

Family and Community Engagement

In Promoting Excellence for All



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Report of the 2014-15 State Superintendent's
Parent Advisory Council



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Tony Evers, PhD, State Superintendent
Madison, Wisconsin



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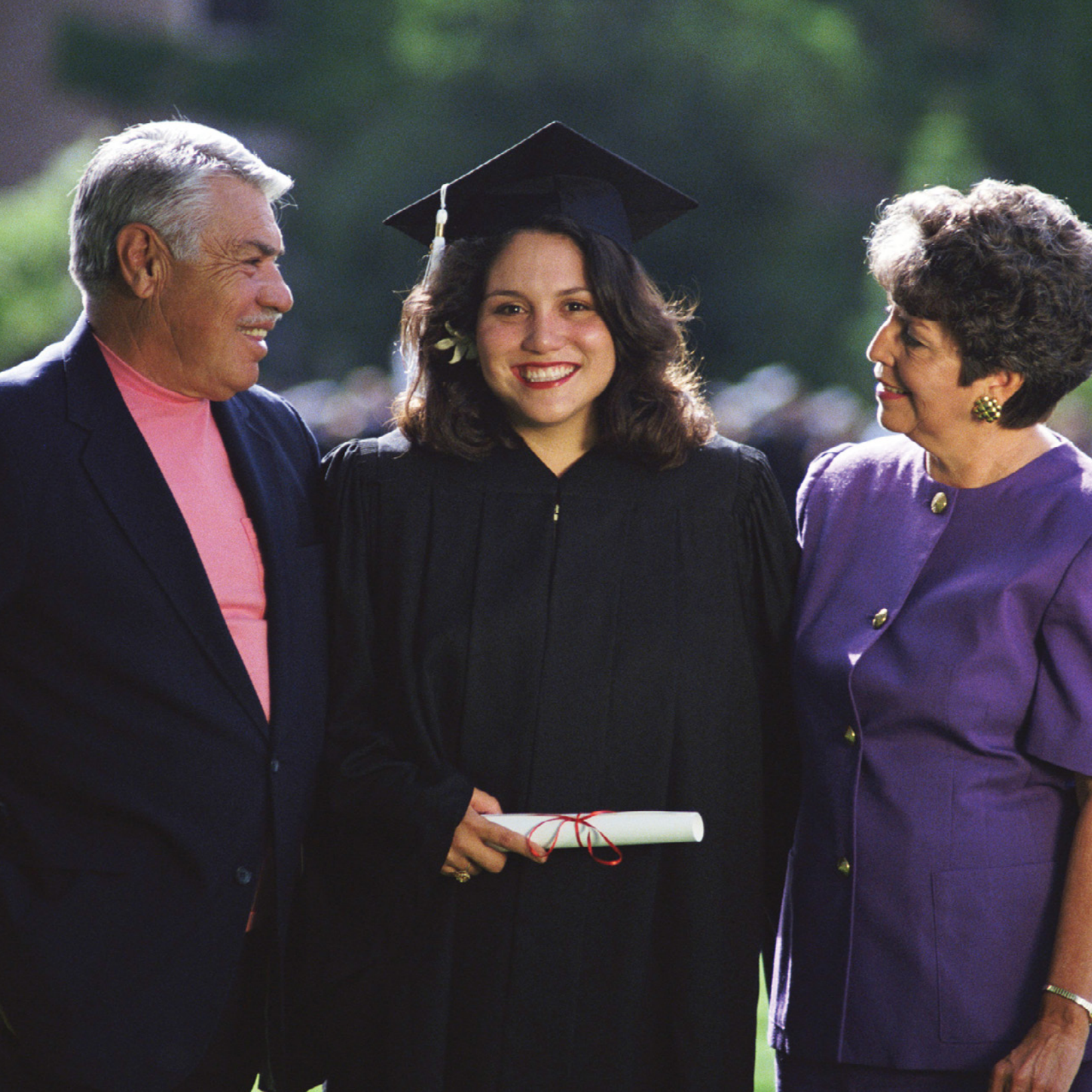
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Foreword

Dear Wisconsin Educators and Families,

Every family wants their children to do well in school and to graduate prepared for the next steps in life. Parents and families are a critical factor in helping all kids graduate college and career ready. When schools reach out to engage parents and families and address barriers to involvement, every family can support their children's academic success.

