

Conducting a Parent Needs Assessment

Whether you are working closely with your school to engage more families or you are working with a group of concerned GEAR UP parents, you should conduct a needs assessment before planning your next steps. A needs assessment is a systematic process of gathering information about the current situations and specific needs of parents, families, the school and staff, of the services and programs currently offered to parents and the activities and programs that might potentially be provided. A needs assessment allows you to:

- Learn more about the needs and interests of parents and families.
- Discover what skills, talents and abilities parents might have and be willing to contribute to GEAR UP activities.
- Determine a baseline from which changes can be monitored over time.
- Begin to garner support for parent involvement activities and programs.
- Make an informed decision about future actions around family involvement.

There are six basic steps to conducting a needs assessment; however, the way your needs assessment will be conducted will vary based on the time, funds, and human resources available to you. Although the steps outlined below seem very formal, keep in mind what you already know about your community. You might pick up a great deal more information about the needs of your parents through informal chats and meetings than through a formal survey process.

1. **Establish a needs assessment team.** Solicit the help of your parent leaders, as well as some members of the school staff (such as the GEAR UP parent liaison, coordinator, director). Be sure to discuss roles and responsibilities of committee members and how you will ensure that you will be able to get input from all parents on what they need or are interested in learning about through your work.
2. **Look at data and information that is already available.** Perhaps you have had conversations with parents already about what they need in terms of information, activities, programs and/or services. Or maybe a survey of parents has already been conducted. Review this data before moving forward – there is no point in asking parents questions they have been asked before.
3. **Determine what other information you need to have before moving forward with your family involvement plans.** Family involvement activities and programs can only be effective if they address the needs of the community they serve. Part of understanding these needs are to learn more about parents' backgrounds, concerns and interests. Understanding these factors will help ensure that activities and services are relevant, responsive and make use of the resources parents and families can bring to your efforts.

Some of the important factors you should try to understand about your parents include:

- Language background of students and their parents.
- Cultural values and practices of different groups.
- Parents' attitudes towards school, teachers and administrators.
- Work schedules of parents.
- Childcare needs.
- Special skills, talents and interests of parents.

Some important concerns and interests you should understand about your parents include their:

- Level of comfort monitoring their child’s academic progress through traditional channels of communication including report cards and parent-teacher conferences.
 - Ability and willingness to become involved in school-based decision making.
 - Ability and willingness to provide academic assistance to their children at home or at school.
 - Interest in the school as a possible venue for enhancing their own educational pursuit.
4. **Determine the best methods for collecting data.** Some methods for collecting data include surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviewing. The method you choose will be determined by the number of people you are intending to reach, as well as their level of comfort responding to a written survey and/or sharing their views in a group. Think carefully about your parent population before deciding on the best way to collect data.
 5. **Collect and analyze the data.** This is the time to implement your survey, conduct your focus groups and speak with local GEAR UP parents. Be sure to collect information from GEAR UP and school staff if possible; they will have tremendous insight into how they are already working to involve parents or plan to involve parents in the future.

When analyzing data, look for trends in the responses you have received. Summarize and categorize the responses to help determine the priorities of your parents and community. Do they want to learn more about the school system and how it operates? Are parents concerned that their children are not on a “college track”? Perhaps families perceive that the contributions they are making to their child’s education at home are not valued or appreciated by the school system. These trends and responses will help you and your parent leaders decide what steps to take next. Discuss your findings with the team you have gathered and the other parent leaders in your community.

6. **Determine your next steps.** Based on your analysis of the data collected, begin to determine how to move forward. Consider the responses you received during the data collection process in the context of what you know about what is already going on in the school and the community around family involvement. The strategies and activities you consider implementing need to respond to the information you have collected and the needs you now understand.

Adapted from D. Ellis and K. Hughes, *Partnerships by Design: Cultivating Effective and Meaningful School-Family-Community Partnerships* by D. Ellis and K. Hughes (Portland: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002).