

Schools are diverse communities, and educators can use the strengths families possess to support student achievement. It is important to understand and value the backgrounds and experiences of parents. This will help school staff identify strategies for developing and sustaining strong partnerships to help all children succeed in school.

## BRIDGING FAMILIES' CULTURE AND SCHOOLS

The Regional Education Laboratory for the Pacific (REL Pacific) developed a tool kit that focuses on practices and tools that provide an integrated approach for engaging families and the community with the schools. The tool kit consists of four parts. Below is the introduction from “Part 2: Building a Cultural Bridge,” which focuses on using the strengths of families to actively engage them in student learning.

- **It is critical to identify family strengths in order to engage with families as partners in their children’s education.**  
To identify and make use of family strengths, educators may need to shift from a deficit model—focusing on what families aren’t doing— to a strengths-based model that acknowledges that families want to help their students succeed (Moore, 2011). For example, in the Chuukese population it is not unusual for the extended family or another interested community member to come to school functions when a child’s parent is not available. Rather than seeing this as a case in which parents do not care about their child’s education, educators can see the involvement of others as a reflection of a cultural strength—the community is interdependent and focused on group success. If the parent isn’t available, another member of the community steps in to support the student. Of course, educators must avoid the pitfall of thinking that all family characteristics in a culture can be generalized. Instead, they must get to know each family better.
- **Collaborating with families based on strengths develops strong relationships between home, school, and community.**  
Educators can help families build on their strengths by asking them how they want to be involved and how the school and community can create opportunities for that involvement. When educators recognize parents’ strengths, they are more likely to reach out to parents as true partners in their children’s education (e.g., work together with them to set goals for their children’s education, help them understand how to support their children’s learning at home, acknowledge the importance of the home language). To make use of family strengths, the school and community need to offer diverse and culturally-appropriate approaches to engaging families. They need to provide opportunities for parents to be viewed as individuals, recognizing the diversity that occurs within and between cultural groups.
- **Partnering with communities to promote family engagement helps schools and families support student learning.**  
Family, school, and community have “overlapping spheres of influence” and if the three spheres, or areas of influence, interact and communicate with each other, it is more likely that students will receive common messages about student success (Epstein, 2010). By partnering with communities (e.g., businesses, faith-based organizations, community centers), families and schools can maximize their efforts to support student success (Epstein et al., 2002). Research shows that all students can benefit when all stakeholders work together.