

I-6: Respectfully inform, involve and invest students' influencers

Approach Influencers with Respect and Humility

As a probable newcomer to a potentially tight-knit community, you may find yourself in unfamiliar territory—geographically, demographically, socio-economically, politically, racially, culturally or all of the above. Your proven record of achievement has earned you the right to be confident in your ability to influence people to make positive changes for the sake of your students. At the same time, as a new member of your school and community, you are undeniably less informed of much of what is going on and has gone on around you. Somewhat paradoxically, we have found that a key to successfully earning credibility in a new community is focusing on what you do *not* know rather than on your proven record of accomplishment. Your best bet for successfully engaging student influencers is to approach each issue with an unmitigated sense of respect and humility.

Guidelines for Approaching Families

<p>Approach families with profound respect for their perspectives and opinions</p>	<p>As a teacher, you will have the opportunity to influence considerable aspects of your students' lives. If and when issues truly hinder your students' learning, you may find that you have to engage families in those issues to ensure your students can meet their academic goals. <i>How</i> you choose to approach the issues will be just as important as which issues you choose to address.</p> <p>Where you may simply see a problem that needs to be solved, others around you may see a whole history and context that you do not. Where you may see an opportunity to change some policy or practice for the benefit of students' learning, others around you may see a web of political dynamics that can only be navigated in a particular way. And, where you may see what you believe to be an obvious solution, others around you may, with the benefit of their experience, see a much better solution that you could benefit from yourself.</p>
<p>Approach families with the humility to recognize how much more they know about your students than you do</p>	<p>The fact is that no matter what your background and experience you have much to learn about the context of your students' lives. Ask questions and remember how much you do not know. Learn as much as possible—about and from—those who know your students best. Ask them for advice and suggestions about their children. Their insights will often prove invaluable.</p>
<p>Invest time and energy building relationships with students' families</p>	<p>“Network” with those in your students' lives to learn as much as possible about them (and, by extension, your students). Talk to families before and after school at drop off and pick up, sit with them at school functions, and attend local events. As much as you may crave peace and solitude during non-school hours, make a point to be visible in your community.</p> <p>Remember—you are being welcomed into a community with values and traditions that long predate your arrival. Seize any and all opportunities to immerse yourselves in those traditions, and to understand local values. Live locally, shop locally; attend community</p>

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	<p>meetings, frequent local movie theaters, concerts, and festivals. Go to baby showers or church dinners when invited, even if you do not normally attend these types of activities. Be, in other words, a member of your students' community. Part of this relationship-building process is recognizing and showing extreme sensitivity towards how others perceive you (hopefully as open and accessible). Just as you gain your students' respect by respecting them, you can gain the respect and support of your students' families by making a sincere effort to learn more about them and by integrating yourself (to some degree) into their lives.</p>
<p>Build credibility through success inside your classroom</p>	<p>Until you have your own successful program in place in your classroom, you have little credibility for suggesting how to fix anything. Once you do have that evidence of your success, opportunities for influence will come quickly and often. For at least the first few months in your school (if not longer), you will be unproven to your students' families and they may be understandably suspect of you (and your potentially "different" ways of doing things). Work to earn the trust of your students' families at every opportunity by communicating openly, honestly, and often about your rationale and motivation for your approach.</p>
<p>Have high, but reasonable, expectations of families</p>	<p>The notion of high expectations extends to families as well; they can and should be part of the academic achievement of your students. Find the balance between having high expectations for your students' families while understanding the realistic constraints they may face. And whether or not they take advantage of every opportunity with which they are presented, they deserve to be treated as, and assumed to be, parents who care deeply for the welfare and success of their child.</p>
<p>Recognize that students' families may be curious about you</p>	<p>Be willing to talk about yourself and share aspects of your own background with students' families. Despite sincere efforts to learn more about your students' community, you may be considered an outsider for some time. Be sensitive to the way you are perceived by members of your new community. Just as you may have assumptions and biases that you will have to overcome, others may also have assumptions or biases about you. You may be younger than other teachers, lighter or darker than other teachers, have a different accent, religion, or background, or you may just have a drastically different perspective than those around you.</p> <p>The less traditional nature of your training may also cause concern. As a new teacher lacking standard educational credentials, some may question your competence. As you introduce alternative methods, some parents may be concerned by your "unusual" or unfamiliar techniques and may be confused by your insistence on doing things "differently." You will need to figure out how to enlist all of their support and respect, while minimizing any resentment that your divergent methods produce.</p>
<p>Maintain the highest level of professionalism when dealing with students' families</p>	<p>Since professionalism affects your ability to influence others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dress professionally • Be prompt at all meetings with families • Speak in respectful tones • Avoid gossiping with families about school personalities <p>Use your maturity and good sense to resist counter-productive temptations to resort to inappropriate informality. Showing respect will ultimately garner you the respect of others that you can leverage into positive changes for your students.</p>

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<p>Respect the challenge students (and their families) face in reconciling different expectations between home and school</p>	<p>Your students are expected to exist and achieve in a variety of contexts and communities, each with potentially competing roles and expectations. Their families and their cultures may place pressures on them that compete with teachers' demands (for example, some cultures might expect an older child to stay home to help care for a sick younger sibling, whereas school personnel might understandably consider this type of absence "unexcused"; some cultures would value collective effort on an exam, whereas most schools measure mainly independent accomplishment).</p> <p>Your unique demands may compete with the more traditional demands of other teachers, and with the prevailing school culture. By asking your students to achieve more and to achieve differently than has been asked of them in the past, you ask them to directly defy the cultures that have defined them to date. Consciously or unconsciously you may expect your students to value your expectations over everyone else's.</p> <p>Your challenge will be to present your agenda not in opposition to, but in conjunction with, everyone else in their lives. Your role will be to enable your students to navigate the dissonance between the discordant cultures they experience. They will need to recognize that they can succeed academically even if they are the first in their family to do so. They will need specific tools to guide them towards the success that may differentiate them from those who surround them.</p>
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Overcoming Stereotypes

As researcher Carol Tomlinson suggests, some parents who lack formal educations themselves may feel insecure in a school setting. This by no means suggests indifference towards their children's futures. To the contrary—many parents who didn't graduate from high school or college are that much more aware of the necessity of a formal education and will be that much more resolute about their children's educations. Still, they may lack the comfort or confidence to challenge or engage a teacher, and you may find an aunt, sibling, uncle or grandparent who will choose to be involved on the child's behalf.

It is essential that you overcome any stereotypes or misconceptions you may have about your students' families. It can be tempting, for example, to assume that someone who speaks heavily accented English is uneducated, but it is an ignorant assumption to make. Many well-educated people immigrate to America, specifically for the purpose of giving their children a better life than they had in their native countries. And whether they are formally educated or not, if anything, immigrant populations may be more motivated and more passionate about improving their children's lots in life than those for whom such success required far less sacrifice.

Many people also incorrectly assume that poorer populations are less interested or less capable of assisting their children with schoolwork. Again, it's a fallacy to think that just because people haven't received a formal education they don't value one. It's also a fallacy to assume that just because someone is poor, they are uneducated. Those who struggle the most have the most to gain, and many will be incredibly anxious to ensure that their children don't struggle as they have. What you may legitimately find is that family members lacking a formal education may be less knowledgeable about how to best help their children succeed academically. You can offer them valuable insight about how to best assist their children's educational endeavors.