

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

BRIEF 4

Fostering Collaborative Partnerships With Families of English Learners Within a Multitiered System of Supports

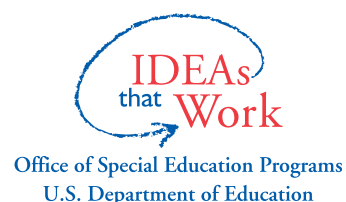


English Learner Literacy Intervention Programs and Strategies
ENSURING SUCCESS



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Multitiered Instructional Frameworks

When implemented effectively, multitiered instructional frameworks support educators in providing high-quality culturally and linguistically responsive instruction for English learners, including those in need of supplemental support in language and literacy. Further, when a multitiered system of supports includes assessment procedures that are aligned with the language(s) of instruction and informed by educators' knowledge of the language-acquisition process, students with disabilities are accurately identified.

In this fourth brief in the series, three model demonstration projects describe their work implementing multitiered instructional models for English learners with and without disabilities in grades 3 to 5 and describe key practices for fostering collaborative and equitable home-school partnerships.



Overview

This is the fourth brief in the series *Meeting the Needs of English Learners With and Without Disabilities*. It features the work of three model demonstration projects whose aim is to support English learners (ELs) with and at risk for reading-related disabilities in grades 3 to 5. This brief focuses on fostering collaborative and equitable home-school partnerships with parents and families as partners within a multitiered system of supports for ELs (MTSS for ELs).

Who Should Read This Brief?

This brief is for school leaders, educators, and policymakers charged with improving the academic outcomes of ELs. Specifically, this brief focuses on the following:

- Building proactive multidirectional relationships with families of ELs
- Engaging families in educational decision-making and planning for their children
- Supporting meaningful family participation in general and special education processes and programs

Structure of This Brief

We begin this brief by describing the need for culturally and linguistically responsive home-school partnership practices. Then, we provide a brief overview of MTSS for ELs, highlighting the key roles of families. Throughout the brief, we provide “in-action” examples of family engagement and partnerships from three model demonstration projects aimed at improving literacy outcomes for ELs in grades 3 to 5 within an MTSS for ELs framework.

Introduction

More than 5 million ELs are enrolled in U.S. public schools.¹ Home-school partnerships and family engagement are vital components of an effective and equitable educational system for ELs. Research shows that successful home-school partnerships increase student achievement, socioemotional health, and prosocial skills.² Further, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires collaboration between families and educators. Yet schools often find it challenging to establish multidirectional communication and partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families. This work calls for providing caring spaces, listening, and providing feedback loops that respect families and signal true partnership opportunities.

Multidirectional Communication and Partnerships

“Multidirectional communication means that information flows back and forth between families and school personnel and that all participants can initiate communication.”³ In effective MTSS for ELs, communication initiates from any stakeholder and is available through many methods to ensure that families have access to information and can communicate in the most convenient ways (e.g., phone calls, emails, text messages, video chats, in-person meetings, smartphone apps), no matter their life or work schedule. Rather than transferring information in one direction, multidirectional communication imparts respect and dignity, and it gives voice to families in all aspects of school policies and practices. These types of partnerships can include open-door policies for administrators and teachers, meaning that parents can readily access key personnel before and after school and that multilingual staff or interpreters are available. Regular communication includes newsletters available in multiple languages, in-person parent meetings, or virtual meetings at times and locations convenient and comfortable to families. Home visits are a valuable way to connect with families who find it difficult to attend meetings at school due to work schedules, transportation issues, cultural or language barriers, or comfort level. Multidirectional communication promotes partnership and collaboration.

