November 2021

Using a Ternion of Michigan's Resources to Support a Symbiotic Family/School Partnership

Darreth R. Rice
Michigan State University, ricedar1@msu.edu

Using a Ternion of Michigan's Resources to Support a Symbiotic Family/School Partnership

by Darreth Rice

Often we observe partnerships that seem smooth and natural; however, we know in reality, the partnerships are commonly the result of the combined work and dedication of each participant. One example of a solid partnership that is important for students' academic achievement is the partnership between families and teachers. In fact, a strong family-school partnership supports reading achievement (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor, 1983). Despite knowing their effectiveness, achieving these successful partnerships between the caregivers and the schools can feel overwhelming. Fortunately, there are some policies and resources that have been created in Michigan that help to foster the creation of these partnerships while simultaneously supporting students' reading achievement. What follows in this article are ideas and recommendations for educators to use to enact some of these practices and the research that supports the rationale for doing so in order to attempt to create a meaningful partnership between their students' families and themselves. It is important to note that this article is not meant to provide the only way to nurture the family and school partnership; rather, it sheds light on some resources and recommendations to consider as educators work to build relationships. The overall intent of each recommendation and resource is to help support teachers build relationships with families as they collaboratively work to support students' reading achievement.

The Triad: Literacy Essential #10, MiFamily, and Read By Grade Three

Before discussing the symbiotic partnership, it is important to consider access to resources. Schools need to identify and evaluate all of the resources at their disposal. Do they have necessary resources? Are the resources useful? Do they have all the essential components? Can

Darreth Rice

they actually build this relationship? Are the resources useful and appropriate for caregivers of all different backgrounds? During the pandemic—and the subsequent variety of modes in which instruction was delivered—teachers may have been or might still be teaching from their living rooms, from their empty classroom, or from their classroom but with only half of the students that they would normally teach. Teachers have been called to reimagine their instruction and their delivery of content in order to best support their students' learning through the challenging and often frightening pandemic. As such, teachers have undoubtedly spent more time than ever thinking about relationship building and effective ways to connect with families during this time. In fact, relationship building is also on the mind of the state. Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law (RGB3) requires schools to partner with caregivers to create a plan for caregivers to work with their student outside of the traditional school setting (Read by Grade Three (RGB3), 2016). The General Education Leadership Network (GELN) created the ten Essentials Practices of Early Literacy (2016) of which the tenth essential is collaborating with families to promote literacy. Most recently, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) released the MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework (Michigan Department of Education (MDE), 2020). These initiatives all support student literacy development by engaging families with the school. These initiatives

and their resulting recommendations can serve as important resources for teachers to consider as they work to establish effective partnerships. Each of these initiatives can help to support the home-school partnership.

MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework. Though written prior to the pandemic, at the time this article is being written, this is the newest initiative by Michigan's Department of Education. The framework is useful for schools to consider because it gives five concrete principles that guide schools to nurture the family and school partnership. In fact, the released document clearly states that it is intended to serve as a guide for schools and not meant to be given to caregivers as a handbook for family engagement (MDE, 2020). Similar to the Essentials Practices of Literacy, this document is meant to be a resource rather than a mandate (MDE, 2020, p.1).

Michigan's Read by Grade Three (RBG3). Another impactful initiative in the state is RBG3 in which caregivers and schools are legally responsible to work together to support literacy achievement. In the language of this law, the word 'parent' is mentioned fourteen times. Most mentions have to do with notifying the caregiver in a reasonable timeframe regarding the student's progress in reading either on state assessments or progress monitoring tools. The non-notification mentions (i.e., those times in the policy when caregivers are mentioned but not simply as a requirement for notification) speak of the Read at Home plan and the workshops to support caregivers in working with their students at home effectively (see RGB3, 2016). Additionally, the law mentions schools must "provide parents, legal guardians, or other providers of care for the pupil with a 'Read at Home' plan, including parent, guardian, or care provider training workshops and regular home reading." (RGB3, 2016, Section 1280f(3)(v)). Important to note is that the central purpose of this law is to increase student proficiency in reading by the end of third grade, but clearly the policymakers believe that one key element of achieving this goal is for schools to build partnerships with families. Some may argue that the policy itself does not seem very partnership-friendly when it states the schools must provide for the

caregivers, but it does create an opportunity for schools and families to work together to better support students in their reading achievement.

