



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

# School Family Engagement with Grandfamilies in Mind

Research-based Strategies for Educators Engaging Grandfamilies

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center  
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Ohio Statewide

# Family Engagement Center

#GrandUnderstandings ————— at The Ohio State University

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Kinship caregivers are relatives who provide care for minor children. Grandfamilies are one of the forms of kinship caregiving, where biological grand or great-grandparents provide for the care of their grandchildren. Custodial grandparents, grandparent caregivers, or grandparent headed-families are just a few terms that capture the relationships between a grandparent and the grandchildren entrusted to their care. Grandfamilies, a more comprehensive term, explores the notion that grandparents are not simply long-term babysitters; the reality is quite the opposite. Grandfamilies, in many ways, describe the extent to which a new family is formed, where grandparents are seen as parents.<sup>13</sup> According to Grandfamilies.org,<sup>18</sup> seven percent of Ohio's children live with their grandparents. And, of those grandparents, more than half are employed, and twenty-two percent live in poverty. At least a quarter of Ohio's grandparents are diagnosed with a disability. Navigating the educational system can be cumbersome and time-consuming for many parents. However, for grandparents there can be additional barriers related to ensuring that their grandchildren are successful in school. For example, in Ohio, only 10% of grandparent caregivers have full judicial custody.<sup>31</sup> Grandfamilies can experience difficulties related to school enrollment, special education discussions, and decisions.<sup>17</sup>

The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center's mission is to provide schools, families, and community partners with the tools they need to work together so that all children have success in life and learning. This document was created to explore and understand grandfamilies, uncover their assets that may not be readily seen by educators, understand what grandparents may need to know regarding school and education, and highlight successful interventions and best practices aimed at supporting families and schools in Ohio. It is possible that when given appropriate attention, grandfamilies and educators are more aware of needs and successful strategies to address them. This heightened awareness has the potential to have a positive impact on students' academic success. Educators can use this document as a tool where suggested strategies are known to positively impact the experiences of grandfamilies, increase school-family engagement, and increase academic success. These recommendations reflect a dual-capacity building approach to family engagement, where schools/community partners and families are both building their capacity for partnerships for student success.<sup>25</sup>

## Strategy #1

### Design school activities and events with grandfamilies in mind.

School family engagement practices include large- and small-scale events and activities. Many school activities offer families an opportunity to interact with school administrators, teachers, and other families. Grandparent caregivers may respond positively when schools connect with them early and often.<sup>33</sup> Marketing of school events and activities can be intentionally designed to attract grandfamilies. This is critical because grandparent caregivers' past experiences as parents themselves are noted to have occurred at least two to three generations before their current parenting of a grandchild. The lapse of time between raising children then grandchildren often coincides with major changes in schooling and school expectations. However, a grandparent caregiver's previous experience can be an asset for educators. For example, some teachers see grandparents as allies and partners.<sup>4</sup> When creating school events, schools should do so with the understanding that grandparents are more likely to engage in school activities when they are seen from a strength-based perspective.<sup>14</sup> School activities designed to specifically attract and engage grandfamilies can assist grandparent caregivers in quickly understanding school culture, school expectations, and how to make meaningful connections to school staff.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Grandfamilies may value certain types of engagement. Reach out to grandparent caregivers to determine how they can engage.
- Design open house activities that begin to integrate grandfamilies into the school environment and culture.
- During family-teacher conferences, discuss school processes as well as academic expectations and progress.

## Strategy #2

Use family-inclusive language in school communication so grandparents know they are included.

Grandfamilies are identified using a variety of terms. Some grandparent caregivers consider themselves parents, while others identify themselves as grandparent caregivers. Regardless of the title, some grandparent caregivers report a sense of isolation related to caring for a grandchild.<sup>38</sup> This can be further exacerbated when school communication excludes them by using parent-only language. Grandparent caregivers are often older individuals who have a lot of life experience. Their accumulated wisdom and expertise can be leveraged by educators when they are engaged in communication.<sup>5</sup> Schools communicate with families in a variety of ways, regarding a variety of events and activities. School officials can include grandfamilies by using family-friendly language in all family communication.

### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Do not assume that all families are familiar with all the current pop culture words or phrases. Remember to communicate with all families using language that all families understand.
- Consider using the term “family-teacher conference” rather than “parent-teacher conference” when communicating dates and times for these events.
- Review and refine language used for events like the “daddy-daughter dance.”
- Consider the use of alternative language for school events and gifts like those for “Mother’s Day.”
- When contacting families using prerecorded school or district automated phone calls and messages, remember to use terms that would include grandfamilies.

## Strategy #3

### Identify your grandfamilies by reviewing school forms and documents to ensure that they are included.

Caregivers are asked to complete school forms and provide information regarding their student and family on a routine basis. Many times, grandfamilies are seen, yet unknown to school staff.<sup>33</sup> Grandfamilies have unique needs, and schools are known to be a tremendous resource to families since they contain highly skilled professionals.<sup>14</sup> Some grandfamilies are formalized through legal adoption in which grandparents are now identified as parents, while other grandparent caregivers are legal guardians. There can be grandfamilies represented in schools that do not fit either category, where grandparent caregivers perceive themselves to be more than a grandparent but not quite a parent or guardian. Accurately identifying grandfamilies is the first step in uncovering their needs and drawing on their assets. School officials can do this by refining school forms and documents, where specific language is used to assist in the identification of all grandfamilies. Because grandfamilies can form and change throughout the school year, educators should consider how they can use school forms and documents to identify grandfamilies throughout the school year.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Avoid using mother, father, parent, or guardian-only language on school forms.
- When using electronic enrollment and school forms, consider including a drop-down menu with options like grandparent caregiver, grandmother, grandfather, or kinship caregiver.
- Use family questionnaires and interest forms that include non-parent options.
- Because grandfamilies can be temporary, consider adding forms like Non-Parent or Custodian Affidavits to your school forms. These forms give grandparent caregivers the ability to identify their type of grandfamily.

## Strategy #4

### Ensure your grandfamilies are represented in committees and positions.

Every Student Succeeds Act <sup>37</sup>(ESSA), signed in 2015, provided educators with a framework aimed at increasing high-quality education and access and student success. School family engagement is highlighted as a critical component that leads to these outcomes. Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) are organizations that intentionally link parents to teachers and administrators, where the goal is to improve the school experiences of students and families.<sup>28,29</sup> These organizations create a regular forum with school officials where parents can advocate for all students. Unfortunately, these groups can be very exclusive, and some non-parent caregivers do not feel welcomed. This can also occur with parents who work during meeting times or who may not share the same background as most of the parents in the group. Grandparents are faced with these barriers as well. However, parent committees are natural places where grandparent caregivers' voices can be represented and heard, since many of them have memberships that include grandparents, foster parents, and other caregivers.<sup>28</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS & TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Use PTA and PTO meetings as an opportunity to increase the knowledge of members regarding grandfamilies and their school engagement.
- When marketing PTAs and PTOs, use images and language that include grandparent caregivers.
- Collaborate with your PTA and PTO leadership to ensure a commitment is made to guarantee grandparent caregiver representation.
- Review the school positions historically held by parents (e.g., classroom aide, parent liaison, cafeteria monitor, library aide, etc.) to determine if grandparent caregivers may also fill those roles.
- Given their unique needs, if you have a large representation of grandparent or kinship caregivers, consider creating a separate school committee or council for them.

