

Leader Strategies

I Family Engagement in Literacy

RECOMMENDATION 1

Build trusting, inclusive partnerships with families.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Engage families in data conversations and MTSS-R decision-making.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Equip families to support literacy at home.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Strengthen literacy partnerships with strategic communication systems.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Climate	 Strong

RECOMMENDATION 1

Build trusting, inclusive partnerships with families.

Principals should lead efforts to build trusting and inclusive partnerships with families to support student literacy success. This involves creating schoolwide systems that recognize families as essential partners and value their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

Building these partnerships includes four interconnected strategies. First, principals facilitate staff reflection on beliefs and assumptions about families to strengthen respect and openness in family interactions. Second, leaders support building bridges between school and family cultures by integrating family traditions, languages, and experiences into reading instruction and activities. Third, principals establish effective two-way communication systems that ensure families receive clear, actionable information and have opportunities to share their insights and goals. Finally, principals ensure family conferences focus on student strengths, include family perspectives, and result in shared reading goals and actionable strategies. Together, these strategies foster a school culture where families feel valued and included, and where literacy learning is strengthened through collaborative support.

Strategies

1. Facilitate staff reflection on beliefs and assumptions about families.

Principals can build stronger family partnerships by helping staff reflect on their current beliefs and assumptions about families. Educators' beliefs shape how they interact with families and communicate about learning. Leaders can provide structured, practical opportunities for staff to consider questions such as: What do I believe about families' roles in their child's reading development? How do I communicate my expectations for family support in literacy? Reflection can occur in professional learning communities, coaching sessions, or staff meetings, and might include written prompts, paired discussions, or guided group conversations.

To implement this strategy, principals can integrate reflection into existing staff development routines. For example, after reviewing student reading progress data, teachers might reflect on how their communication with families encourages or limits family involvement in reading practice at home. Principals can model by sharing their own reflections on family partnerships and encouraging teachers to set small, practical goals to strengthen communication and trust with families. These reflections can build a shared commitment to partnering with families to improve student reading outcomes.

This approach should be revisited throughout the year to ensure reflection leads to action. Principals can connect these reflections to improvements in family engagement practices, such as increased use of family input in classroom decisions or greater attendance at reading events. A school culture that encourages honest reflection creates stronger, more respectful relationships with families.

Example

At Prairie Ridge Elementary, Principal Allen noticed low family attendance at reading nights. During a staff meeting, he asked teachers to reflect on their assumptions about why families did not attend. Teachers shared ideas such as “Families don’t prioritize reading events,” which opened discussion about other possible reasons like work schedules or transportation. Teachers then identified ways to learn more about families’ needs, such as asking families during pickup about the best times for events. One teacher called a family to ask about home reading routines and learned the child often read aloud in Spanish to grandparents. The teacher began incorporating Spanish books in class, and the family later attended a reading night, feeling more connected to the school community.

2. Build bridges between school and family cultures.

Building bridges between school and family cultures means finding ways to connect what students learn at home with what they learn at school. Research shows that when schools include family knowledge, language, and traditions in learning, students are more engaged and motivated. Principals can encourage teachers to include books that reflect students’ backgrounds, invite family members to share stories or traditions during reading time, and design activities that ask students to learn about their families’ experiences with reading.

To implement this strategy, principals can begin by asking teachers to review classroom book collections for representation of students’ backgrounds. Leaders might organize reading nights where families can share favorite books or stories from home. Teachers can design reading assignments that encourage students to interview family members about recipes, songs, or important family stories, helping students build vocabulary and narrative skills while learning from their families.

Principals can also involve families in decisions about reading programs and events, such as inviting families to help plan reading celebrations or to suggest books for the library. These practices show students and families that their experiences matter and build trust between home and school.