Though many families of ELs know how to navigate school systems, it is important to check in with families to assess their knowledge and experience. Hiring cultural liaisons, or cultural brokers, who are bilingual and have similar cultural backgrounds as the school community can strengthen family engagement but should not replace communication with other teachers and administrators. Schools must intentionally focus on creating an atmosphere where all families are equal partners and decision-makers in their children’s education. When schools honor the diversity of the community and work to dismantle ineffective power structures, families are more likely to engage as full educational partners.⁴

1 McFarland et al., 2019

2 González et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2012; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lee, 2010; Nieto, 2010

3 Weingarten et al., 2020, p. 126

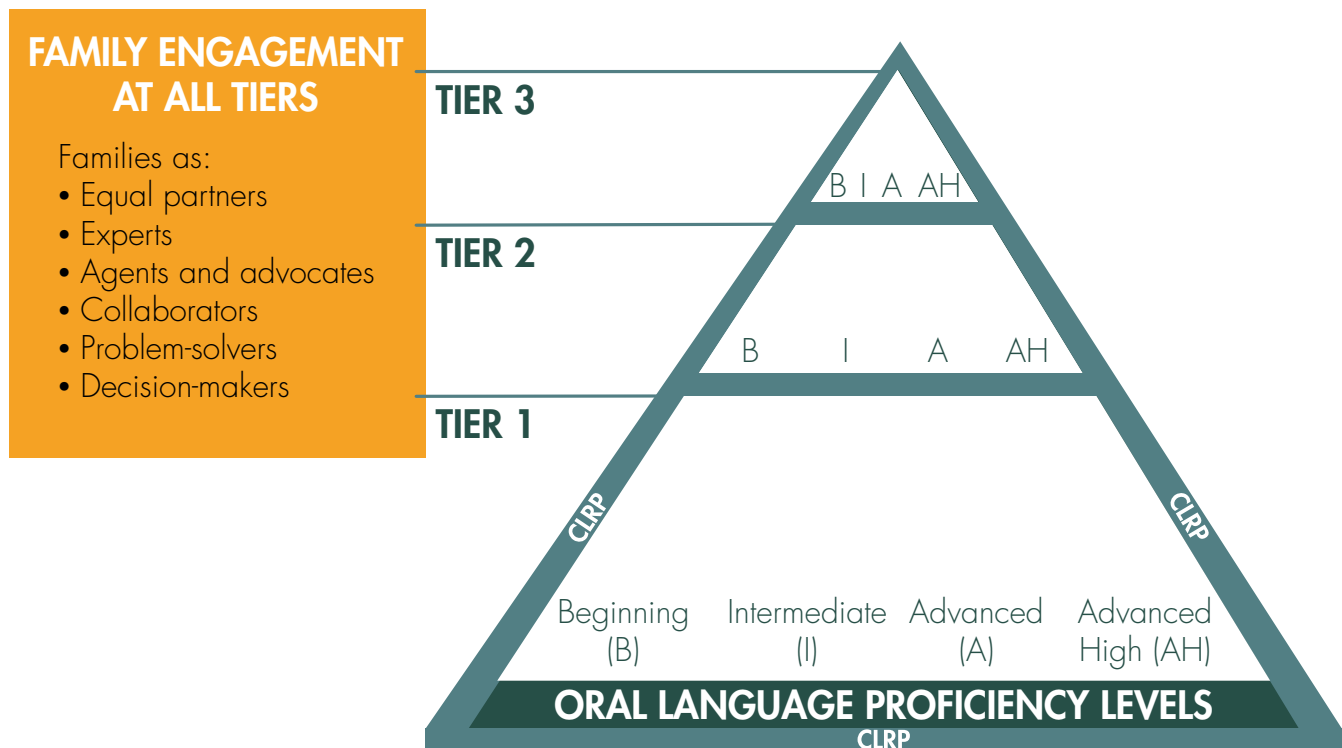
4 Hornby & Lafaele, 2011

MTSS for ELs

Within MTSS for ELs, schools integrate language and instructional support to help students achieve meaningful educational outcomes.⁵ In such systems, families and educators have a shared understanding of the curriculum, instruction and assessment practices, and the school's support systems for students' academic and language development. This series of briefs focuses on oral language and reading development, but MTSS for ELs includes other content areas, such as math and behavior. MTSS frameworks include a universal level at Tier 1 that supports the needs of most students and families (about 80% should be meeting grade-level benchmarks). Tiers 2 and 3 provide increasing levels of support to smaller populations of students who need more intensive intervention (about 15% in Tier 2 and 5% in Tier 3). In MTSS for ELs, schools must thoughtfully engage families as collaborative partners at all stages of educational decision-making: proactively at Tier 1 and through increasingly collaborative partnerships responsive to students' identified needs at Tiers 2 and 3. To appropriately serve ELs, educators with expertise in second-language development and bilingualism, and families with expertise about their child and their child's culture and language, are essential members of the team at each tier.

Figure 1 shows school and family partnerships at all tiers of instruction in MTSS for ELs. Instruction aligns to students' language proficiency levels in the instructional language(s), and culturally and linguistically responsive practices (CLRP) are used within and across all tiers.

Figure 1: Collaborative Partnerships for Family Engagement in MTSS for ELs



5 Project ELITE² et al., 2018

Tier 1: Begin by Building Proactive, Assets-Based Relationships

The goal of Tier 1 in a culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS framework is to proactively support and maintain high expectations so that all students can meet important academic and social outcomes. To do this, educators should use an assets-based approach that values students' multilingualism, provides rigorous culturally responsive instruction, and leverages students', families', and communities' cultural beliefs.

Table 1 includes key questions and examples of strategies schools can use to connect with families from a proactive, assets-based perspective at Tier 1.

Table 1: Proactive Strategies for Supporting Home-School Partnerships

Guiding Questions	Examples
<p>What are my cultural beliefs and assumptions about parents and families of ELs? Why is it important to understand my own culture?</p>	<p>Complete a cultural self-awareness checklist and an assessment of self-efficacy in working with ELs.</p> <p>Reframe perspectives of families' and communities' cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics from a deficit- to an assets-based perspective.</p>