While public schools in Wisconsin are considered strong and among the best in the nation, the state has large achievement gaps as measured by various assessments and the graduation rate. The cost of having race-based gaps is devastating for the individual and our state. When one in four Hispanic and American Indian students drop out and one in three African American students fail to graduate on time, we must take urgent action to address these gaps.

This is why I formed the *Promoting Excellence for All: State Superintendent's Task Force on Wisconsin's Achievement Gap* in April of 2014. I asked this group of successful educators to identify dynamic strategies to reverse persistent and disturbing achievement gaps. The task force, building on the work of scholars and community experts, issued its report in September 2014, focusing on four essential areas that will improve learning for students of color and other student groups.

Those areas—effective instruction, positive student–teacher relationships, school and instructional leadership, and family and community engagement—have succeeded in narrowing student achievement gaps. The four focus areas are interdependent and some will argue that none of the school-based strategies can be truly successful without family and community engagement. In fact, the task force called for Wisconsin schools to employ “new and different ways of engaging families based on mutual respect . . . because our schools belong to all.”

I asked my 2014-15 Parent Advisory Council (PAC) to examine the family engagement strategies targeted by the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force. As involved parents, grandparents, and community members who represent the diversity of Wisconsin public school students, they identified meaningful ways for schools to welcome and engage all families in children's learning.

I ask every educator to explore the *Report of the 2014-15 State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council* and determine what specific actions schools can take to build positive relationships with the families of our lowest-performing students. Let's purposefully enlist families' innate desire to help children and young people succeed so they graduate college and career ready.

Sincerely,
Tony Evers, PhD, State Superintendent





Introduction

Overview

The State Superintendent's Task Force on Promoting Excellence for All

Wisconsin's historic tradition of commitment to a vibrant public education system continues to work for many students. Wisconsin is a national leader in overall graduation rates, ACT scores, and Advanced Placement results. However, Wisconsin has much more work to do to ensure every child is successful in school and graduates ready to pursue college or a career.

State Superintendent Tony Evers' vision for education, Agenda 2017, expects all students to graduate college and career ready. Agenda 2017 is focused on student-centered goals. These include improving the number of students who graduate from high school and score proficient on state tests in reading and mathematics in third and eighth grades.

The results of the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed Wisconsin had the widest race-based gaps of any state in reading and mathematics achievement for students in both fourth and eighth grades. In addition, Hispanic and American Indian students drop out of school at a rate of one in four, and African American students at a rate of one in three. Wide gaps in student achievement also persist for students with disabilities, English language learners, and students in poverty.

In response to unacceptable gaps, the state superintendent established the *Promoting Excellence for All: State Superintendent's Task Force on Wisconsin's Achievement Gap* in April 2014. The state superintendent

named 18 educators from schools statewide to the task force and asked them to share how their schools were closing achievement gaps and improving the achievement of students of color. Task force members were from public, charter, and choice schools throughout Wisconsin representing urban, suburban, and rural areas.

In a report issued in September 2014, the task force identified four research-based school improvement focus areas:

- effective instruction
- student-teacher relationships
- family and community engagement
- school and instructional leadership

Within each of the four focus areas, task force members identified individual strategies used in their schools to help close race-based achievement gaps, accompanied by “applications” of how members put strategies into practice. Educators’ beliefs and a systemic framework that pays attention to race and values culturally-responsive practices, both within and outside of the school building, are keys to closing race-based achievement gaps, task force members said.

The systemic approach to school improvement moves district and school staff away from fragmented efforts to a more coherent and connected way of operating.

To reframe family engagement requires educators to shift their practices and beliefs in the way they engage families and communities. (See Figure 1. Baldwin and Johnson 2015, 16)

The task force took a fresh and deeper look into how Wisconsin schools are reaching out to and engaging families of color and those from different cultures in their children’s school lives.

“We believe new and different ways of engaging families based on mutual trust and respect are required because our schools belong to all. When we engage culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities we feel we are making a difference because we are actively seeking out these diverse families as partners who have valuable contributions to make toward the success of their children. Our schools are strengthened by a diverse community in which to live, work, and grow—we choose diverse schools.” (DPI 2014, 45) The task force recommended seven family and community engagement strategies for schools to use in closing race-based achievement gaps:

Figure 1
Reframing Family Engagement

Individual Responsibility	➔	Shared Responsibility in Partnership
Deficit-Based/Adversarial	➔	Strength-Based and Collaborative
Random Acts	➔	Systemic
Add-On	➔	Integrated
Events Driven	➔	Learning and Outcomes Driven
Compliance	➔	Ownership and Continuous Improvement
One-Time Project	➔	Sustained

Source: Baldwin and Johnson 2015

“Closing the achievement gap is a work of love. Only together can we solve this problem”

Tony Evers, PhD
State Superintendent

- Consider Families and Communities as Experts on their Children
- Family Engagement
- Welcoming Environment
- Community Schools
- Community Partnerships
- Focused Events
- Communication with Families

The state superintendent reminds us that “Closing the achievement gap is a work of love. Only together can we solve this problem.”