Example

At Hawthorne Elementary, Principal Reed noticed students in the Somali bilingual program were not engaged during read-alouds. She met with Somali families, who shared that storytelling often included songs and audience responses. Principal Reed purchased bilingual Somali-English books and invited families to read them in class. Teachers learned to use call-and-response reading to mirror storytelling traditions at home. The school hosted a “Family Storytelling Night” where families shared traditional stories. Students were excited to hear their cultures represented, and teachers saw improvements in reading participation.

3. Establish two-way communication systems.

Communication between schools and families should be two-way, clear, and respectful. Effective communication ensures families understand their child’s reading progress and feel confident sharing their insights or concerns. Principals can build systems where teachers communicate regularly with families using family-friendly language and multiple formats, such as phone calls, translated newsletters, text messages, or home-school journals.

To implement this strategy, principals can train teachers on using clear, positive language when sharing reading updates. Leaders might create templates for reading progress notes that include what the child is doing well and one way to support reading at home. Principals can also ensure there are systems and structures in place to enable families to share information with teachers, such as short surveys about home reading habits or open-ended questions during family-teacher conferences.

One way to strengthen two-way communication is to send pre-conference surveys asking families about their reading goals for their child and any questions they have. During conferences, teachers can begin by discussing these goals, showing families their perspectives are valued and important to reading success.

Example

At Lincoln Heights Elementary, Principal Nguyen noticed Spanish-speaking families were not responding to reading updates sent via email. He worked with a bilingual family liaison to set up text message updates in Spanish with reading tips and goals. Teachers also sent home surveys asking families what their child enjoyed reading. Conferences were restructured to start with family goals and ended with teachers sharing ways to support those goals at home. Families reported feeling more informed and respected, and teachers noticed families were more engaged in supporting reading.

4. Conduct strength-based family conferences.

Family conferences are a key opportunity to build strong partnerships that support reading. Strength-based conferences begin by focusing on what the child does well and what families notice about their reading progress. This builds family confidence and helps teachers learn about students' interests and reading experiences at home. Principals can support teachers in using conferences to celebrate successes, share clear data in family-friendly language, and develop reading goals together.

To implement this strategy, principals can provide teachers with conference templates that begin with questions like, "What books does your child enjoy at home?" or "What improvements have you noticed in their reading this year?" Teachers can then share reading data and discuss goals, followed by specific, practical ways families can support reading at home. Leaders should ensure conferences are accessible by offering interpreters, flexible times, and a welcoming environment.

When teachers use a strengths-based approach, families feel respected and motivated to support their child's reading. Conferences become a partnership meeting rather than an evaluation, building trust and shared responsibility for literacy growth.

Sample Conference Template

Welcome and Purpose

"Thank you for meeting with me today. I'm excited to talk about how [child's name] is growing as a reader and to hear about your observations at home."

Learning About Your Child at Home

Ask families:

- What books does your child enjoy reading at home?
- When does your child like to read the most (e.g., bedtime, after school)?
- What improvements have you noticed in their reading this year?
- What do you think helps them feel confident as a reader?

Sharing Strengths

Share at least one reading strength you observe:

"One strength I notice in their reading is _____."

(For example: "They can retell stories with detail," or "They know many sight words quickly.")

Discussing Growth Areas

Share one or two areas for growth using family-friendly language:

"One area we're working on is _____."

(For example: "Sounding out longer words smoothly," or "Reading with expression.")

At-Home Strategies

Provide one or two practical, specific strategies:

“At home, you can support this by _____.”

(For example: “Practicing reading short chapter books together and talking about what happened,” or “Playing word games with new vocabulary words.”)

Family Input on Support

Invite family ideas:

- What has helped your child with reading at home?
- Do you have any suggestions for how we can support their reading together?

Closing and Encouragement

“Thank you for sharing your observations. I appreciate all you do at home to support reading. Working together makes a big difference.”