<p>How do we understand families' and communities' cultural and linguistic assets?</p>	<p>Get to know families and communities to understand their sociocultural wealth through learning about their educational goals, backgrounds, language preferences, and other characteristics.⁶</p> <p>Connect with culturally specific community organizations as partners in developing strong home-school collaboration.</p>
<p>How do we build trusting relationships with families of ELs?</p>	<p>Ensure that families are equal partners in decision-making about their children's education.</p> <p>Assess EL families' level of trust in their child's school.</p> <p>Communicate a belief in families as experts.</p> <p>Involve parents in policy setting and decision-making.</p> <p>Demonstrate commitment to engaging families and ensuring their children's success.</p> <p>Share information with and seek information from families.</p> <p>Demonstrate that you treat families and students equitably (e.g., allocation of resources, interpretation and translation services, effective programs).</p>

6 Yosso, 2005

Guiding Questions	Examples
<p>How do we build welcoming environments for families of ELs and their communities?</p>	<p>Create spaces where diverse families feel seen and welcomed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a family center. • Post material in families’ native languages; include visuals representing the school communities’ cultures and native countries. • Post greetings and common phrases in native language and English (along with pronunciation guides). • Post artwork representing children in prominent locations throughout the school. <p>Hire staff who can communicate effectively with families:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that office staff speak most common languages of families. • Make district language services easily accessible. • Include interpreters at all school-family meetings. • Provide childcare at all family meetings. • Hire cultural brokers that represent the most common cultures and languages in the school.
<p>How do schools create multidirectional cross-cultural communication?</p>	<p>Proactively interact with families about their children’s education, sharing information about children’s progress and gaining family insights and input on their child’s and family’s strengths and needs.</p> <p>Welcome communication with families:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have open-door policies for families to connect with administrators and teachers before and after school. • Establish multiple ways families can connect with the school administration and teachers outside of school hours (face to face is often best for families of ELs). • Listen, listen, listen.
<p>How do we support students so that they achieve important educational outcomes?</p>	<p>Create shared responsibility for school success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include EL families on school leadership teams and advisory committees. • Include EL families in decisions about programs, curricula, and related instructional materials and supports. • Identify families’ funds of knowledge. • Offer workshops for ways that all families, no matter their language or literacy background, can support academic and social success. • Ask families to lead workshops (or share information) about what they teach their children that reflects cultural values. • Ask families to share skills and knowledge associated with their employment, hobbies, or interests. • Support efforts to develop the languages of the home.

