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A Multi-Tiered Approach to Family Engagement



[Barbara Boone](#)



[Hadley Bachman](#)

Abstract

No two families are alike, so why should schools' approach to supporting families be cookie cutter?

A one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement, where all families are expected to have identical needs or respond to one opportunity, leaves both educators and families frustrated. This old way of doing things has largely failed. Genuine family engagement is more than a well-attended open house or small booster group that raises funds for the school. Family engagement initiatives proven to be effective are balanced, equitable, reciprocal, and open partnerships that allow educators and families to share expertise and seek feedback in a mutually trusting way. Each role contributes to the shared goal of student success. To achieve this effective engagement, schools must take a multi-tiered approach.

The goal of a Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement is that all families not only have the opportunity to engage with the school, but can and do engage through a differentiated approach. We developed this model as part of our work at The Ohio State University, one of 12 federally funded Statewide Family Engagement Centers in the United States. We apply the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, used for decades in healthcare and education, by emphasizing that schools' partnership efforts with families must be adaptable and data driven.

To be clear, an MTSS approach does not assign families to tiers. There is no "Tier 3 Family," or "Family of a Tier 2 Student." In this model, schools categorize practices, services, and supports into different tiers, which are then made available to families and staff flexibly in any given situation. The model helps to design a school's approach to family engagement inclusive of all families. Families will need different levels of support at different times and in different situations. They will also take on various roles in the system of supports. Our model is expansive: The purpose is to widen educator practices so that every student's family can be engaged in a meaningful and impactful way.

A Tiered Approach

No two families are alike, and there is no one way for schools to welcome, invite, and successfully partner with each of them. This is why a multi-tiered approach is necessary. The Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement is flexible and centers on students and families. It works for improving systemic and planned family collaboration at any level of school, for any student learning goal, for behavioral purposes, or for school improvement. It can also be applied to family partnerships in special or general education.

With multiple tiers, schools no longer think of some families as just too "hard to reach," but create actions and strategies to support partnerships with *all* families. In our model, there are three tiers—universal, tailored, and intensive. The universal tier includes schoolwide strategies for family engagement that all families experience. The tailored tier addresses common needs and opportunities that groups of families may have, beyond what is being met through universal strategies, and offers tailored engagement opportunities to fit those needs. The intensive tier offers unique engagement opportunities and strategies for a small number of individual families as needed. The value of adopting this approach to family engagement is that proactively planning differentiated engagement strategies enables administrators to prepare positive partnership opportunities in advance, rather than having to react defensively when a one-size-fits-all approach falls short.

Tier 1: Universal

Tier 1 supports are *universal*, linked to whole-child tenets. These are the school- or program-wide supports accessible to all families, such as family-teacher conferences or whole-school family surveys. Tier 1 establishes the school culture and communication channels necessary for behavior and learning support.

Effective universal supports should meet the needs of at least 80 percent of families. If not, school leaders should review and revise the approach to be responsive and accessible to more families. For example, all families should be able to participate in family-teacher conferences, so these supports should work for a vast majority of caregivers. If they don't, school leaders must look for root causes of the low participation (events scheduled during families' work hours, ineffective school communication) and revise the strategy as appropriate.

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Tier 2: Tailored

Tier 2 supports include programs and strategies for groups of families with similar needs or interests for additional, deeper support or engagement. Some families, for example, may have school, family care, or work schedules that prevent them from attending teacher conferences, so a school may set up a Tier 2 strategy to provide home visits, virtual visits, or phone call options for conferences. Or, if a whole-school family survey is the Tier 1 strategy to gather family feedback, a Tier 2 strategy may be follow-up phone call surveys or messages to families who did not complete the survey, reminding them that their perspective is valuable to the school.

Tier 3: Intensive

Very few individual families require engagement supports or opportunities beyond Tier 2, but when they do, Tier 3 supports are available to provide additional resources and assistance. These are programs and strategies for families or students with individualized needs. For example, a Tier 3 support is a monthly check-in conference between the family and school counselor who is providing ongoing mental health support for a child. Another might be a small group of families serving on a planning team for family-teacher conferences or a focus group of families with specialized perspectives providing more in-depth feedback on the topic of a whole-school family survey. These represent highly individualized and intensive opportunities that not all families will need or want, but that some families with unique needs or wants should have access to.

Changing, Adapting Tiers

If schools have created a plan for a Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement, they will have a robust, three-tiered menu of engagement strategies for partnering with families. Knowing when to apply which strategy is the next step. To that end, school leaders establish *decision indicators* based on data from the school, family, students, or community. Like the tiered strategies themselves, these indicators are determined in advance and are specific to the particular goal of the plan for family engagement.