Implementation Tips for Principals

- Include this template in teachers’ conference preparation materials.
 - Encourage teachers to adjust questions based on family preferences and student goals.
 - Model strength-based conferences during staff meetings or professional learning sessions.
 - Translate templates into families’ home languages to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness.
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Example

At Willow Creek Elementary, Principal Brown introduced new conference practices where teachers began by asking families about their child’s reading interests and strengths. One teacher learned that a student loved reading recipes with her grandmother. The teacher integrated reading recipes into guided reading groups and sent home simple recipes for practice. At the next conference, the family shared how proud the child felt reading to help cook dinner. Teachers reported that families left conferences feeling valued and confident in supporting reading at home.

Potential Roadblocks



Families may not attend literacy events or conferences.

Suggested Approach. Families often face barriers such as work schedules, transportation, or uncertainty about what events will entail, which can reduce attendance. Principals can address this by surveying families to learn preferred times and formats for events and by providing options such as virtual meetings or flexible scheduling. Leaders might also reduce barriers by offering childcare, transportation assistance, or light meals when possible. In addition, principals can build trust and relationships before events by encouraging teachers to reach out with personal phone calls or informal conversations at dismissal to invite families, explain the purpose of the event, and share how their participation benefits their child's reading success.



Staff may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to engage in conversations about family culture and home practices.

Suggested Approach. Some teachers may be uncertain about how to start conversations with families about home literacy practices or how to integrate family culture into classroom learning. Principals can support staff by providing professional learning sessions that include examples of successful family engagement strategies, modeling of conversations, and reflection opportunities to build confidence. Leaders might share practical tools such as conversation starters, reflection questions, and inclusive booklists to help teachers feel prepared. Additionally, principals can encourage peer sharing at staff meetings, where teachers describe positive experiences engaging families, to normalize and build collective skills in creating welcoming, inclusive family partnerships.



Language barriers may limit effective two-way communication with some families.

Suggested Approach. When families speak languages other than English, they may struggle to understand school communications or feel unable to fully express their insights about their child's reading. Principals can address this by ensuring that interpreters are available for conferences, phone calls, and events so families can participate comfortably. Leaders can also translate written communications such as newsletters, progress updates, and event flyers into languages spoken by families. To further support understanding, principals might encourage teachers to use visuals, simplified language, and clear formats in messages sent home, ensuring all families can access important reading information and feel confident engaging in communication.



Families may feel unsure about how to share their insights or expertise in school settings.

Suggested Approach. Families sometimes feel that schools are not interested in their ideas or that they do not know how to contribute meaningfully to their child's learning at school. Principals can help by creating clear and specific roles for families during events and conferences, such as reading a story, sharing a cultural tradition related to literacy, or suggesting books for the library. Leaders can also encourage teachers to personally invite families to participate and explain how their involvement supports students. Highlighting and celebrating family contributions in newsletters, announcements, and events builds families' confidence and sense of belonging, encouraging ongoing engagement and partnership in literacy.

Additional Resources

Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2019). *Powerful partnerships: A teacher's guide to engaging families for student success*. Scholastic.

Although teacher-focused, this guide provides clear frameworks and conversation strategies principals can adapt for staff professional learning on building trust and respectful family partnerships.

Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. The New Press.

Offers comprehensive, practical approaches for schools to strengthen family engagement practices, including building culturally responsive partnerships.

Ohio Department of Education. (n.d.). *Ohio statewide family engagement center resources*. <https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/resources/>

Ohio-specific tools and templates for engaging families in learning.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Climate	 Strong

RECOMMENDATION 2

Engage families in data conversations and MTSS-R decision-making.

Principals should lead efforts to engage families as active partners in understanding and using literacy data to support their child’s literacy success. This involves creating schoolwide systems that ensure families receive clear, meaningful information about literacy assessments and progress, and know how to support learning at home. Engaging families in data conversations includes four strategies: communicating data clearly and accessibly; building staff capacity to share data with families in strengths-based, actionable ways; involving families in decision-making within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Reading (MTSS-R); and creating structures for families to provide input on literacy supports and interventions. When families understand and use literacy data alongside educators, they can reinforce instruction at home and advocate for their child’s needs, strengthening schoolwide literacy improvement.

