and support system need(s) and then determine which services and approaches they would like to access.</td>
<td>Families initially identify a/their wellness and support system need(s) and then determine which services and approaches they would like to access.</td>
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### Quality of Participation or Consent

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<th>Rungs of Youth Voice</th>
<th>Rungs of Family Voice</th>
<th>Wellness &amp; Support Systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people</td>
<td>Adults have the initial idea, and young people are involved in making decisions, planning and implementing the project.</td>
<td>School site leadership have the initial idea, and family members are involved in making decisions, planning and implementing the project.</td>
<td>Adults initially identify the wellness and support system need(s) of young people, and young people are involved in making decisions around the response to those needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adults design and facilitate the project and young people’s opinions are given weight in decision-making. Young people receive feedback about their opinions.</td>
<td>School site leadership design and facilitate the project and their opinions are given weight in decision-making. Family members receive feedback about their opinions.</td>
<td>School site leadership initially identifies the wellness and support system need(s) of students and their families, and families are involved in making decisions around the response to those needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Young people are consulted and informed</td>
<td>Adults design and facilitate the referral pathways, processes and policies related to young people’s wellness and support systems. Young people are asked for their opinions based on their lived experiences; they receive feedback about their lived experiences (validating or invalidating their opinions).</td>
<td>School site leadership designs and facilitates the referral pathways, processes and policies related to student wellness and support systems. Families are asked for their opinions based on their lived experiences; they receive feedback about their lived experiences (validating or invalidating their opinions).</td>
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<th>Rungs of Family Voice Youth Driven</th>
<th>Wellness &amp; Support Systems Family Driven</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Young people assigned but informed</td>
<td>Adults decide on the project and young people volunteer for it. Young people understand the project and adults respect their views.</td>
<td>School site leadership decides on the project and families volunteer for it. Families understand the project and schools respect their views.</td>
<td>Adults design and facilitate the referral pathways, processes, and policies related to young people's wellness and support systems and young people volunteer to participate in some or all of the steps of the processes and policies. Adults ensure that there are structured opportunities to check for youth [and their families'] understanding of the process, policies, and pathways in place regarding youth wellness and support systems. Adults create and drive a wellness and support system reform initiative or project; adults select [which] young people [should be] to be a part of the implementation.</td>
<td>Schools design and facilitate the referral pathways, processes, and policies related to student wellness and support systems and families volunteer to participate in some or all of the steps of the processes and policies. Schools ensure that there are structured opportunities to check for families' [and their young people's] understanding of the process, policies, and pathways in place regarding student wellness and support systems. Schools create and drive a wellness and support system reform initiative or project; schools select [which] families [should be] to be a part of the implementation.</td>
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### CHAPTER NINE

<table>
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<th>Rungs of Family Voice</th>
<th>Wellness &amp; Support Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Tokenism</td>
<td>Young people are given a limited voice and little choice about what they say and how they can communicate.</td>
<td>Families are given a limited voice and little choice about what they say and how they can communicate in relation to their child’s wellness and support system access.</td>
<td>Young people are given limited voice and choice about how they experience awareness and access of wellness and support system services and approaches. There are few opportunities to communicate their lived experiences to adults.</td>
<td>Families are given limited voice and choice about how they experience awareness and access of wellness and support system services and approaches. There are few opportunities to communicate their lived experiences to school site leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adults only refer or invite young people to share their wellness and support system needs when they are required to.</td>
<td>School site leadership only refers or invites families to share their wellness and support system needs when they are required to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2. Decoration                      | Young people can take part in an event in a very limited capacity and have no role in decision-making | Families can take part in an event in a very limited capacity and have no role in decision-making | [Only youth with the awareness of services] can access wellness and support system services based on a referral from an adult; they do not have decision-making power in if or how they receive services. | [Only families with the awareness of services] can access wellness and support system services based on a referral from the school; they do not have decision-making power in if or how they or their child receive services (e.g., they are told what the expected behavior of students looks like without an opportunity to co-construct it). |
|                                    |                      |                       | | |
1. Manipulation  
Adults have complete and unchallenged authority to abuse their power. They use young people’s ideas and voices for their own gain.

Schools have complete and unchallenged authority to abuse their power. They use families’ ideas and voices for their own gain.

Adults have complete and unchallenged authority to abuse their power in forcing or coercing young people to receive services. Any ideas youth offer about their experiences of support systems and wellness services are used for adult gain.

Adults share young people’s wellness and support system needs & information without permission.

Schools have complete and unchallenged authority to abuse their power in forcing or coercing families to receive services. Any ideas families offer about their experiences of support systems and wellness services are used for school gain.

School site leadership share young people’s and their families’ wellness and support system needs & information without permission.