Essential Practices in Literacy. These documents are the result of work done by GELN in which the group of professionals surveyed current research and identified ten essential literacy practices that all teachers should enact every day in their classrooms. Practices have been identified for children of all ages including birth to age 3, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten to third grade, fourth and fifth grade, and six through twelve disciplinary literacy instructional practices (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), General Education Leadership Network (GELN), 2016). In addition, there are school-wide practices and literacy coaching practices. This article will simply focus on the kindergarten to third grade and the fourth and fifth grade essential practices. As written, "these practices are intended to help guide classrooms in literacy practice by identifying research-based practices that can have a positive impact on literacy development" (MAISA GELN K-3, 2016, p.1). In both sets of essentials, the tenth essential is collaborating with families to promote literacy (MAISA GELN, 2016). Within the tenth essential, teachers can find guidance in how to approach collaboration with families, such as ensuring all students have access to books at home, either borrowed or given to them. Additionally, the Essentials promote independent reading, support over the summer months with homework and advocate for talking about books in the language that is most comfortable for the family. By allowing the Essential Practices to guide their work, teachers are creating evidenced-based literacy learning experiences for students in their classroom and also working with families to extend those literacy experiences outside of the classroom.

Building relationships between school and home

Similar to what typically occurs in education, there has been an ebb and flow to family engagement. Now, more than ever, we need to consider building and fostering enriching relationships with the families in our school communities. Teachers know that the level of family

involvement has been directly associated with students' reading outcomes (Graue et al., 2004). It is also widely understood that families play a large role in the success of their child during the elementary years (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor, 1983). Furthermore, research tells us that access to books and a strong home literacy environment will likely have a positive effect on a student's reaching achievement (Aiken & Barbarin, 2008); yet, not every student has access to books or reading materials at home. Because the physical home environment may be dissimilar among families, a solid partnership can help schools find identify the ways in which families need support and identify resources to support all families.

In order to build these relationships, teachers will need to truly know the families in their classroom. This will involve more than just a cursory overview of the families; educators must really understand the families from the families' perspectives (see Creating a Demographic Profile in Edwards, 2016). There are many ways to achieve this level of knowing a family and there are some important things to consider. For example, if teachers send a survey, it is important to make sure the survey includes questions about a family's culture and how the families celebrate successes at home. Teachers might ask about how the family views education or what school was like for the caregivers. Families have dreams and aspirations for their children. Willson and Hughes (2009) found that families' perceptions of their children and their aspirations for their children positively affected their students' achievement. Understanding the family's perspective will help the teacher better support those aspirations. Both teachers and families want students to succeed in school. There are a number of ways (see Table 1) to begin to build a solid relationship with families.

Table 1

What does building relationships look like?

Schools' Actions	Activities that engage caregivers without stressing them out		
Keep	Check in with families and see how they are doing with activities on the Read at Home plan	Provide a variety of activities to meet the needs of different learners with different skill support	Communicate with families as the year progresses and students acquire more skills
Add	As a school streamline what they ask of caregivers Streamlining supports households from being overwhelmed with engagement if they have multiple students in differing grade-levels	Only ask caregivers to do activities that have a direct connection to student literacy, do not ask them to do arts and crafts-style projects without some direct connection to literacy. *For example, try not asking caregivers to help their students color all the lowercase letter b's on the page* But that doesn't mean that each activity has be boring and disengaging. Instead, ask caregivers to hold a scavenger hunt looking around the house for all the lowercase letter b's they can find	Reassure caregivers that the work they are doing is benefiting their child when teachers see that the child is progressing Be supportive when families don't or can't execute the activity exactly as intended Provide support, if necessary

Families engaged and supported to promote student achievement

There are several components that have an impact on a student's academic achievement, and for the purposes of the article, students' literacy achievement. Effective teachers have a strong impact on achievement (Davis & Willson, 2015; Kleickmann et al., 2013). Research has shown that participating in a strong community and school experience is a more significant factor than their homes lives in students' reading achievement (Aiken & Barbarin, 2008). Schools are making a difference. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that families engaged in the schooling process of their children also is related to higher achievement (MDE, 2020). This was demonstrated in Jeynes' (2003) meta-analysis which looked at several types of engagement such as monitoring school work at home, attending school functions, having positive attitudes and holding high expectations toward school achievement, encouragement of reading outside of school Jeynes determined all have positive effect sizes for African American families.

Families are more likely to engage with schools if they feel supported with the activities given to them (Aiken & Barbarin, 2008; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Yeung et al., 2002). One example of how families felt supported while working on reading with their child was in Rasinski and Stevenson's (2005) study where they used a structured and scripted at-home intervention with families. In this study, families appreciated the well-organized guidance. Not every family knows exactly what to do foster literacy development. This scripted intervention helped families to know how to work with their child by offering activities that support reading achievement.