Strategies

1. Communicate reading data clearly and accessibly to families.

Principals play a key role in ensuring that literacy data is communicated to families in ways that are clear, family-friendly, and meaningful. Many families find assessment data confusing or overwhelming when it is presented with technical language or without explanations of what scores mean for their child’s progress. School leaders can support teachers in using plain language to explain screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring data, focusing on what the data says about the child’s literacy strengths and areas for growth.

To implement this strategy, principals can develop schoolwide templates for sending literacy assessment results home, including definitions of terms, color-coded visuals to indicate proficiency levels, and short descriptions of what each area assessed represents (e.g., phonemic awareness, decoding, comprehension). Leaders can review these templates with teachers to ensure consistency across classrooms. Additionally, principals can train teachers to share data with families in ways that connect results to at-home reading activities, reinforcing that data is used to support student growth, not label performance.

Principals should also consider how data is shared with families who speak languages other than English. This may involve working with bilingual liaisons or translation services to ensure families receive assessment explanations in their preferred language. Leaders can encourage teachers to prepare simple talking points when discussing data at conferences so they can focus on actionable strategies rather than technical descriptions.

Sample Schoolwide Reading Progress Template

Area Assessed	What It Means	Your Child's Progress	How You Can Help at Home
Phonemic Awareness	Hearing and working with sounds in words (for example, identifying the sounds /c/ /a/ /t/ in "cat")	⦿ <i>Approaching grade level expectations</i>	Play rhyming games together, or clap out the sounds you hear in words when reading or talking.
Decoding	Reading words by sounding out letters and chunks	⦿ <i>Meeting grade level expectations</i>	Read simple books together. Practice sounding out new words and noticing word patterns like -at or -ing.
Fluency	Reading smoothly, accurately, and with expression	⦿ <i>Needs extra practice</i>	Read aloud together every day. Reread favorite books to build speed and confidence.
Comprehension	Understanding and talking about what was read	⦿ <i>Meeting grade level expectations</i>	After reading, ask your child to retell the story in their own words or explain what they learned.

Example

At Lakeside Elementary, Principal Carter noticed that families often left literacy conferences with data reports but seemed unsure how to interpret them. She worked with the literacy specialist to develop a one-page literacy data summary with color-coded bars showing whether students were meeting grade-level benchmarks. Each section included a short explanation, such as "This area measures how quickly and accurately your child reads grade-level words." The template also included a "How you can help at home" section with one or two specific activities, like practicing sight words or rereading familiar books for fluency. Teachers practiced using these summaries in professional learning sessions. During conferences, they walked families through each section, pausing for questions and affirming the child's strengths. Families reported feeling clearer about their child's progress and more confident in supporting reading at home.

2. Build staff capacity to share data with families in strengths-based, actionable ways.

Teachers often feel unprepared to share assessment data with families in ways that are understandable, encouraging, and actionable. Principals can address this by integrating data conversation training into staff professional development. This includes modeling how to discuss assessment results by highlighting student strengths, explaining areas for growth without jargon, and suggesting practical next steps families can use at home.

To implement this strategy, principals can organize role-playing sessions during staff meetings where teachers practice discussing literacy data with a “family partner,” using schoolwide templates to guide conversations. Leaders should emphasize using an asset-based lens, starting each conversation with what the student is doing well before describing areas that need support. Teachers can then provide one or two specific strategies families can implement, such as practicing blending words with specific consonant clusters or asking questions about stories to build comprehension.

Principals can also provide teachers with sentence stems or prompts to support data conversations. For example: “One strength I notice in your child’s reading is...,” “One area we are working on is...,” and “You can help at home by...”. By making these tools readily available, principals ensure that teachers feel confident engaging families in meaningful conversations about literacy progress.