## Strategy #5

**Some grandfamilies are temporary. Create school policies that increase grandparent caregivers' ability to participate in their grandchildren's education while caring for them.**

Grandfamilies are formed gradually or, in other instances, immediately. As a result, the needs of grandfamilies may differ. For example, some grandfamilies are formed due to parental neglect, drug use, or incarceration.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that some grandparent caregivers may not have the time or the knowledge needed to understand all the support they will need to care for their grandchildren. The Grandparents Caretaker Law sought to address issues related to the immediate need of grandparent caregivers to legally engage in educational conversations and decisions. The law outlined the legal documents that can be used to assist grandparent caregivers in supporting their grandchildren's education needs. A parent can grant a grandparent caregiver Power of Attorney (POA) to enroll their student in school and make education decisions. When parents cannot be located, and a grandchild lives with a grandparent caregiver, grandparents can sign a Caretaker Authorization Affidavit (CTA), which gives them the ability to take custody, care for, and make decisions (e.g., educational, medical, psychological, etc.) on their grandchild's behalf. Once notarized and filed in juvenile court, a grandparent can share these documents with schools. Schools are governed by both internal and external policies, and many of these can be used to address the transitory needs of grandfamilies.

### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL BOARDS, ADMINISTRATORS, & TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Require that all enrollment personnel are familiar with The Grandparent Caretaker Law and similar laws.
- Consider creating enrollment and school policies that require that when a grandparent caregiver has been identified during enrollment and other school activities, school personnel contact grandparents to share POA/CTA information and forms, rather than turn grandparents away.
- Consider making printed POA/CTA forms available to grandparents during enrollment, so they can share these with their attorney. The forms can be provided at schools as a part of frequently used or available forms.
- Ensure that school board members are familiar with The Grandparent Caretaker Law and similar laws, so that future policies are sensitive to them.
- Remind school staff that grandparent caregivers can be engaged in some education discussions (e.g., family conferences), but not included in decision-making without proper legal documentation.

## Strategy #6

**Social support is key. If you cannot create one, connect grandparent caregivers to local support groups.**

Schools have always played a critical role in the lives of families, as they often provide a linkage between student and families and their needs. Even when grandparent caregivers' financial needs are met, they can struggle with their social needs.<sup>38</sup> As a result of their unique situation, grandparent caregivers can feel a sense of isolation from friends, family, and other school parents. While caring for their grandchild, grandparent caregivers may also struggle to process the issues that led to their need to provide a more stable home for their grandchild (e.g., loss of a child, etc.). Grandparent caregivers may experience increased stress because of these experiences.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, grandchildren being raised by a grandparent may have experienced parental death or other trauma related to their parent's absence.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, some grandchildren struggle and behave in maladaptive ways in school and at home.<sup>2</sup> Social and support groups have been successful in meeting the social-emotional needs of grandfamilies, where mutual support can occur.<sup>21, 23</sup> School Social Workers are the most knowledgeable people in the school regarding school and community resources and their consistent connections to families allow them to have a better understanding of their unmet social needs.<sup>10</sup> Schools are well-suited to create an environment of support for grandfamilies.

### **OPPORTUNITIES SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS CAN USE:**

- Consider creating a grandparent caregiver support group. If there are not enough families, consider targeting grandparent caregivers from surrounding schools. Scholars have created curricula that could be leveraged to formalize meetings based on needs and topics. Childcare and meals are known to increase attendance.
- Reach out to and connect grandparent caregivers to local support groups, if one cannot be created at the school.
- Connect with local community agencies that are known to provide support to grandfamilies and compile an information sheet to share with grandparent caregivers.
- Consider creating a small affinity group at lunch or after school for students raised by grandparents or other kinship caregivers. The group can help students understand that they are not alone and could assist in normalizing their shared experiences.

## Strategy #7

### Increase staff knowledge of grandfamilies by offering professional development.

School staff members receive a variety of training about the students and families they serve. Professional development provides educators with information that they may not otherwise have known, and it gives them the ability to increase their knowledge of certain school populations and best practices. Professional development is an appropriate time to increase school staff awareness of grandfamilies. Because professional development is generally held before school starts and throughout the school year, professional development offers multiple opportunities for school staff to learn and build on their knowledge and practices related to grandfamilies and their needs.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Collaborate with organizations that have personnel who are knowledgeable of the assets and needs of grandfamilies to provide professional development.
- Capture your school's grandparent caregivers' experiences and share them with school staff during professional development as lessons learned and successes. Use these as future topics of professional development.
- After grandparent training, use professional development time to create small multidisciplinary school professional groups to brainstorm ways to use their new knowledge of grandfamilies.