When families received support in how to work with their child on reading skills, they tended to have more favorable perceptions of the schooling experience (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). This type of support does not need to be a full professional development session for families every single time teachers want them to work with their child. Rather, consider partnering with grade-level colleagues to create quick 2-4 minute videos for families to view on their devices to help scaffold the way in which caregivers can extended what is happening in the classroom as they work with

Table 2

What does supportive engagement look like in schools?

Schools' Actions	Activities to help with creating a positive environment for families		
Keep	Inform families of the happenings at the school and in the classroom	Welcome all families	Work *with* caregivers and not for or against them
Add	Collect caregivers' ideas and thoughts about communication, learning activities in the Read at Home Plan Send positive communication frequently Always send communication in families' home language	Be cognizant of the sensitivity and lingering attitudes some caregivers may have because of their prior schooling experiences	Examine whether a classroom (virtual or in person) is set up for a partnership 1. How do teachers ask for caregiver input? 2. How do teachers consider caregivers and students when proposing activities for a Read at Home plan?

their child at home. For example, if teachers have a group of students in their kindergarten class working on letter recognition, the teacher might create a video that demonstrates how caregivers can lead a letter hunt in which the child and caregiver collaboratively hunt for letters in their home environment. To do this, the teacher might create a quick video showcasing teachers hunting for letters in their classroom, school library, or home pantry. This will model for families exactly how to conduct the letter hunt, and to enhance the experience, teachers can also throw in extra information about why learning letters is so important. Table 2 provides a few options, but by no means are they the only option for schools to try.

Clear, Purposeful, and Intentional Family Engagement

In order for the engagement with families to be effective and build the intended partnership, schools must truly consider how they engage with families. In many classrooms, teachers are sorting through a mountain of emails from individual caregivers each day and still doing a weekly email blast or newsletter to the whole class. Caregivers are also receiving an abundance of emails and other communication. Educators and parents alike might find it useful to streamline this communication. Teachers might consider using an online discussion forum, like Edmodo, for families to post questions and for teachers to answer the questions publicly. That way they devote their email to the confidential, student-specific, or emergency communication. Teachers may also want to set a specific time each afternoon to check messages and be transparent with families when the messages will be read and answered. Knowing when and how communication will be delivered can be very useful for a strong partnership.

When schools do ask caregivers to engage with them, schools will want it to be meaningful for the caregivers, the students, and themselves (see Table 3). Schools

Table 3

What does engaging caregivers without stress look like?

Schools' Actions	Activities that support individualized family engagement		
Keep	Create family learning opportunities	Support families, especially during the trials of education in a pandemic	Offer communication in several modalities to connect with families
Add	Hold schools events when caregivers can participate Hold school events at different times throughout the day to increase caregiver participation Use a method of delivery that allows for families need that need any accommodations (i.e., interpreter, print material in their home language)	Offer clear and concise, step-by-step directions that both student and caregiver can understand Share resources to support learning like quick "how-to" videos or video explanations of how to complete an activity	Ensure all communication is in a manner that can be understood by families (i.e., in families' home language or verbal communication for caregivers who may need this)

must carefully plan to avoid overwhelming caregivers. From the research, schools know that caregivers react negatively to distress (Aiken & Barbarin, 2008; Yeung et al., 2002). When the stress comes from a lack of support from the school, this distress could negatively impact the students and their achievement. As such, when schools consider supporting literacy achievement, they should aim to facilitate engagement that promotes a strong literacy environment at home without adding extra strain on the caregivers (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). One way schools can do this is to offer very clear and detailed instructions any time they request a caregiver to work at home with their child. In addition to the detailed instructions, it is also useful to inform caregivers about how the particular task supports the child's literacy development. To achieve this, teachers could include short videos that demonstrate the task (as referenced above), or they might provide detailed and thorough instructions on particular assignments for both the student and the caregivers, or teachers might consider inviting caregivers to a gathering to learn more about the practice. No matter how they choose to deliver, when proving such instruction, teachers should evaluate their language to be sure it is accessible to caregivers of varying backgrounds and to avoid "teacher jargon" that may be unfamiliar to non-educators.

Another way teachers can be sensitive to the needs of the family is to consider activities that occur each day in the home. For example, there are many literacy activities that can occur around meal time. Caregivers can have children read a recipe along with them or write a list of groceries needed for a meal.

