

Engaging Families in Creating a College-Bound Culture at Your High School

Beating the Odds,ⁱ a recent study of thirteen New York City high schools, identified innovative practices used by high-performing schools to engage families in helping their children graduate on time and go on to college. Even though their 9th graders have high poverty rates and below-average reading and math scores, these “beat the odds” schools created college-bound cultures. The results? Four-year graduation rates and college attendance are above average, and well above other schools serving similar students.

The Challenge of Family Engagement in High School

By ninth grade, most students’ families are less involved at school. Because many parents feel that students want them to “back off” and schools want them to “let go,” parents aren’t sure what they’re supposed to do. But research shows that helping families stay engaged all through high school is critical to students’ staying in school, taking challenging classes, graduating on time, and going to college.ⁱⁱ

The “Beat the Odds” high schools viewed involving families as difficult but critical. Students’ sense of independence, coupled with the stresses affecting their families, can make it challenging to keep parents informed of academic requirements. Although most of the parents had not attended college, school staff understood that they could not create a college-bound culture without gaining parents’ active agreement and collaboration.

What Parents Need to Know

High schools serving students who are the first in their families to attend an academic high school and go to college must keep parents well informed. To support their students, parents need to understand:

- ✓ What high academic standards for high school work look like, including the frequency and quality of homework assignments
- ✓ The courses required for graduation and getting into college
- ✓ Resources available to students who have difficulty with a subject or do poorly on an exam
- ✓ The tests and applications required for college, and how to complete them successfully
- ✓ The range of post-secondary education available, and what is expected of their students
- ✓ The relationship between post-secondary preparation and careers that interest their children

Components of an Effective Program to Engage Families in a College-Bound High School Culture

Feature/Purpose	Key Message & Vision	Examples of Practices
<p>Transition Program- Acquaint students and their families with a college-prep HS, including the school’s high priority of involving parents.</p>	<p><i>This is a college prep HS -- we’ll work with you to make sure your student makes it!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events at feeder schools, followed by tours of the HS, welcome families and stress the HS’s academic vision. • Parents take part in summer bridge program, to prepare students for HS work, explain the school’s programs, and relate academic programs to future careers. • Workshops for families cover: courses needed to graduate and go to college; what high-level academic work looks like; where students can get help when needed; and tests and applications required for college.

<p>Advisory System Each student has adult advisor, who is the family's key contact. The advisor makes sure that the academic messages at home and at school dovetail</p>	<p><i>Every student has an adult in the school he or she can count on!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with family starting in 9th grade draw up students' academic plans, and select the appropriate program. • Summer school, tutoring, after-school programs, and other supports are described to all families. • Regular information is given to families about students' academic programs, how well they are doing, and opportunities to strengthen their skills.
<p>Process to Monitor Progress All families can expect regular, two-way communications, keeping them informed a.s.a.p. of their students' academic successes and difficulties.</p>	<p><i>No student will fall through the cracks!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sequence of coursework from 9th-12th grade is clear and explicit—presented in parent-teacher meetings, parent workshops, assemblies, and other events for parents. • Student work is regularly posted in the halls, and parents are invited to the exhibitions. • Families are invited to end-of-year student presentations, and information on other assessments are sent home to and discussed with parents
<p>College Information The school provides families with the information they need to understand the college application process, from testing to financial aid.</p>	<p><i>We will help all students to apply to college and for financial aid!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College awareness starts beginning of 9th grade • Plan for college done by end of 9th grade • Parents invited to college fairs and special efforts are made to take them along on college visits. • Workshops held for parents to acquaint them with PSATs, SATs, and other exams. • Workshops held on how to fill out college applications and apply for financial aid • Special assistance offered to illegal immigrants and other families who are afraid to make their situations visible.
<p>Strong Parent Collaboration Parent leaders get information out to other families, and bring family concerns back to the school</p>	<p><i>Parent collaboration is essential to supporting student progress!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent organization and leadership represent all families in the school. • Parent leaders sit on college pathways and school leadership teams. • Parent organization does focus groups with families to surface issues and concerns and report back to school leadership.

Beating the Odds College Pathways rubric and tools are available free in PDF at:
<http://annenberginstitute.org/publication/college-pathways-tool-series>

ⁱ Carol Ascher and Cindy McGuire. *Beating the Odds: How Thirteen New York City Schools Bring Low-Performing Ninth-Graders to Timely Graduation and College Enrollment*. New York: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, December 2007. <http://annenberginstitute.org/publication/college-pathways-tool-series>

ⁱⁱ Catsambis, Sophia, Expanding knowledge of parental involvement in secondary education -- effects on high school academic success. Baltimore MD: CRESPAR, Johns Hopkins University, Report #27, 1998; Ho and Willms, Effects of Parental Involvement on Eighth Grade Achievement, *Sociology of Education*, 69(2), 126-141, 1996; Ascher and Maguire, 2007, *op cit*.