A New Framework for Building Family-School Partnerships

Coinciding with the work of the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force, in April 2014 the U.S. Department of Education released a new framework for schools and communities to build parent and community engagement. The “Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships” (see Figure 2) called for states and districts to develop the knowledge, confidence, and skills of both family members and school staff to work together for student success. (SEDL and USDE 2013, 5)

Figure 2

Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships



Source: SEDL and U.S. Department of Education, 2013

Despite valuing relationships with families, many principals and teachers receive little training for engaging families and report feeling unprepared. Family engagement “initiatives must include a concerted focus on developing adult capacity, whether through pre- and in-service professional development for educators; academies, workshops, seminars, and workplace trainings for families; or as an integrated part of parent-teacher partnership activities,” the report stated. (SEDL and USDE 2013, 9)

School staff prepared to engage families in improving student achievement possess the skills and supports to:

- honor and recognize families’ existing knowledge, skill, and forms of engagement
- create and sustain school and district cultures that welcome, invite, and promote family engagement and development
- develop and connect all family engagement initiatives to student learning

In addition, schools can help families—regardless of their race, ethnicity, educational background, gender, disability or socioeconomic status—gain the skills they need to fill multiple roles required of school partners. Those roles include:

- supporters of their children’s learning and development
- encouragers of an achievement identity, a positive self image, and a “can do” spirit in their children
- monitors of their children’s time, behavior, boundaries, and resources

- models of lifelong learning and enthusiasm for education
- advocates and activists for improved learning opportunities for their children and at their schools
- decision-makers of educational options for their children, the school, and community
- collaborators with school staff and members of the community on issues of school improvement and reform

(SEDL and USDE, 2013)



“We believe all parents want their children to learn and to succeed in school. Families are a source of strength and knowledge...”

PAC Members

State Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Council

Upon election in April 2009, the state superintendent launched his Parent Advisory Council (PAC) to advise him on family engagement in student learning. The group of parents from communities throughout the state represents the geographic and cultural diversity of Wisconsin public school students. The PAC offers members the opportunity to learn about and give feedback on state education programs and priorities, while encouraging parent members to share information about effective practices in their schools and communities.

In response to a national call for sustained dialogue and collaboration among educators, families, and community members, the state superintendent charged his 2014-15 Parent Advisory Council with “building on the work of the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force.” He asked the council to recommend “strategies for how schools and families can work together to engage all families in student learning and close student achievement gaps.”

During four face-to-face meetings from September 2014 to April 2015, and a February 2015 webinar, PAC members identified and described effective practices they believe close achievement gaps by welcoming and engaging families in children’s learning and schools. The Midwest Regional Comprehensive Center supported the council’s discussions along with Department of Public Instruction staff.

Using the seven “Family and Community Engagement” strategies identified by the task force, PAC members recommended ways for schools to plan and implement efforts to close achievement gaps by engaging racially, culturally and linguistically diverse families.

PAC members developed the recommendations after considering their own experiences as parents, and after gathering information from other parents, family members, and school staff.

They also agreed on the following belief statement about why family engagement is important and how schools can enlist families as partners in closing student achievement gaps.

Belief Statement of the Parent Advisory Council

“We believe all parents want their children to learn and to succeed in school. Families are a source of strength and knowledge. They are best able to help their children do well in school when schools accept families as they are and make frequent efforts to know, listen to, and learn from parents.

Schools enlist families as partners and decision-makers in closing student achievement gaps when they do the following:

- recognize and build upon students’ unique cultural and family strengths,
- communicate regularly with families in their languages and invite families to share their knowledge and needs,
- create multiple ways for all families to gain skills and knowledge that support children’s learning and achieve school goals, and
- help families become aware of and use community resources that prepare every child to be career and college ready.”

PAC members developed recommendations after considering their own experiences as parents, and after gathering information from other parents, family members, and school staff.

