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Episode 61: The Five R's of Family Engagement

Samantha Statler: Welcome back listeners! Becky and I are excited to be plugged in with you today to discuss a very important topic when it comes to being an educator, family engagement.

Becky Lewis: Yes, Sam, I couldn't agree more. And not only is this topic crucial for educators but it is also something that we focus on with the WVCGLR. So, listeners, now that you have had some time to get to know your students, create classroom norms, amongst other BOY things- we want to focus a little more on engaging and involving your child's first teacher, their families!

Samantha Statler: You know, when I first started teaching, I remember that this was an area that I didn't fully understand. I communicated with my families regularly and held conferences with them about their child's progress. But now I know more, and I realize that family engagement reaches well beyond these two examples. According to the National Association for family, school, and community engagement, family engagement is defined as a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.

Becky Lewis: Right, we know that engaging families is something that is not isolated to teachers or schools. Engaging families and involving them in their child's development and learning can and should involve many other entities like you just mentioned, Sam. But for educators especially, developing those positive partnerships with your students' families is truly one of the most important tasks we have. And like you said, sometimes this topic can be a little scary or challenging, but our hope is that this episode will make that a little less scary and less challenging as you continue to build and develop relationships with your students' families.

With the support of the West Virginia Department of Education, we understand that a family's engagement in their child's education is key in improving outcomes for their child.

Samantha Statler: You are right, Becky. And when it comes to The WVDE's connection to family, school, and community engagement, they have a set of core beliefs that I would like to share with our listeners.

1. All families have dreams for their children and want to see them succeed.
2. All families have the capacity to support their children's learning.
3. When families are equipped with accurate, relevant, and timely information, they are properly positioned to partner to support their children's learning.
4. Families and school staff should be equal partners with support from the community.
5. The responsibility for building positive productive relationships between school and home rests primarily with the school staff, especially school and county leaders.

Becky Lewis: Thanks for sharing those with us, Sam. I also want to let our listeners know that we will have the WVDE's family and community engagement page linked in our resources. I encourage you to check out some of the resources they have available along with some information about county family-educator resources that are available throughout the state. I would also recommend checking out episode 31, which features an interview with Amanda Peyton, an instructional leader from McDowell County. In this episode, Amanda discusses some unique approaches that her county has implemented to make deeper connections with families.

Another resource we are using to drive our conversation today is an article from the National Association for the Education of Young Children titled *Five Rs for Promoting Positive Family Engagement*. This article walks us through five R's, which are: respect, reassurance, responsiveness, relationships, and reciprocity. So, Sam, why don't we walk our listeners through these five 5 r's?

Samantha Statler: I think that is a great idea! The first R is respect. Our student's family members want to feel respected as their child's first and most important

teacher in their lives. Families also want to know that their family values, culture, and home experiences are respected. Another part of this piece is to be aware of your own biases, ideas, and beliefs. These are things you cannot let interfere with your work to understand each of your students' families and their choices and circumstances.

Becky Lewis: I couldn't agree more. It is important for educators to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate what their students and families bring to the school. Families aren't a separate part of a school community- they should be viewed as contributors and participants. During our last episode with Claire McCoy, she shared with us little tips and strategies for building a strong sense of community and culture in the classroom that is applicable to our topic today. One strategy that she mentioned was sending home a survey to families so that they could share information about their family's home culture, traditions, and the caregivers' expertise. So that educators can utilize caregivers as a resource at different times throughout the school year.

Samantha Statler: A couple strategies you can use to develop this respect for your students' families is to listen to them. This truly confirms for families that their thoughts and suggestions are valued and that you two together are a team. You both want the best for that student/child.

Make sure to have constant open communication with families. I know technology has made this a little easier with apps like Seesaw or ClassDojo. This is a great place to post classroom news, weekly newsletters, photos of students, and any other relevant information for your families.

When I was a classroom teacher, I sent home weekly "fridge facts" that had the content we were learning that week along with any important announcements. I also emailed a digital version to the families I had email addresses for. My school also used ClassDojo- and it was a great, quick way to send messages to families. I also made a lot of calls home- and no, not just negative ones. I always made a point to call families throughout the year to just brag about their child and they were so appreciative of these phone calls.

Becky Lewis: My former school also used ClassDojo to communicate with families. But we were in a rural community with limited cell and internet service so many families did not have access to ClassDojo, so I also used the app Remind to

communicate with families. I was able to send my families a text message from my computer to their cell phones that they could get when they went to work or when cell services were available. For some families this was a much better way for me to stay in contact with them.

Okay moving on to our next R of this article there are actually two “r” words that are connected to one another, and they are: reassurance and responsiveness. Your students’ families need to be reassured that you not only care about their child as an individual, but you will also meet them where they are in their learning. Families want to be reassured that you will make decisions for their child that will keep them safe and engaged in their learning.

Samantha Statler: Right, they also want to feel that you are responsive, and they can trust you to address any questions or concerns they might have. Flexibility and responsiveness go hand in hand as an educator. Educators who are flexible in their understanding, expectations, and their responses to the families they serve will build that trust.