For example, a middle school may develop a multi-tiered plan to support student math achievement. At the Tier 1 level, all families are provided with regular updates on the concepts and skills being taught in the classroom. Families receive quarterly updates about their child's progress and at family-teacher conferences. If student assessments indicate some students need supplemental instruction for a particular math concept, this is a decision indicator that these students' families also will receive Tier 2 family engagement. The school plans for these families to receive updates every other week about their child's progress and any specific steps the student may take to improve. Families will be invited to a virtual meeting where the math intervention is explained, and they may ask questions. When students make sufficient progress

(decision indicator), the supplemental instruction is discontinued, and families of students return to receiving the Tier 1 level of supports.

Family engagement planning should identify decision indicators to provide a metric for when current practices are not enough or not a good fit. They may be tied to student academic, attendance, or behavior benchmarks. Family requests and feedback may also be viewed as data: an outcry of confusion or requests for support indicate a need to shift gears and to adapt or change family engagement activities.

Decision indicators also alert schools to when it's not a matter of doing *more* of a strategy but rather doing *better*. Sometimes the school's practice itself is not effective, necessitating a change in approach. For example, imagine that a school has an annual reading event to encourage families to read with their children at home. However, despite flyers, robocalls, and social media messages, only 10 percent of families attend. Because they realize this Tier 1 strategy isn't reaching enough families, the literacy specialist and teachers make short videos about reading at home and shared reading. These videos are posted on the school website and a social media platform many families use. This improved Tier 1 strategy results in the majority of parents and caregivers in the school reporting they have used the shared reading strategies with their children. Moving forward, the school can use these new Tier 1 strategies to more efficiently and effectively reach student literacy goals.

Decision indicators give the school metrics for determining if supports and strategies are effectively supporting families and students and if more tailored supports or services are needed. These metrics also indicate when a strategy has had its desired outcome and a return to only Tier 1 supports is appropriate. The primary goal in the Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement is to be responsive and supportive: Schools should expect that all families will need differentiated opportunities and supports and that these will change for all families over time. This dynamic nature of family engagement is supported by this tiered approach.

Roles for Families

In our experiences consulting with schools in our work at the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, family engagement strategies often consider parents in only two ways: as caregivers who provide at-home support to their children and as receivers of supports offered by the school. While these two roles are valuable, families have other important roles in a systemic approach. The Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement recognizes five critical roles for families, which all families should have available to them:

- *Receivers*. First, families are recognized as the center of student supports. Families might receive general information about the school at the start of the

year and more specific information from each teacher about how to support their child in each academic area.

- *Designers.* Families are influencers and improvers of student supports from the school. Not only is this role required by federal legislation such as Title I Part A, but it also provides valuable perspectives not available to building and district leadership teams planning new initiatives for supporting whole-child growth and development.
- *Initiators.* Families are necessary drivers of whole child supports in the education system. They initiate support for their own children, for groups of children, and for the entire community. For example, a father might initiate mental health support from the school counselor for his son, or a grandmother might form a support network for other kinship caregivers. The initiator role spurs action and ignites creativity within the school community.
- *Providers.* In this role, families are active players in the support system. They provide academic, self-regulatory, social-emotional, and mental health support to their children. They also offer support to other families through informal and formal conversations, both in-person and online. In addition, as providers, families support the school staff in their roles in the system, encouraging children to listen to their teachers and value what is being taught in school.
- *Evaluators.* Finally, families provide essential feedback to the school about the effectiveness of support systems for children's development. Families help schools understand how students experience interventions and programs. They provide a holistic lens because they are experts in their own children. In a multi-tiered approach, schools will welcome feedback from families at each tier (universally, specific interest groups, and individual families) to hone and strengthen the system of supports.

A Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach to Family Engagement ensures that families are active contributors and resources partnering with the school. The school integrates parents and caregivers, recognizing the value, energy, and expertise they bring to supporting student learning and school improvement. With this approach, schools open the door for families to initiate improvements, evaluate effectiveness of interventions, provide supports to others, receive timely information and resources, and co-design effective programs for students and families.

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Partnership for Student Success

A multi-tiered, systemic approach has proven to be effective in education for areas such as academic and behavior supports, so it makes sense to apply it to family engagement as well. Schools are continuously improving, adapting, and developing new strategies for instruction, classroom management, climate, and governance. Family engagement should not be left behind. It is time for schools to shift from rigid or less-than-effective family engagement strategies to approaches that are effective and appropriate for the families of all students.

With a multi-tiered approach, school leaders strengthen a school's system of supports in all areas: Family engagement is proactive, accounts for all families, and opens opportunities for families to play important roles. No longer is it acceptable to reference "hard to reach" families. Rather, school leaders utilize data, determine indicators, and design and refine strategies with families to support all students through a dynamic and equitable system of supports.

Reflect and Discuss

- Can you see a multi-tiered system of family engagement working at your school? How is it different from the approach you currently use?
- Why is it important to think of the tiers in this type of model as fluid and adaptable?
- Is there room for all of the roles that the authors list for the families in your school? If not, where might you make additional opportunities for them?



Hadley Bachman is a family engagement researcher at the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center and a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Administration at The Ohio State University.



Barbara Boone is the program director for family engagement at The Ohio State University, Center on Education and Training for Employment, and is the director of the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center.