Sample Role-Play Protocol

Step 1. Preparation

- **Pair teachers:** One as the teacher, one as the family partner.
- **Provide each pair with:**
 - The Reading Progress Summary Template (from Strategy 1).
 - A student data scenario, such as:
 - *Example Scenario:* Student A is approaching grade level in phonemic awareness and decoding; meeting grade level in fluency and comprehension.

Step 2. Conduct the Role-Play (5–7 minutes)

Teacher practices the following conversation steps:

- a. Warm greeting and purpose statement
“Thank you for meeting today. I want to share how [child’s name] is growing as a reader and ways we can support them together.”
- b. Start with student strengths
“One strength I notice is their comprehension. They understand and can retell stories very well.”
- c. Describe growth areas using family-friendly language
“One area we’re working on is decoding, which means sounding out words smoothly.”
- d. Provide one actionable at-home strategy
“At home, practicing reading simple word lists or sounding out words in books together can help.”
- e. Invite family input
“What do you notice about reading at home? Are there books that [child’s name] really enjoys reading with you?”

Step 3. Feedback and Reflection (3–5 minutes)

Family partner shares feedback:

- What felt clear and encouraging?
- What was confusing or could be said more simply?
- How did the conversation feel overall?

Switch roles and repeat with a new student data scenario.

Step 4. Whole-Group Debrief

Facilitate reflection with questions such as:

- “What sentence stems or prompts helped you communicate clearly?”
- “How can we ensure families leave data conversations with one practical strategy to try at home?”

Sentence Stems for Data Conversations

Provide these to teachers for practice and conference use:

- “One reading strength I notice is...”
- “An area we’re working on is...”
- “This means your child is learning to...”
- “You can help at home by...”
- “What do you notice about their reading at home?”

Implementation Tips for Principals

- Integrate this protocol into staff meetings before conference weeks or data-sharing events.
- Use real, de-identified student data to build authentic practice scenarios.
- Print or digitally share sentence stems and data templates for teacher reference during conferences.

Example

At Riverbend Elementary, Principal Thomas noticed that teachers often handed families data reports without much explanation. During a staff meeting, he facilitated a training where teachers practiced data conversations using a student scenario. Teachers first identified the student's reading strengths, such as accuracy with grade-level words, then discussed growth areas, like reading fluency. They practiced sharing simple at-home strategies, such as reading aloud together daily and timing reading for one minute to build fluency speed. After the training, teachers reported feeling more prepared for conferences. Families later shared that they appreciated knowing what their child was doing well and left meetings with clear, doable ideas to support reading at home.

3. Involve families in MTSS-R decisions about their child's reading supports.

In an MTSS-R system, families should be included as partners in planning and monitoring the reading interventions provided to their child. Often, families are told about interventions after decisions have been made, rather than being included in conversations about what supports might be most effective. Principals can lead by ensuring that teachers and intervention teams involve families early in the process, explaining the purpose of tiered supports, and gathering family insights about the child's reading behaviors at home.

To implement this strategy, principals can establish protocols requiring teachers to contact families before a student begins an intervention, explaining why the support is needed, what it will involve, and how progress will be monitored. Teachers can ask families about reading habits at home, strategies that have worked, and any concerns they have. Principals might provide teachers with MTSS-R family communication templates or checklists to ensure consistency.

Leaders can also invite families to intervention meetings when appropriate or provide summaries of decisions and next steps, asking for family input before finalizing intervention plans. By creating a culture where families are seen as knowledgeable about their child's learning, principals strengthen intervention effectiveness and build trust in MTSS-R processes.

Example

At Maple Grove Elementary, Principal Wilson noticed that families were sometimes surprised to learn their child was receiving reading interventions. She worked with the intervention team to create a family communication protocol: before a student began Tier 2 reading support, teachers called families to explain the intervention purpose and goals, and asked questions such as, "When you read at home, what do you notice your child does well or struggles with?" During intervention cycles, teachers sent home progress updates with a short description of activities families could practice at home, like segmenting sounds or reading word family lists. Families felt included in decisions and reported greater confidence in supporting intervention goals.