Becky Lewis: One strategy you can use to help foster that reassurance with your families is to take lots of pictures and videos of your students learning. Of course, be aware of what students have permission to have their photograph taken and what types of sharing is permitted. Families want to know what their child is doing during the day, who they are playing with, and what activities they seem to enjoy. You could do this daily or weekly, depending on the time you have. Another strategy you can use is to provide daily or mid-week talking points. These differ from that weekly update in that these can be short and sweet.

Samantha Statler: And just to add to that- My daughter's teacher did such a great job of this last year. She used seesaw which I found to be very user friendly as a parent. But she would post pictures of honey throughout the day, activities she was doing, and even her just happy and having fun. It was such a reassuring feeling to see the smile on my daughter's face and This leads me to that third “R” which is families want a relationship. It truly is the parents/guardians of a child who are the experts and who also play a critical role in their child’s growth and learning. When families feel like they have a relationship with their child’s teacher, they are more willing to interact with the teacher and volunteer when needed.

Becky Lewis: One simple strategy you can use to build these relationships with families is just by saying hello. Maybe you pass them one day in the office after school or see them at the local grocery store. Take those few seconds to say hello—it is these short yet inviting conversations that can lead to positive relationships and family engagement.

Samantha Statler: Yes! And another strategy that comes to my mind is that you can use to help strengthen your relationships with your families is by inviting them into your classroom. Some families don't know how they can be involved and to what capacity. Maybe you could have parents/guardians be mystery readers, and this could be done in person or virtually if needed. You could also ask for volunteers to help chaperone a field trip.

Becky Lewis: I think those are some very excellent ideas! But I know that many of the families of the children that were in my classroom worked during the day and didn't have time to volunteer in my classroom and I was not sure how to get them involved. And this was much the same for my fellow teachers, but I do remember one teacher in my building that offered opportunities for families to volunteer by prepping items that the teacher would need for big projects that were coming up. Such as sorting things into Ziplock bags or cutting things apart. So, she asked families who were interested in volunteering but didn't have time during the day if they could complete these tasks in the evenings or weekends. If the families were able to then she would send the supplies home with the student along with directions and a deadline date for when she would need them back. The great thing was that she never had any issues getting material back in time because again these families were looking for a way to support their child and the classroom.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and that really is such a great idea, Becky. I've never, I've never worked with anyone that's done that. And like you said, this is challenging. For all teachers who have families that work during the day and still want to be involved. So that was a really creative way for that teacher to still involve her families.

Becky Lewis: And so, moving on to the fourth R of this article is reciprocity. In this scenario, reciprocity means that the teacher and parent/guardian must depend

on each other to accomplish something. This type of coordination requires flexibility with our approaches and expectations. One strategy you can use to practice reciprocity is to involve your families by talking and including them in decision making. Be in the know of the goals and expectations they have for their child, for you as their child's teacher, and for the child's school. If you are simply telling the parent/guardians about their child, this is an example of one-way communication. What we want to have is two-way forms of communication where families have the opportunity to collaborate with you and to be able to share openly about their concerns, wants, and goals.

Samantha Statler: Yes, and I think by including families in this decision making. Can really help to strengthen your relationships with them and like you said, we really want it to be a two-way form of communication where both parties are feeling valued and feeling heard.

Becky Lewis: Another strategy you could use to practice that reciprocity is to be considerate of culture, language, and literacy when you are communicating with your families. You want to make sure that you are making accommodations when needed so that every family can access and respond to the information you are sharing. Be mindful of families' home languages and translate documents as needed.

Samantha Statler: I really the focus of that reciprocity piece, because again, families should be a part of the decision making and those conversations that take place about their children.

We are now on the fifth and final R which is reflection. Families want teachers who reflect- not only to reflect on where they stand with their families, but also on their instructional practices, too. This reflection helps teachers engage children and families intentionally instead of falling into habits. One simple way to work on reflection is by checking in with yourself. Here are some questions you can use to do this:

- How well do I know each of my students and their families?
- How can I learn more about them?
- How often do I interact with each family?

- How am I making my families feel important and part of the learning community

Becky Lewis: I really appreciate that the article included those questions. Because I think sometimes, we need that explicit guidance on how we can become better at reflection, personally and professionally. The article also mentions another strategy you can use which is to ask your students' family members. Some questions you could use here would be:

- How would you like to be involved in the classroom?
- Is there a book you would like to read to the class?
- Is there a cultural tradition you'd be wanting to share with the class?
- What do you think your child needs to have the most enjoyable and educational experience in the classroom?

Samantha Statler: (Respond before continuing) The last strategy you could use to improve your reflection is to ask your colleagues how they engage with their families. How do they get to know their families and make them feel part of the learning community?

Becky Lewis: As we begin to conclude this episode Sam, I want to ask you if you have one tip or piece of advice for our audience focused on family engagement?

Samantha Statler: One last thing I would tell educators to do to help strengthen their family engagement is to share resources with them that they can use at home. A strategy you could use to share these resources is to include them in your weekly newsletter- let them know about free community events, educational websites, local library events, and even provide a list of support services and organizations.