Family and Community Engagement Strategies and Applications

Strategy

Consider Families and Communities as Experts on their Children

Description

Educators honor the family as an expert on their child to create a sense of partnership and shared responsibility between the teacher and family. This starts with a positive initial contact. Staff is purposeful in empowering the community by supporting local business, hosting culturally responsive events, and building up the community's culture.

Application

Teachers at the **Goodman Community Center** 4-year-old kindergarten program in Madison meet individually with parents. Parents share their hopes and knowledge about their child's strengths and learning styles. Then, parents and teachers come up with goals they will work together on for the child to achieve.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Encourage parents to share information about their children with teachers and the school. Invite parents to talk about their family with the class when their child is “Student of the Week.”
- Take time to listen to and gather information from families attending parent-teacher conferences.
- Build and maintain a database of parents as resources. Identify parents’ skills such as language fluency, computer skills, art, cultural awareness, and others.

“What I found refreshing . . . is the teachers put the parents in the driver’s seat.”

Josephine Lorya-Ozulamo
PAC Member



Strategy

Family Engagement

Description

School effort is concentrated and conducted with cultural competency to connect families with the school in order to highlight the importance of academic success. Involving families in school-based activities also fosters positive engagement with educators and increases family awareness of student progress.



Application

Mindoro Elementary School

offers a fall literacy event for children and families.

Participants rotated through each of five classrooms themed to a different book.

Teachers or family members read a book aloud, children have a snack, and do a craft

activity that reflects the book's theme. Each child then receives a personal copy of the book to take with them. At the end of the night, each child had a small set of books that they could read at home with their family.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- View extended family members as resources.
- Meet parents at neighborhood spaces such as churches, libraries, fast food restaurants or neighborhood centers.
- Expect and train all school staff to promptly greet families and offer friendly, personal assistance.
- Share strategies for learning used at school that can be reinforced at home.

“This was a fun and casual activity with my children. . . It was an easy, happy experience with my children’s teachers.”

Quincey Daniels, PhD
PAC Member

“As a parent, that personal touch made a big difference. It made the program feel more inviting and that my presence was truly wanted.”

Jakelyn Karabetsos
PAC Member

Strategy

Welcoming Environment

Description

Educators are customer-service friendly and make sure that everyone feels respected and welcomed at all times. Policies and practices reflect this. Staff provides service for all customers that entails greeting, high expectations, visibility, public pride, and private problem-solving.

Application

Roosevelt Elementary School starts each school year with an event to welcome families. Families receive a written invitation to attend the evening event and a personal phone call from school staff or members of the school’s parent–teacher organization. Upon arriving, the principal, school staff, and even the school mascot individually welcome each family. Families meet each other while sharing a meal. Then, while parents rotate through various informational sessions, children enjoy activities with the physical education teacher. Children and parents re-unite to play ice-breaking games.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Select a student each day who will greet adults entering the school with a handshake and say, “Welcome to our school.”
- Provide many opportunities for children and families of color to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.
- Feature family photos on classroom bulletin boards and walls.
- Prepare for student-teacher conferences by knowing family names and having family information materials ready.



“I really appreciate the district’s effort in teaching Native American studies, as they should. This not only benefits the Native American students, but the entire student population.”

Melissa Lowe
PAC Member

Strategy

Community Partnerships

Description

Educators engage with community members and leaders to support holistic, future-focused activities and events for students and their families.

Application

Black River Falls High School has collaborated with the Ho-Chunk Nation to offer a Ho-Chunk and Ethnic Studies course for any high school student. Students hear from and interview guest speakers from the Ho-Chunk community. The course traces the history of the Ho-Chunk people and explores the role that cultural identity plays in an increasingly diverse society.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Hold community discussions or create a community assets map to help families, staff, and community members get to know each other.
- Invite community members to school discussions and focus groups to help shape decisions before they are made.
- Identify and form partnerships with community leaders to empower families and members of those communities.
- Ask community groups and businesses to adopt a school to provide resources, student internships, job shadowing, and other career readiness skills.



“The council is really helping to break down barriers among people who might not have a chance to meet.”

Ellen Chicka
PAC Member

Strategy

Focused Events

Description

Educators plan purposeful events that target specific cultural and ethnic groups to involve, inform, and strengthen partnerships in the school community.

