

Transcript for Video 1: Positive Relationships and Empowering Families

- [Narrator] Throughout Virginia, many public school systems are changing the way they work with students and families. Across the state, teachers and administrators are making focused efforts to build trusting, collaborative relationships to get ideas and insights about their students and how they learn. The challenges vary between rural and urban school districts, but many practical ideas can be adopted by all. Family engagement is not a new idea, but the current focus follows years when school systems rarely offered families opportunities for collaborating and sharing as partners. It's partnership that's the key.

- And if you have a good relationship with parents, if parents believe that their children can do well and succeed in school, if they believe the school is doing the right thing day in and day out, that's gonna translate into some impact in terms of student achievement in the classroom.

- [Narrator] This is part one of a three-part series on strengthening family engagement in Virginia public schools. In this part, we focus on building positive relationships with families, and empowering them to take an active role in their students' education at school and at home.

- When everyone is working cohesively together, and the child knows that they have that support, I feel like they feel like they can't fail because they know they always have someone to count on, whether it's at home, at school, or outside of the school system within the community.

- [Narrator] Positive relationships and empowering families are two of six factors many school systems consider as they work to engage families. All of these factors combine to make up a comprehensive approach to family engagement in Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports. When schools welcome families using dynamic, responsive methods, they set the stage for effective two-way communication. The goal is genuine collaboration with families in planning, decision-making, and implementation to support the needs of every student. Over time, school culture is transformed in meaningful, measurable, and sustainable ways. It starts with positive relationships.

- If you don't have a relationship with your boys and girls, your students, you really don't have a clue what's going on, and that means knowing what's going in their homes, knowing what's going on in their little minds. You want to know these things.

- For so long we've been going about trying to solve our problems without family voice, and without family input, and I think, as we begin to include that and make that essential part of our improvement efforts, we're gonna see it really paying off for our outcomes for kids.

- [Narrator] The shift toward actively engaging families is driven by research that shows building a constructive relationship with families improves the academic, social, and emotional development of students. Families who support educational goals at home build upon the learning done at school.

- Ultimately, families and educators are communicating and working together and developing their relationship for the purpose of supporting that student. And it is more of an individual

relationship basis where they're identifying what that support looks like and the goals of that support. It could be different depending on the kid's needs, the family's needs, but essentially it's all for the student.

- The social-emotional development of a child begins at home, and we're here to help, we're here to inform, we're here to provide resources to families so that they can join together with us to make sure that this child is reaching their full potential.

- [Narrator] Engaging families involves complex considerations and challenges.

- Every family looks different. They don't all look the same way, and so we have grandparents, and aunts, and uncles, and cousins, and moms, and dads, and step-parents all in what we call a family, and we want all of them to be engaged here at NES, whether they live in the household or not.

- [Narrator] Virginia students have always been diverse in racial, social, and economic ways. More and more, languages and cultures add diversity and challenges to education. And families vary in their willingness to engage depending on their own educational history.

- Research points to the fact that people who have had bad experiences themselves in schools are often hesitant to come to the school building because they've had negative experiences there. And what seems to kind of change that is keeping in mind that it's rare you hear a parent or hear anyone say that they don't want something better for their child.

- [Narrator] Many school systems pursuing family engagement have family advocates, liaisons, coordinators, or other positions dedicated to nurturing family engagement.

- We realized we've gotta help. How do we help reach the parents, how do we help them to feel like school is a place where they feel comfortable, that they're not intimidated by. How do we help them to realize the impact that they have.

- Helping families understand how important their role is is really critical, and then asking them what kinds of help, what kinds of information, resources, training is gonna help you to be best in your role.

- [Narrator] Family engagement is leading school systems to take action that addresses fundamental student needs that affect education, but which have traditionally been considered the families' domain.

- What we're finding is that many of our students aren't going to school, so if they're not going to school, why not? And we're finding that many of them aren't going because they don't have their basic needs met. Some of them need the basics like school supplies to get in the door, some of them need to have decent clothes so they can have a spirit of dignity and pride like everybody else.

- [Narrator] Using family engagement to meet the needs of families and students fits well into the Tiered Systems of Supports used throughout Virginia. Tier 1 supports are for all students. Classroom instruction is an example. Tier 2 supports some students, typically in small group

settings that supply additional resources. Tier 3 supports a few students, often one-on-one, to provide individualized resources.

- We will come together as a team, and then invite the families in as well, and just seeing what supports are needed. That can be with academics, that can be with behavior with their children, but also during that time, oftentimes, we will have conversations with parents and find out things that may be going on at home, as well. So therefore that will lead us to kind of understand why the child may be performing in a certain way, or may have shutdown.

- We have the students for about eight hours or so a day, but the majority of their time they're at home, so it's important for our families to understand what our initiatives are in the school in order for it to really be effective. I think that is key in anything that we do as a school system.

- I am not with that child after school, I am not with them on the weekends, I don't know what happens all that time, and we have to honor that parents are the experts.

- Explicitly saying you are the expert of your child. Help me know you better as a family, help me know your child better, validates families as equal partners in the process of educating their child, and helps them to feel respected and really communicates that they are kind of those co-equal members in this partnership.

- [Narrator] Trying new things in family engagement often comes with challenges. Working with families can involve having difficult conversations. That's why having a trusting working relationship is critical.

- You always front-end load with the relationship so that when you have to have those conversations down the road, you're able to have them in a meaningful way.

- If I've established a relationship with you, and then I tell you something that might be a little difficult to hear, but you know I'm coming with good intentions, then that's a little different than this person who I've never talked to all of a sudden coming in and sitting down, sitting down in a very formal way saying how my child is doing this, not doing this, or flipping it around, a parent coming in saying here's the things that I think the school's doing wrong.

- The feedback I have gotten that when you're calling and you have something difficult to say, that you're direct about it, and that there's also a plan about how to address. It's not just a call saying this didn't go well, and then you sort of leave it hanging out there. And that you want to partner with the family. So I don't just blurt a problem or whatever I've got on them. I always open it up and say, you know what, I need your help with this situation or what's happening. I'm letting the parent know that I'm concerned about that and I need their help, I'm enlisting their help to help solve the problem.

- It's a partnership for the school and the parents to work together. I know a lot of times it does get put back on the schools because we say we didn't know, I didn't realize, I didn't receive that information, and there's truth to that. But it is also my job as the parent to get on the website, to check the Facebook page, to sign up for the emails and the robo calls, and when I'm not sure

what's going on, to reach out to talk to the teacher or the nurse or the principal, whoever is the person that I feel can best answer that question.

- [Narrator] The goals of positive relationships and empowering families are closely related and each supports the other. And when empowered family members engage with schools, the benefits grow over time.

- This first grader is gonna be in our school next year, and next year, and next year, and then when I went to the division office, it's like, they're gonna be with us K-12, so you know what, we can have a dysfunctional relationship with this family, or we can have a productive relationship with this family. Either way, we're gonna have a relationship with this family. And so why not make it a productive one.

- When we really put aside all of the jargon, and all of the education and that artificial boundary between school and home, and we just let that go, and we engage in a conversation about a kid, I think that that is a liberating moment for the teacher and the family.