Guiding Questions	Examples
Do myths or misinformation need to be addressed to facilitate home-school partnerships?	Identify and address deficit perspectives of educators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify common misconceptions and proactively address them with families. • Proactively validate families' efforts to develop the native language at home. • Help families understand that their input is valued and welcome at all stages of the educational process. • Communicate concrete examples of how students' multilingualism benefits them in their classroom. • Dispel the myth that language confusion in bilingualism causes disabilities. • Dispel the myth that English as a second language and English language development programs are remedial programs.

Parents and Families as Agents and Advocates

Parental/family agency is the ability of parents and families to make choices and decisions for their children's future. Families from the dominant culture often use this agency to advocate for their children's needs, whereas this same belief is often not held by families of ELs. Their prior experiences, positive or negative, affect their belief about their ability to have a voice or be an effective agent. Far too often, families report dissatisfaction with schools and have reported the need to "fight" for basic rights.⁷ Family beliefs about language and bilingualism, ability and disability, and educational goals may not always align with the dominant culture's educational views and practices, but these beliefs must be integrated with existing school practices. Doing so requires a safe space in which to listen, learn, and collaborate because parents draw from their own cultural strengths to make the best decisions they can for their children.

It is also helpful to enter this work using a framework to highlight a community's strengths and assets. One such framework is Yosso's Model of Community Cultural Wealth.⁸ Yosso outlines six forms of cultural capital, or strengths, all families possess: (a) aspirational: hopes and dreams for the future, including bi/multilingualism for achieving future goals; (b) linguistic: language, communication skills (including multilingual abilities) across varying contexts; (c) familial: cultural knowledge nurtured by/among family; (d) social: dynamic network of community resources; (e) navigational: negotiation through social institutions that may be unwelcoming to students of color; and (f) resistance: cultural knowledge of structures of oppression and abilities to challenge them. Using such an asset-based framework can promote connections between school policies and practices and community cultural wealth. Returning to the concept of multidirectional communication, educators can also share their own cultural wealth with families, highlighting similarities and honoring differences.

7 Cioè-Peña, 2020; Montelongo, 2015

8 Yosso, 2005

Project ELITE² In-Action Example: Building Culturally Responsive Teachers Who View Families Through an Assets-Based Lens

One of the tenets of cultural responsiveness includes using an assets-based approach when working with students and families who are part of the school community. Project ELITE² worked with participating teachers to enhance their self-awareness of values, beliefs, and attitudes informing and affecting their teaching. Teachers were introduced to the concept of cultural responsiveness and worked in small groups to deepen their understanding through critical discussions about their views and implicit biases toward their students and families. Through this collaborative process, teachers explored how to get to know their students and families, recognize family and community strengths, and gain an understanding of the power of positive perspectives of these families and students.

As part of the ELITE² professional learning model, educators were also supported in understanding bi/multilingual students' linguistic assets and deepening their knowledge of how students' native language and home language practices support academic learning. Through training and job-embedded support, educators recognized ELs' strengths within and across languages and learned that ELs' oral language development in their native languages at both home and school is an essential building block for reading and writing.

