

M1-S8: Shifting with Family Partners

CLH	Hey Gina - I'm going to start this podcast with a question for you.
GK	Okay, what's the question?
CLH	As a parent, did you feel your child's school made you feel like a partner in their school experience?
GK	Not really. And I was one of those really avid stay-at-home Moms who joined the committees, and organized events and fundraisers. But my opinion was not asked for about school-related things or even about my child. I felt like I needed to stay in my lane. How about you?
CLH	So I've had experiences on both sides where as a parent I felt that I was valued and included and where I felt pretty intimidated or cut out of the whole parent-teacher thing.
GK	Yea, I think what might be particularly difficult is creating those partnerships in this whole changing school landscape. So we are talking about all different learning environments in this professional development academy and shifting our perspective of family partnerships so they're effective and inclusive across learning environments. It's definitely the thing we want to help with.
CLH	So let's dive into that a little bit. When you say effective and inclusive, you really got me. What do you mean by that?
GK	Well, I'm reminded of an amazing story that came out of the Utica City Schools. It's a newspaper article. The story was about a multigenerational family of 11 that were living together in some pretty tight quarters. The 6 students in the family were sharing their Chromebooks and trying to find a quiet place to do their work.
CLH	I will never complain again.
GK	Me neither. This family is part of a refugee community in Utica. They had to flee their country of origin, which is Myanmar, and the grandparents and parents don't speak English yet. So the oldest sibling, I believe 16 years old, a highschool student, supported all of the younger kids in their school work.
CLH	Wow - that is so impressive. So how did they do during the pandemic?
GK	So here's the thing. The sixteen year old, who was not only the tutor of all of her siblings, but the point of contact between the school and her family, she signed up to become a tutor at the Midtown Utica Community Center's Virtual Tutoring program. That's what she did during the pandemic.

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	I'm going to send you what she said about that.
CLH	Got it. She says "I have many relatives here that are struggling and their kids are struggling with all of the online stuff, so I wanted to sign up." Again, that is very impressive.
GK	Yes, and stories like this really point out social and cultural gaps between home and school that lead to low levels of parent engagement in the traditional formats of parent engagement.
CLK	But that family was super-engaged right?
GK	Yeah totally. In a newspaper article the parents were interviewed in translation, by a translator. They said they didn't have the opportunity to receive an education themselves but they are happy and grateful for their children to receive an education. They are completely behind their children's education.
CLH	Yeah so instead of assuming that parents are disengaged or disinterested in school, we have to find ways to bridge that gap between home and school and that starts with a recognition that engagement can look like a lot of different things and maybe none of those things are baking cookies or going to PTA meetings.
GK	Exactly, and now to this picture of many ways to engage and what engagement looks like, now add pandemic. One of the greatest things we got from the 2020 thing was this glimpse into our students' home lives. Teachers developed more awareness of the cultural assets and the language and social dynamics of the home front and our parent communities in turn got to see what we do and what school language and goals and curriculum are like. And together we shared a common goal of making school happen. We learned a lot about each other as teaching partners, during and after a shift because we're in Module 1 and it's about the shift amongst learning environments.
CLH	Right okay, so you mean what does it mean to partner with families while we're making those shifts and how do we make the shifts together?
GK	Exactly, you've got it and that is right. Are you ready to start with before?
CLH	Yea let's do it.
GK	Okay let's do this in order. We're going to do before a shift between learning environments, during and after. Here's the before. This brings to mind Session 2, which talked about the four priorities that promote resilience for our students, because if there's one thing we've learned, it's that we have to infuse trauma-informed practices into everything we do.

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CLH	<p>Yeah, I have memorized those four priorities by now: predictability, flexibility, connection and empowerment.</p>
GK	<p>You've got it. And those four constants strengthen and support the capacity of students to respond to change or uncertainty, which is certainly what the shift to emergency remote teaching brought us. But why stop there? Why limit the application of these four constants to our students? We can apply them to our parent community too.</p>
CLH	<p>So for predictability I'm thinking what you mean is families need complete predictability in the way teachers communicate with them. And to reach the most family members, we have to make sure our communications can be read easily on a smartphone or a tablet. We need to make sure something like a school website or a class newsletter can be easily accessed on a phone, or else parents aren't going to have the time to go through it.</p>
GK	<p>Yes, and we should invest in one of the numerous translation apps too when we know we are dealing with many speakers of other languages. In the example of the family in the Utica City School District, 17% of its students speak the home language of the family referenced in the story. And you want to invest in making sure the translation was really a part of good communication. We want to give parents one reliable way, in the language that they speak, to establish these two-way communications.</p> <p>Then, the second priority is connection. Parents should feel a connection and they should feel comfortable when they come to our schools. We should be decking out our school entrance and class doors with celebrations of cultural heritages, various careers that are represented in our communities and diverse talents of the students in the schools.</p>
CLH	<p>That actually sounds fun. I love decorating bulletin boards, it might be a reason why I'm a teacher. So now we've got flexibility and that one seems pretty easy to pin down. We're talking about being flexible in our hours of meetings, right?</p>
GK	<p>Yea, that's important. But what we're actually talking about here is that many families don't engage with the school because they have prior experience with their role in a top-down structure. So to undo that experience, we have to actively diversify and amplify the voices that get heard.</p> <p>For some schools it looks like taking the conversations that are important to the parents in our schools to places where people feel comfortable gathering. That takes flexibility on our part, because it could be a community walk or a gathering at a library or a local park or something that doesn't feel like what we have come to think of as a parent meeting in a brick and mortar setting.</p>

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CLH	So finally we have empowerment, and this reminds me of the Parents Bill of Rights. I've seen these before and they are pretty great.
GK	One example we use in our resources for the Explore section of this session is called Walking Together. It's from the New Teachers Project and it highlights what an equitable school culture would feel like from the family side and it makes very explicit the norms for a healthy engaged social dialogue.
CLH	Okay great, so now what about during the shift?
GK	Well once we've moved across learning environments with our students and their families, it's tremendously important to consider our style of communication.
CLH	Yeah so that goes back to two way communication that you mentioned before?
GK	Right, that can mean using multiple communication paths such as social media or local television or even radio call-in programs. It can mean surveying families about what they need and collaborating with parents to establish policies and practices from those identified needs.
CLH	This seems like it's about recentring family and the school community.
GK	It is. It's important that we recognize the huge impact family has on our student lives and their achievements. And then, after the shift, we should take time to assess the impact of those four priorities that we're using and the effectiveness of our communications with families.
CLH	This is also a good time to look at one of the most challenging aspects of pandemic teaching - the disturbing inequity in digital access and resources.
GK	Definitely, and listeners you'll learn more about that in Module 2, which is about Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education.
CLH	Yeah I'm excited to see that. So, what about the long haul? Not before or after a shift, but looking into the future?
GK	What really sums up this new era of family engagement for me is a quote from Ann Henderson who sums up her experience like this: "I've never met a parent who didn't care about their children or value education, but they may not show it in ways that white middle class people would expect. What the research says about the best way to engage parents is deeply connected to being welcoming, responsive, and listening to create true learning partnerships." We'll explore more ways to engage in family partnerships in Module 5 of the Tale Academy.

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CLH	Well that's great so many great modules coming up, thank you Gina.
GK	You're very welcome, see you next time.