Application

Northern Lights Elementary School’s Diversity Council brings together parents and caregivers from all walks of life to meet and to talk about their families, how they feel about school and education, and ways they can work together to help children learn. In addition to regular meetings, the council sponsors tables at school and community events to build awareness of their efforts. Council members also help with school and community events, such as hosting a diversity dance and sponsoring Child Safety Day and a bike rodeo.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Ask parents to serve as authentic cultural resources for the school.
- Offer a “day in the life of your student” activity in which parents attend school in the role of their children.
- Give families new to the school a chance to visit their school, meet staff, and learn about expectations before the school year begins.



Strategy

Communication with Families

Description

Schools establish timely, two-way communication systems with parents, develop strategies to involve parents and community in the learning process, and allow parents and community some voice in key school decisions. Educators document ongoing positive family communication on a consistent basis. Schools establish systems to contact families with concerns and information about specific interventions. Staff and families meet when students are referred for interventions (Tier 2 and 3) to discuss students' strengths and areas of concern.



Application

To support families, the **Pecatonica Area School District** surveyed families and found that many parents employed beyond district boundaries were using resources in neighboring communities. As a result of the survey, administered online and sent home, the district has re-structured before-and after-school programs and 4-year-old kindergarten to fit with parents' job schedules. In addition, child care programs are offered through the school district for breaks and no-school days during the school year.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Ask parents how to best communicate with them. Offer choices such as e-mail, phone, social media, or text messaging.
- Use multiple modes of communication, including text notifications and digital media, to communicate with families. For example, alert parents to upcoming school events using voice mail and text messages.
- Provide parents with constructive feedback about their children. Send home a weekly log from the teacher with a system or place for parent feedback. Ask students to submit work via Google Docs. Teachers can share teacher feedback with the student and parent on Google Docs.
- Hang data mini-posters or signs about student achievement in conspicuous places such as hallways, entrances, classrooms, for students and parents to see.
- Give parents rubrics to help them understand how student grades are determined for school quarters or for classroom projects or papers.

Strategy

Community Schools

Description

The school is used as a host location to build a network of resources and systems to ensure every student's needs are met (i.e., dental services, medical access, fitness programs, restaurant on campus, etc.). School facilities need to be accessible to families beyond the school day.

Application

The **Northern Lights Family Resource Center** in Superior is located at Northern Lights Elementary and provides services to families. The center offers parent education programs, personalized family support services, community events, and information referral services. It partners with community and service organizations as well as local businesses to provide a network for shared ideas and information. The center also readily introduces schools to families with children from birth to 4 years old.

Tips from Parent Advisory Council members:

- Promote communication regarding health services and health providers.
- Offer or connect families to skill-building opportunities they can use such as job training, English language skills, or using the Internet.
- Establish partnerships with community service providers.
- Encourage city officials, such as alderpersons or neighborhood groups, to hold meetings at the school.
- Share school library resources with families.



Next Steps

Family and Community Engagement in Promoting Excellence for All: Report of the 2014-15 State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council will be incorporated into the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction *Promoting Excellence for All* website. This report, as well as videos of PAC members describing their most meaningful family engagement experiences, will become part of the body of tools, resources, and research educators and families can access online.

DPI will promote this report and the *Promoting Excellence for All* website statewide to help guide school and district efforts to engage families and communities in closing student achievement gaps. Districts can link to this interactive website on closing achievement gaps at:
<http://statesupt.dpi.wi.gov/excforall>.

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Resources

Coalition for Community Schools
<http://www.communityschools.org/>

Family-School Partnerships: National Standards for Family-School Partnerships
<http://www.pta.org/nationalstandards>

Harvard Family Research Project
<http://www.hfrp.org/>

National Family and Community Engagement Network
<http://www.fcenetwork.iel.org/>

National Network of Partnership Schools
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/>

National PIRC Coordination Center
(Parental Information and Resource Centers)
<http://www.nationalpirc.org/>

National PTA
<http://www.pta.org/>

NAEYC Family Engagement: A Family Checklist

<http://www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/resources/family-checklist>

Promise Neighborhoods

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>

Urban Family Engagement Network

<https://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2135>

US Department of Education: Family and Community Engagement

<http://www.ed.gov/parent-and-family-engagement>

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Promoting Excellence for All: Family & Community Engagement

<http://dpi.wi.gov/excforall/family-and-community-engagement/family-engagement>

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council

http://fscp.dpi.wi.gov/fscp_ssptrldr

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Title I Parent Involvement

http://titleone.dpi.wi.gov/ttlone_parent_index





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Bulletin No.16018

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