Engagement Through Family Listening Sessions, Workshops, and Events

Families of ELs may be literate and speak English and their native language, may be literate and speak only in their native language, or may speak but not be literate in their native language and/or English. Workshops and resources should take into consideration this range of skills and needs by offering a variety of ways to support their children, including the following:

- MTSS framework
- Primary language and literacy as foundational for English development
- Benefits of dual-language and bilingual education
- Content and benefits of English as a second language and English language development programs
- School curriculum
- Common Core State Standards (for language proficiency and academic achievement)
- District and school assessments
- State accountability assessments
- School structures and leadership
- Ways to volunteer in school activities
- Parent organizations
- Supporting school success at home
- Educational jargon and technical terms (instead, provide parent-friendly definitions)
- How to advocate for your child

- Parent and family rights
- Special education procedural safeguards

The most successful workshops and events consider the needs of families and communities. At the beginning of each year, it can be helpful to conduct a survey to identify topics of interest to families. Surveys may be sent via phone, text, or email. Educators should ensure that surveys are available in both English and the families' native language. Though the survey may include some initial choices, it is important to allow families to make suggestions about topics that support their needs. It is essential to offer interpretation services or programming in the native languages of families. Written materials should be available in the families' native languages; when creating these materials, consider the accuracy, comprehensibility, formality, and cultural aspects of communication.⁹ It may also be helpful to offer childcare and refreshments and to have families select meeting sites convenient for them. Some districts have found low response rates for surveys from EL families, so initially, schools may need to contact families via personal notes, phone, text, or email until parents are comfortable responding online. Family listening sessions are another way to begin to establish meaningful support and communication systems with families.

To summarize, collaborative home-school partnerships have common characteristics: (a) multidirectional communication, (b) open-door policies, (c) shared responsibility for school success, (d) active parent groups representative of the school community, (d) regular communication of school processes and procedures, and (e) processes for feedback.¹⁰ Throughout Tier 1, school personnel, families and the community form relationships built on respect, understanding, and equitable partnerships.

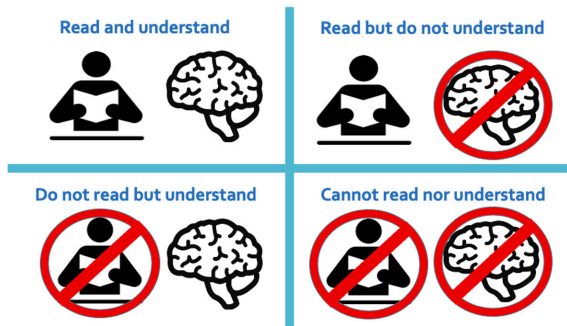
Project ELLIPSES In-Action Example: Supporting Literacy at Home Parent Guide

Parent and family workshops delivered by Project ELLIPSES staff led to the development of the Supporting Literacy at Home Parent Guides in English and Spanish. Multigenerational family members of ELs attended the workshops and were eager to support literacy at home, but some were unsure how to do so if they did not speak or read the language of the text. The guides provide a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to supporting children's literacy development at home that accommodates parent and family members' language and literacy abilities. Parents and family members are encouraged to engage in interactive reading and to connect the text to their culture, funds of knowledge, and background experiences. They learn to use evidence-based reading strategies, such as making predictions, fluency checks, rereading, and deepening comprehension, through open-ended questioning strategies. These strategies accommodate variations in parent language and literacy proficiencies.



9 Mandic et al., 2012; Wylie Communications, 2020
10 Weingarten et al., 2020

Supporting Literacy at Home Parent Guide



The guide is divided in quadrants, and parents select the one that matches their speaking and reading skills in relation to the language of the book their child is reading (see image at left). The parent and child interact with the text through strategic use of language, active listening, questioning, and thoughtful discussion about the text. For example, if the parent does not read or understand the language of the text, the child translates what they read into the language they share with the parent.

The guides support an asset-based view of parents and family members of ELs and their ability to support literacy, even if they do not read or speak the language being read by their child. The guides can do the following:

- Empower families to use the strategies in the guides to support literacy at home
- Encourage all family members to support literacy at home
- Show families how they can nurture a love of reading through their active engagement in reading with their child
- Foster use of oral language, translation, and inquiry to support literacy development
- Deconstruct myths about families of ELs' interest in, or ability to, support literacy development at home

Project ELLIPSES In-Action Example: Parent MTSS Workshop

Parent workshops about MTSS—what happens during tiered instruction, who provides the instruction, why and how often students are assessed, and how data are used—are necessary in supporting collaborative partnerships with parents. These workshops should be provided in the languages the parents speak and understand. Sending information on MTSS home is insufficient to help parents and family members understand what their child experiences during the school day.

