

Transcript for Video 2: Leadership and a Multi-dimensional, Multi-tiered Approach

- [Narrator] Every day, at every school, every principal is at the heart of a community. How the students, teachers, administrators, and families at that school get along over time is directly tied to the decisions that principal makes about policies, practices, and professional development.

- The role of the school leader is to set the tone and the culture, that this is a place where we will open our doors to the community, where we will value parent input. Where we will see things through multiple lenses.

- [Narrator] This is part two of a three-part series on strengthening family engagement in Virginia public schools. In this video, we'll look at how leadership in a multi-dimensional, multi-tiered approach helps schools reach and engage families. There are two factors among six that make up a comprehensive approach to family engagement in Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports. Family engagement is about changing the way schools and families work together so that students constantly grow in their capabilities and achievements. And it's decisions made by division and school leadership that drive those changes. With dozens of tactics available to develop the relationship between school and family, leaders need to choose which are right for their school and school system. Each takes time, each takes effort, and each pays back in different ways. The tool that many leaders use to guide decision making is data.

- [Jamel] So there's all different kinds of data points that we look at in the school to kind of conjure up a goal that we need to address, and then we implement steps to achieve those goals. And then like a doctor you kind of diagnose and you prescribe as you go.

- If you do ask for input from your families, then they're probably gonna have some really good input and some ideas for how to make things better. And it's really important that, I think, if you're gonna ask them, if you're gonna go out of your way to ask them, that you use that input that you're getting. Being open to some of the challenging feedback that you might be receiving is critical for making sure family voice and perspectives are included in your system.

- It's not a to or against, it's a with thing. Creating that mindset and being open to that mindset from the educator end is critically important.

- By explicitly welcoming that input from families, it empowers them to share their thoughts and ideas for improvement and makes them know and feel like they can give feedback.

- [Narrator] How to get feedback from families is also a decision school leaders need to make. Data gathering and other forms of two-way communication need to be tailored to meet the needs of different families. That sort of multi-dimensional approach requires schools to adapt their practices and try new methods.

- We're always finding ways to communicate with our parents, whether we're sending flyers, whether we're sending information through our instant alert, through our newsletters, through our newspaper, social media, we use a lot of them. We found that to be the most effective way to communicate what's going on in our building.

- And so, for us not to assume that, again, that a one-way kind of path of, 'Well, I did this and this, So that should be good enough.' It's like, no. What's good enough is when the parent has understanding and we have to backward map from that.

- It's really important that we are looking at all the different ways we can engage our families. We have all different kinds of families, and it's our job to determine how we can pull them in.

- [Narrator] Getting family members to visit and be involved at school can be hampered by many factors. In rural Northumberland County, families are spread out, so distance is a factor for people who live far from schools. Shift work and working multiple jobs limits when family members can meet or visit a school. School systems are addressing these and other challenges by using multi-dimensional approaches to reach parents.

- [Javornda] Community is very, very vital in this particular school system because it is very small, so when we do anything we wanna make sure we have our community, which includes our parents, involved in everything that we do.

- [Narrator] For parents to be involved, especially parents of students who need Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, they need to understand the multi-tiered framework that Virginia public schools use to address the needs of students.

- The easy thing about communicating to families, I think, a lot of times, is the personal. This is how the Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports will impact your child. I think where sometimes it can be difficult is getting them to understand the big picture. Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports is really an umbrella framework for everything that happens in a school. And so there are many things we do for all kids. And we talk about our areas of five domains, attendance, behavior, mental wellness, and mathematics and literacy. Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports embraces it all, and within that context and framework, we have some systems set up to make sure that, again, your child gets what they need.

- It's important that we have communication so parents get a monthly report on how their student is doing. If they have moved into Tier 2 or Tier 3, whether it is academically or behaviorally. We have monthly meetings with teachers to look at the data to determine where a student is and whether there is any movement. And then we come up with a plan for that student.

- [Narrator] To get the most engagement from families with schedule challenges, schools are adjusting where and when they work with families.

- It's our job to make sure that parent engagement doesn't just happen between the bells from 8 to 4. We need to meet parents where they are, where real life is happening.

- And so meeting them in different places, going to community centers, going to libraries, going to churches is a great way to start to connect.

- If we need to communicate with a family member, who maybe their child has some challenging behaviors, if we can't get them on the phone, we can do a house visit or we can communicate through a sibling to get a message to a parent to please give me a call.
- We try new things all the time. Dr. Burns always says, we're a yes school. We'll try at least everything once. And so, that's what we're doing. If we can't reach a family a certain way, we'll try it in a different way.
- A lot of what we do is just don't give up. Continue to call, continue to try to reach out, whether it's through their work, through home, to try to get them a part of what's going on with that child.
- [Narrator] School staff who have good relationships with students will find them willing partners in getting parents to school events, even if the flyer never made it home in a backpack.
- Kids know how to get the parent to come on board. Mommy, mommy, mommy, we have to go!
- Certainly, my children will pester me. They have no problems telling me that there's an event that's happening and they really want the opportunity to attend. They come home pretty jazzed up about it.
- [Narrator] Manassas City Public Schools has rich racial and ethnic diversity. Many families speak Spanish, and have come from countries where families engage with schools from a distance.
- [Evelyn] When you're new in this country, you have to learn how the school system works in the US. And I've been working with some Spanish-speaking parents that were very amazed at how different, the big difference it is when you have a system that cares and always trying to get the children to learn and be their best compared to where they come from.
- [Narrator] Building and strengthening a school community that genuinely embraces diversity and promotes equity requires ongoing professional development and strong leadership.
- It's important that the school leader walk that talk during PLC meetings, during professional development. We welcome the public, we welcome the parents. We see ourselves as a member of the community and not separate from the community.
- So it starts at the school level, training, professional development that an administrative team provides for my teachers at the relational level. And strategies that they can use to help students cope with just the every day life outside of school first, and then inside of school.
- [Narrator] Family engagement is a process that takes patience, as its effect grows over months and years. Working as a team, school communities will find family engagement becomes a rewarding and ongoing evolution in the ability to meet the needs of all students and to solve problems together.
- There's not one way to do any of this. And I think one of the things that I'm proud to be a part of is the fact that our administrators are open minded, our teachers are more open minded than they were 15 years ago. I've been with the division since 2000. I've seen a tremendous amount of change. And this is one of those things that's changed a lot.

- And if we're letting parents know that we're listening, they'll keep communicating with us. I think that's the most important part, is we have been on this path and it's ever growing.