**Note:** Refer to the Ladder of Youth Voice adapted by Fletcher (2011) based on Hart et al (1994): [http://www.freechild.org/ladder.html](http://www.freechild.org/ladder.html). Hart’s original ladder uses “equal partnership”; Fletcher suggests “equitable partnerships” as the highest rung whereas “equal partnerships” are more appropriate for the sixth rung. Mental health needs, approaches, and services also refer to preventions, interventions, and assessments. “Referral pathways” are defined as “the series of actions or steps that begins at the moment a person in the school or local community identifies a mental health-related concern in a school-aged young person” (O’Malley et al., 2015)

Recognizing that all schemas, continua, and models might suggest that working with youth and families in schools is linear, we acknowledge that in each relationship and interaction and in each school and district, the quality of participation or consent in partnerships may shift dynamically. The purpose of this applied (and adapted) model is to offer schools a tool through which school leaders and families might “sit together” and discuss with authenticity and transparency what their partnership looks like regarding student support systems like PBIS. Too often, when we ask schools how families are involved, it rarely lands above Rung 5 (“School site leadership design and facilitate the project and their opinions are given weight in decision-making. Family members receive feedback about their opinions”). At “back-to-school” events, families may be presented with the expected behaviors for their children or the tiered student support model with examples of services and supports by tier. Rarely, however, are families active co-constructors of those expectations or of the decisions that contribute to what supports are provided for each tier and whether or not their children should be placed in services. Altogether, there are enormous challenges to this work, and they namely land in school leadership’s attitudes and
belief systems around how students and their families are seen and valued in the schooling experience, a dynamic stemming from a number of potential factors. These include parental perception of a school’s culture that exhibits culturally insensitive outreach, communication errors or inadequate methods, logistical barriers (e.g. when schools create meetings during parent/guardian work hours), and schools failing to orient and explain the school system or opportunities for parent/guardians to contribute meaningfully. In the section below, we discuss how leaders can use Hart’s Ladder to assess their attitudes and belief systems and begin the shift toward a more equal and equitable partnership with youth and families.

Avoiding engagement traps. It can be tempting to concentrate on where a partnership lies in the top few rungs, but we encourage practitioners to examine the bottom three rungs: tokenism, decoration, and manipulation. They often surface during uncomfortable conversations among school staff or between school site leadership and youth and families, particularly if discussing the quality of participation in their partnership together. Schools may not realize that they share information about student and family behavior, mental health and wellness needs and supports without permission. Additionally, when families share information about their first-hand involvement in everyday experiences, their stories are often repeated as part of the school’s narrative by educators and researchers for the school’s gain without the student’s or family’s consent.

Importantly, schools may only engage families because they are mandated to do so. An important aspect of PBIS is to engage families as partners of school culture and climate, but this may be perceived as a “tack on” or extra thing to do (Muscott et al., 2008a). There is great value in taking time to discuss how, when, and with whom schools disproportionately tokenize families (and their participation) when it comes to implementing support systems like PBIS. Terms like “getting parent buy-in” or “getting parents on board” are clues into a partnership that may not be fully equal or equitable.

When using Table 1 to reflect on implementation partnerships among families (including youth) and the school/PBIS team, the school site leadership might examine questions that probe which families may disproportionately experience tokenism, decoration, or manipulation more than others. Are families who are English language learning more often manipulated? Are families that are able to be physically present at school more often able to be consenting partners? Which families’ home values parallel the schools’? Tackling questions like these may result in more authentic partnerships that can move a families’ experience from the bottom rungs to higher ones, accessing a more empowered, cooperative, and collaborative relationship between the school site leadership and students’ families.

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4. School “climate” and “culture” have been described in various ways over the past several decades and are often used interchangeably. School climate generally refers to perceptions or subjective experiences of school, whereas school culture tends to indicate the actual (objective) state of a school (see www.schoolclimate.org for additional discussion).
Summary

Hart’s Ladder, when applied to the context of PBIS and tiered behavior and mental health referrals, offers a concrete approach for schools and their family partners to create school-based systems that are family-driven and student-centered. Whether referral pathways are informal or formal, or have been developed or are in the process of being so, schools have the opportunity to re-empower families. Opportunities lie in the definition of expected behavior, in the agreements around what constitutes each tier, and shared-decision making around supports and interventions (who, why, how,). This explicit partnership might shift families’ experience of having student supports happen to them to happening with them. Conversations are not easy; families’ needs are not uniform. Families often carry similar mental health intervention needs as students’ needs and can be reflections of unmet needs in their larger contexts. Nonetheless, by identifying tangible partner possibilities, schools can work towards building effective student support systems that ensure school climates are intentionally oriented towards youth and family engagement.

Legal Considerations for Family Engagement with Special Education Populations

Quasi-experimental research conducted on the effects of parents’ involvement in the education of their children have documented that increased parent engagement in their child’s education results in increased academic and behavioral achievement of children (Duchnowski et al., 2012). Such research has shown improvements in reading and math achievement, student attendance, prosocial behaviors, homework completion, and graduation rates (Burke, 2012; Duchnowski et al, 2012) and holds true despite the parent’s socioeconomic and educational levels (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In fact, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Education “Thirty years of research shows that greater family involvement in their children’ learning is a critical link to achieving high quality education and a safe disciplined learning environment” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p.1). Moreover, programs designed to increase parent involvement in their child’s school have shown positive effects (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). PBIS provides systems for these parental involvement practices (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012) to transform parent involvement into meaningful partnerships; consequently resulting in engaged families across the continuum. The purpose of this section is to identify the relevant laws surrounding family engagement and to understand how these legal and policy implications inform family engagement and PBIS.

The importance of family engagement has also been recognized in federal education law and can be fulfilled through the implementation of PBIS with fidelity. President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law in 1965. The purpose of the ESEA was to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students by provided federal money to assist states in improving edu-