As part of Project ELLIPSES, multigenerational families from schools across the district attended a workshop on the components of MTSS. The families were primarily Mexican American and transnationals. All families spoke Spanish and some also spoke English. They requested that the presentation be delivered in Spanish.

To place parents at ease, presenters led an icebreaker using *lotería* (Mexican bingo), a game typically played in Mexico. Parents selected a *lotería* card and then introduced themselves, explaining why they



identified with that card. Parents responded enthusiastically to this activity and remained engaged throughout the workshop.

Parents were then guided through a discussion of universal screening, progress monitoring, tiered instruction, and data-based decision-making. Presenters explained why data are collected and how they are used to identify student needs and promote academic

growth. Presenters explained how students are grouped in the English language arts instructional block, why some students receive extra support, and what these supports should include. An overview of oral language development emphasized how parents can support language acquisition in the languages spoken at home. Parents were empowered to use the language of MTSS (e.g., universal screening, progress monitoring) during parent conferences and to ask questions. Guidance was offered on types of questions to ask (see sidebar at right).

The parent workshop culminated with an interactive activity where groups of parents created a semantic map of strategies that they can use at home to support their child's progress in reading. The map was recorded on chart paper and then shared during a gallery walk. Parents took the maps to showcase during other scheduled parent meetings in the schools.

Parents' feedback about the workshop was positive, and they requested more frequent parent workshops. They shared that they now understood MTSS and felt empowered to ask the right questions to better understand the supports their child was receiving in English language arts. Parents also shared that they felt valued and respected. They indicated that they wanted to support their child's schooling but that they needed guidance to participate in meaningful ways.

Questions Parents Should Ask

- What does my child do during the English language arts block? Who is the teacher?
- What are the results of my child's recent universal screener?
- How is my child performing compared to their peers?
- What are the results of the latest progress-monitoring data?
- What is my child's learning trajectory, or rate of improvement?
- What Tier 2 supports is my child receiving?
- What decisions have been made related to language proficiency progress? In English? In Spanish?
- Is my child's language proficiency monitored? How?

Tier 2: Engaging Families as Part of a System of Supports

In Tier 2, students who are not meeting expected benchmarks are considered for supplemental instruction or interventions. Such support focuses on the identified skills, is usually provided through small-group instruction, and occurs in addition to what is taught in class.

For ELs, linguistic support for language development must be a component of literacy intervention. Schools can engage families as meaningful partners in this tier by sharing the specific support their child is receiving, how to understand regular progress reports, and ways to work with their children at home. Data literacy is as important for families as it is for educators, and it is an essential topic for family workshops. When communicating about educational data with families, educators provide language supports similar to those beneficial for students during classroom instruction, such as visual data (i.e., graphs and charts) and comprehensible narrative explanations. Because Tier 2 provides additional support, family input should be sought with more regularity than in Tier 1. For example, educators ask families about learning strategies that work best for their child at home.

Table 2 provides guiding questions to facilitate family-school connections for students who need Tier 2 support.

Table 2: Facilitating Parent-School Connection for Students With Additional Support Needs in Tier 2

Guiding Questions	Examples
What information do parents need to provide so that their child can be better supported?	Parents should provide information about the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home language and literacy practices • What motivates their child • Long-term goals for their child • Ideas for engaging their child in the school process
How should schools provide information to families about their students' academic and social needs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide workshops and handouts (in native languages) that explain the MTSS for ELs process and allow for parent questions. • Share specific information about their child's progress. • Give parents a copy of the intervention plan and expected outcomes. • Provide regular reports of progress toward meeting targeted goals.
What is the best way to communicate with parents and families?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the beginning of the year, identify families' communication preferences (e.g., phone, text, email, written note). • Provide multiple options and times for parents to contact teachers, school leaders, and other school personnel.
How can educators and parents partner to support students in need of additional academic support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on target goals and objectives. • Define roles. • Affirm how parents support their children at home. • Encourage native language use.