Individualized to fit all families

Just like all students are not the same, neither are their families. If schools want to facilitate meaningful and effective partnerships, schools will have to differentiate their recommendations and their opportunities for involvement. Clearly, not all caregivers have the same abilities (McClain, 2000) nor do they come from the same backgrounds (Davis-Kean, 2005). The most important aspect to remember though is that a families' abilities to invest in providing a stimulating learning environment will have a powerful impact on reading achievement (Yeung et al., 2002) regardless of caregivers' education levels or abilities. Rather than viewing this as a roadblock to the partnership, schools should recognize this as an important challenge and determine ways to support all caregivers.

There are several ways that schools can consider families situations while creating an environment ripe for engagement. Despite its many challenges, the pandemic caused us to rethink communication and some of the things we learned are useful to consider in our post-pandemic schools. For example, students were more successful when schools offered families clear and concise directions; that practice should continue. Sharing resources with families that are geared toward caregivers and not necessarily educators is always helpful (e.g., MobyMax—which offers short quick lessons before the practice—is a great online platform or phonics pronunciation videos in the public domain). It is also important to consider caregivers' work schedules. Schools should try to offer multiple times or multiple opportunities for families to connect with the school. Offering an Open House at 5-7pm privileges the families that work the 8-5 work day, which in some districts might only account for about a third of the school. It will also be important for schools to offer child care (and perhaps a meal). Not offering child care at caregiver development opportunities privileges families that can afford child care. Similarly, when possible, materials should be written in the language that the families speak at home. Schools should consider the accessibility of the space in which the sessions are delivered. As an example, offering caregiver development sessions on the second floor without a working elevator privileges the able-bodied families. Schools will need to develop an inclusive family engagement plan. Table 4 offers some insight into the possibilities of creating an inclusive environment ripe for partnership.

Fostering a positive environment

For some caregivers their own schooling experience has left a negative and lasting impression. Often schools are having to work around feelings of animosity and lingering attitudes attributed to the caregivers' own school experiences. Positive caregiver perceptions of a school

Table 4

What does individualized engagement look like?

Schools' Actions	Activities that support building relationships		
Keep	Positive communication	Set high expectations for all students	Do not penalize students for actions outside of their control (i.e., getting to school on time, inability to do work at home because they stay in multiple locations)
Add	Include caregivers in the planning stages of a communication plan-*what would families like to happen in regards to communication?* Make engagement a part of a curriculum-based family development night, as referenced in RGB3	Survey families Find out more about them, and become genuinely interested in a family as a unit and as part of the classroom community Asking about 1. their home cultures 2. their celebrations 3. how school can help support their aspirations	To learn more about families, assign an optional collaborative project where students and caregivers ***can*** showcase their families' attributes while showing off their literacy skills 1. K-1: a class cookbook with families favorite recipes (procedural text) 2. 2-3: a collaborative collage (digital or print) that represents each family (synthesis and symbolism) 3. 4-5: a family history as told by the family (research and narrative non-fiction)

have a positive impact on reading outcomes of young Black boys (Joe & Davis, 2009). Fostering a positive environment directly impacts the reading outcomes of our students. In most classrooms, teachers may only need to make minor tweaks to what they are current doing in order to achieve an optimal and inviting environment that is welcoming to all families (see Table 5 on the next page). This can be especially useful when caregivers have had a negative experience with school in their past.

Nurturing the relationship

There has never been a more important time for us to support strong family engagement. Even long after the pandemic has gone, teachers will be reaping the benefits of strong family engagement. It is important to begin cultivating a collaborative culture and nurturing those relationships now. As with most things, it is useful to start small. Pick one of the five components and start working on that one. Consider actions and activities that the school can control, get to know each child's family, and actively create opportunities to foster an effective partnership with caregivers.

References

Aikens, N. L., & Barbarin, O. (2008). Socioeconomic differences in reading trajectories: The contribution of family, neighborhood, and school contexts. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 100*(2), 235-251. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.100.2.235

Table 5

What does creating a positive environment look like?