## Strategy #8

### Understand your school's grandfamilies' needs by using a brief survey.

Communication between schools and families should be two-way. Schools can learn a great deal from grandfamilies when engaging in direct one-to-one interactions. Surveys are additional tools that have been used to capture feedback from grandfamilies regarding their needs. In addition to face-to-face conversations, when created and implemented appropriately, surveys have the potential to provide school officials with much more information regarding specific areas where school staff can devote their time and attention. They also can be developed and deployed several times a year to provide real-time information to guide school decisions and policies.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES ADMINISTRATORS, SCHOOL COUNSELORS, AND SOCIAL WORKERS CAN USE:**

- Consider embedding grandfamily-related questions into already existing family surveys.
- Once grandfamilies are identified, survey grandparents to understand what supports they need that could help them in supporting their grandchildren's education.
- Include questions in grandparent caregiver surveys that help identify the needs that can be met outside of the school and provide grandfamilies with targeted community-based information to meet those needs.
- Consider gathering feedback from grandfamilies by hosting a focus group.
- Some grandfamilies may require a personal touch; consider calling some grandfamilies to capture their perspectives.
- Survey grandfamilies to understand if the school climate or environment is supportive of their involvement or engagement.
- When possible, conduct follow-up surveys to determine the extent to which the school has met the identified needs of your grandfamilies.

## Strategy #9

### Offer workshops on topics that often impact grandfamilies.

Due to their age, some grandparent caregivers are known to care for multi-generations of their family. On average, Ohio grandparents are under 60 years of age.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that some grandparent caregivers are raising great-grandchildren, while others raising grandchildren are also caring for an older parent. In other words, they are physically and financially responsible for two generations. Researchers suggest that individuals in this category may have increased levels of stress. Grandparents caring for their grandchild often leverage their previous parenting knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In many instances, previous experience has assisted grandparent caregivers. Schooling, parenting, and technology have changed over the years and are likely different from what a grandparent caregiver experienced as a parent. A grandparent caregiver may not be aware of the current state of these changes as it relates to their caregiving. Schools create events to increase the awareness and skills of parents and caregivers. Educators can support grandparents as they increase their knowledge as it relates to topics that impact them and their grandchildren.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Share unofficial and official school policies and procedures with grandparent caregivers.
- Hold office hours to further explain or explore topics such as homework, grading, and school discipline practices.
- Consider offering technology boot camps to explore online apps that the school uses for communication, homework, and grades. (e.g., Class Dojo, Zoom, etc.).
- Partner with a local police department to provide training to grandparents about online safety.
- Offer parenting classes and share easy interventions that grandparent caregivers can use to address common behavior concerns.

## Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify current official and unofficial practices that may impact grandfamilies and identify opportunities for improvement.

<b>Strategy</b> What can you do?	<b>Glows</b> What can we celebrate about our current work?	<b>Grows</b> What are our next steps?
1. Promote awareness of grandfamilies and their needs.		
2. Provide grandfamilies with information regarding school processes and procedures.		
3. Emphasize and leverage the assets of grandparent caregivers.		
4. Provide actionable and specific steps grandparent caregivers can take to support their grandchild's learning.		

<b>Strategy</b> What can you do?	<b>Glows</b> What can we celebrate about our current work?	<b>Grows</b> What are our next steps?
5. Create school policies that increase grandparent caregivers' ability to participate in their grandchild's education while caring for them.		
6. Connect grandparent caregivers to local support groups.		
7. Increase staff knowledge of grandfamilies by offering professional development.		
8. Understand your school's grandfamilies' needs by using a brief survey.		
9. Offer workshops on topics that often impact grandfamilies.		

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