Tier 3: Collaborating With Families of Students With Significant Needs or Disabilities

Between 4% and 10% of students do not respond to high-quality interventions and may require Tier 3 supports.¹¹ After ensuring that instruction and interventions have been culturally and linguistically responsive, students not making adequate progress toward meeting grade-level goals may require more intensive Tier 3 supports. In Tier 3, all aspects of instruction and support are more intentional and intensive, including the level of collaboration with families. As a part of Tier 3 supports, families collaborate in the (a) problem-solving process; (b) special education referral, if necessary; (c) special education evaluation; and (d) special education service provision.

See Table 3 for key questions and examples of how to address these aspects at Tier 3.

Table 3: Engaging and Supporting Families During Tier 3 Processes

Guiding Questions	Examples
How do we involve families during the problem-solving process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate family participation in meetings (e.g., schedule at convenient times, provide information about the purpose of the meeting, provide copies of documents before meetings). • Ensure that interpretation services are provided during the entirety of all meetings. • Ensure that meetings are safe spaces for open discussion in which families can share input and information about their child. • Support diverse ways for family engagement in problem-solving meetings (e.g., active listening, notetaking). • Allow for bidirectional questioning. • Have specific questions for families to ask or answer about their child.
What information do families need during the special education referral and evaluation process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information on the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal rights (in appropriate language and readability level, with explanations if needed) • Timelines • Assessments and language of assessments • Ensure that English language development specialists are available to share information about language goals and supports.

11 Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002

Guiding Questions	Examples
What input is important for families to provide during the special education referral and evaluation process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child’s strengths • Developmental history • Educational history • How the home language or bilingualism is used outside of school
What information and resources do families need during the individualized education program (IEP) and special education service provision process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An explanation of their legal rights in their dominant language • Interpreters available for the duration of all meetings • Assessment results explained clearly using visuals and graphs • Examples of the types of questions they may want to ask • The right to bring their own advocate (e.g., representative from a community agency, friend, relative, lawyer) • A copy of the IEP in their native language
What input is important for families to provide during the IEP and special education service provision process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dreams and goals that are important to the child and family • The family’s goals for the child’s biliteracy development • Support they need in determining what language services should be provided (family and community context must be considered) • Regular feedback about their child’s progress on their IEP goals (and on making meaningful growth toward the families’ goals)

Individual Problem-Solving

In planning for students who need more intensive support, or who experience larger gaps between their current skills and grade-level benchmarks, teams reconvene to review the existing data and consider ways to better support the student. Students may exhibit academic difficulties for many different reasons. These reasons include instruction that does not align with their language and cultural backgrounds, interrupted formal education, learning a new language while learning new content, and trauma. A disability should be considered only after a thorough examination of contextual factors and achievement data. At this stage, teams (a) define the problem, (b) analyze the problem, (c) set a goal and implement the plan, and (d) evaluate the success of the intervention.¹² Understanding families’ goals and dreams for their child is essential for the team as they carefully plan instruction and interventions.

12 Shores, 2009

Project LEE In-Action Example

When Project LEE partner schools begin working with students and families at Tier 3, they engage in a series of progressively more intensive processes of support. Below are examples of the kinds of questions schools can use to engage and solicit important information from families through the special education referral process. One of the most important aspects of this process is to listen to parents' dreams and aspirations for their child and begin creating plans to help their child realize those dreams.

Collaborative Problem-Solving: Interview Questions for Getting to Know Families Better

We want to know more about what is important to your family and child about their school experience. Can you share with us?

Getting to Know Strengths, Assets, Goals, and Supports

- What do you think of when you think about success for your child at school?
- What are your child's strengths?
- In what ways does your child contribute to the daily household?
- What are your family's educational goals for your child?
- Tell us about your child's education. Did your child receive childcare or early education (before school age)? If so, in which language?
- How does your family celebrate and maintain your culture at home and in your community?
- In what ways do you and your family support your child at home and in your community?
- How can school personnel help support your family or child?