Schools' Actions	Activities that support engagement		
Keep	Ask caregivers to work with their child at home	Offer families a way to connect with their child's learning	Provide concrete activities for caregivers to complete with their child
Add	Give caregivers an outlet (i.e., a classroom online message board, some teachers have used private Facebook groups for their classroom families) to ask questions on how to execute activities Provide detailed instructions (in their home language-*enlist school partners (including other caregivers, if necessary) for translations*) for caregivers to follow or consider a video to model/show them how to execute the activity	Support caregivers by allowing them to practice activities at a family night, in a safe environment (in a small group of caregivers or with the teacher) and receive supportive feedback (from their group members) before trying it at home Provide a rationale for why an activity is important	Share resources to support learning like quick "how-to" videos or video explanations of how to complete an activity Enlist other caregivers to create videos to support one another (especially if the video needs to be translated into a home language different than the teacher's home language)

Burkam, D. T., Ready, D. D., Lee, V. E., & LoGerfo, L. F. (2004). Social-Class Differences in Summer Learning Between Kindergarten and First Grade: Model Specification and Estimation. *Sociology of Education, 77*(1), 1–31. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/003804070407700101

Compton-Lilly, C., Ellison, T. L., & Rogers, R. (2019). The Promise of Family Literacy: Possibilities and Practices for Educators. *Language Arts, 97*(1), 25-35.

Davis, D. S., & Willson, A. (2015). Practices and commitments of test-centric literacy instruction: Lessons from a testing transition. *Reading Research Quarterly, 50*(3), 357-379. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/rrq.103

Davis-Kean, P. (2005). The influence of parent education and family income on child achievement: The indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. *Journal of Family Psychology, 19*(2), 294-304. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.19.2.294

Edwards, P. (2016). *New ways to engage parents: Strategies and tools for teachers and leaders, K–12.* Teachers College Press.

Graue, E., Clements, M. A., Reynolds, A. J., & Niles, M. D. (2004). More than teacher directed or child initiated: Preschool curriculum type, parent involvement, and children's outcomes in the child-parent centers. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 12*(72), 1-38. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v12n72.2004

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms.* Cambridge University Press.

Jeynes, W.H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society, 35*(2), 202-218. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124502239392

Joe, E. M., & Davis, J. E. (2009). Parental influence, school readiness and early academic achievement of african american boys. *Journal of Negro Education, 78*(3), 260-276.

Kleickmann, T., Richter, D., Kunter, M., Elsner, J., Besser, M., Krauss, S., & Baumert, J. (2013). Teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge: The role of structural differences in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 64*(1), 90-106. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022487112460398

Levin, K. (2020, Dec 1). 'Mom, I'm not feeling it': Families overwhelmed by online learning turn to home schooling. *Chalkbeat Detroit.*

McClain, V. P. (2000). Lisa and her mom: Finding success in reading the word (in "strikeout" text) world. *Language Arts, 78*(1), 21-29.

Michigan Association for Intermediate School Administrators, General Education Learning Network (2016a). Essential Practices of Literacy Instruction-Grades Four and Five. Accessed at https://literacyessentials.org/downloads/gelndocs/essential_instructionalliteracygr4-5.pdf

Michigan Association for Intermediate School Administrators, General Education Learning Network (2016b). Essential Practices of Early Literacy Instruction-Kindergarten through Grade Three. Accessed at https://literacyessentials.org/downloads/gelndocs/k-3_literacy_essentials.pdf

Michigan Department of Education. (2020). MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework. Accessed at https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MIFamily_Family_Engagement_Framework_683447_7.pdf

Purcell-Gates, V. (1996). Stories, coupons, and the TV Guide: Relationships between home literacy experiences and emergent literacy knowledge. *Reading research quarterly, 31*(4), 406-428. http://dx.doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.31.4.4

Rasinski, T., & Stevenson, B. (2005). The effects of fast start reading: a fluency-based home involvement reading program, on the reading achievement of beginning readers. *Reading Psychology, 26*(2), 109-125. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02702710590930483

Read By Grade Three Act, MCL §§ 380.1-380.1852, Sect 1280f (2016). Accessed at http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(lgt1fk1gofq2axbqqjnsdier))/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-380-1280f

Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write.* Heinemann.

Willson, V. L., & Hughes, J. N. (2009). Who is retained in first grade? A psychosocial perspective. *Elementary School Journal, 109*(3), 251-266. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/592306

Yeung, W. J., Linver, M. R., & Brooks–Gunn, J. (2002). How money matters for young children's development: Parental investment and family processes. *Child Development, 73*(6), 1861-1879. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.t01-1-00511.

Author Biography

Darreth R. Rice is a PhD student in the Curriculum, Instruction and Teacher Education Program at Michigan State University. Her research centers around literacy policies and family engagement to support student reading joy and achievement. Prior to her doctoral studies, Darreth taught middle school ELA for eight years and spent four years as a traveling literacy specialist.

Michigan Reading Association 66th Annual Conference
www.michiganreading.org
LITERACY EQUITY JUSTICE & BUILDING BELOVED COMMUNITY
LAMARR SANDERS
March 11-14, 2022-Lansing, MI