Identifying Family Concerns

- Does your child have any difficulties with communication, learning, or behavior?
- Describe any concerns you have about your child.
- Have any of your other children had similar problems? Other family members?

Exploring Family History

- What is your birth country?
- What is your highest educational level?
- What languages do you speak? Read? Write?
- Were there any difficulties learning to read? Spell?
- What language is primarily spoken to your child in the home?
- When did your child first hear or speak the second (or third) language?
- What language does your family use in the community?
- What reading materials do you have in your home? In what languages?
- What language does your child primarily choose to speak in the home?
- What was the language your child first heard? Spoke?

Thank you for helping us learn more about your child and your family. This information helps us to provide the best educational program and ways to collaboratively support your child.

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Engaging Families of ELs During the Special Education Process

If a disability is suspected, a referral is made. It is beyond the scope of this document to review the many procedural steps of special education referral, evaluation, decision, and placement. Each school has materials that document this process. There are, however, considerations specific to working with ELs and their families. If a student's developmental milestones have not been obtained, this process may best be approached through a parent interview. Many families, regardless of language or culture, feel that such questions are intrusive or personal, so strong relationships with families can help this process. Another reason to speak with families is that educational records can be incomplete, especially if the child has received education in another country. When an EL is the focus of a special education referral, an EL specialist must be part of that decision-making team.

Cultural Perspectives on Disability

Immigrant and refugee families, particularly those from rural areas, often report having little experience with individuals with disabilities.¹³ Consequently, sharing information with families about special education categories and labels defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is critical. Though many nations are now passing disability-related education laws, families have varying levels of experience with special education and related services. Further, educational and technical jargon frequently exacerbate communication barriers when discussing special education issues. Educators should train interpreters on the special education process and concepts.

A second communication concern is that special education and related services are almost exclusively provided in English in many areas of the country. Teams, therefore, should think outside the box for ways to ensure that current programmatic structures do not sever family-child relationships.

A third consideration is that IDEA ensures that the parents of a child with a disability have and understand their protections and entitlements (e.g., participate in planning and decision-making) under the procedural safeguards and “the means by which a copy of a description of the procedural safeguards can be obtained.”¹⁴ These documents are generally found on state or district websites and are often translated in the state's most common languages. However, because these procedural safeguards document legal obligations, it may be beneficial to all families to highlight the major ideas with the families rather than simply share the document.

Parents have the right to be full partners in special education decision-making. Culturally diverse parents and families often perceive their role in the educational process as supporting the teacher—the expert and professional. Over time, helping families to voice their opinions, priorities, and goals will enable them to fully realize the rights and responsibilities afforded them through IDEA. Special education practices can be fraught with confusion for parents from other countries, or with even those with little experience in special education, so these matters must be approached with respect, care, and clear communication.

13 Cummings & Hardin, 2017

14 IDEA, 2004

Community Resources to Support Families

Another way to support families, whether they have students with disabilities or not, is to provide information on community resources. In addition to culturally specific community organizations, there may be parent centers, organizations specific to various disabilities, parent-led groups, and local and national agencies that can support families. Helping families navigate such supports is far more effective than simply handing them lists. All parents, no matter their background, want to learn ways to best support their children at home.

Conclusion

This brief described ways to engage EL families in multidirectional communication across all tiers of support in a culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS. We discussed proactive communication that is asset based and establishes and builds relationships beginning at Tier 1 for all students. Increasingly collaborative ways for families to be included were described from Tier 2 to Tier 3 and through the special education referral process. A key theme is that communication must be a multidirectional experience where families are respected, valued, and provided the support, access, and resources they need to meaningfully participate in their children's educational experience. In this way, we truly involve parents and families as equitable partners across all aspects of their child's educational experience with the common goal of seeing their children thrive. After all, families are their children's first teachers and one of our greatest resources.

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