4. Create structures for families to provide input on literacy supports and interventions.

Families bring valuable insights about their child’s learning that can inform schoolwide literacy supports and interventions. However, schools often lack structured ways to gather family input beyond annual surveys. Principals can address this by establishing regular opportunities for families to share observations about their child’s reading progress, preferences, and needs, both individually and collectively.

To implement this strategy, principals might create short reading progress input forms for families to complete before conferences or intervention meetings, asking questions such as, “What books is your child enjoying at home?” and “What reading skills would you like your child to strengthen this month?” Leaders can also organize family listening sessions or literacy advisory groups where families share feedback on intervention programs, reading materials, or schoolwide reading events.

Additionally, principals can ensure that family input is reflected in instructional planning by encouraging teachers to include family insights when designing reading supports. This collaborative approach builds family trust, improves reading interventions, and creates a school culture where families feel their voices are valued and impactful.

Example

At Heritage Elementary, Principal Ellis created a Family Literacy Advisory Council with representatives from each grade level. The council met quarterly to discuss reading instruction priorities and family suggestions for at-home supports. One parent shared that many families wanted tips on supporting phonics practice at home. Teachers responded by creating simple phonics practice cards for each grade level, which were sent home with reading folders. Families also completed short reading feedback forms before conferences, and teachers used the information to tailor recommendations and build stronger reading partnerships.

Potential Roadblocks



Families may feel overwhelmed by reading data reports.

Suggested Approach. Families often find data reports confusing when they include unfamiliar terms or lack explanations. Principals can address this by creating family-friendly templates that define assessment areas, use visuals, and connect results to practical home strategies. Teachers can practice explaining data in plain language and pausing for family questions to ensure understanding.



Teachers may feel unprepared to discuss data with families.

Suggested Approach. Teachers may lack confidence in communicating data clearly and positively. Principals can provide training that models data conversations, offers sentence stems, and includes role-playing opportunities to build skill and confidence. Leaders can also create data conversation guides to support consistent, strengths-based communication across classrooms.



Families may not understand the purpose of reading interventions.

Suggested Approach. When families are not included early in intervention decisions, they may feel confused or concerned. Principals can ensure teachers explain the purpose, goals, and structure of interventions before they begin and invite families to share what works at home. This builds trust and reinforces interventions with consistent support across school and home.



Schools may lack systems for gathering family input on reading supports.

Suggested Approach. Without structured processes, family insights may be overlooked. Principals can implement reading feedback forms, listening sessions, or advisory councils to gather family perspectives regularly. Ensuring teachers use this input in planning builds family trust and improves reading support effectiveness.

Additional Resources

Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making. WWC Practice Guide. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC/PracticeGuide/12>

Strategies for effective data use cycles and family communication about student learning.

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center Resources. Ohio Department of Education. <https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/resources/>

Tools and templates for engaging families in reading data and interventions.

MTSS in Ohio: A Tiered Framework of Supports. Ohio Department of Education. <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/MTSS>

Guidance for implementing MTSS with family partnership considerations.

Engaging Families in Education Data Conversations. Data Quality Campaign. <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/engaging-families/>

Practical tips for communicating data to families clearly and meaningfully.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Climate	 Strong

RECOMMENDATION 3

Equip families to support literacy at home.

Principals should lead efforts to equip families with the knowledge, skills, and tools to support their child’s reading development at home. Research shows that when families engage in simple, targeted literacy activities, students build foundational reading skills, improve fluency and comprehension, and develop greater motivation to read. Equipping families includes four interconnected strategies: sharing practical, evidence-based reading activities aligned to classroom instruction; modeling and coaching families to implement activities effectively; providing materials to make reading practice accessible; and creating systems that encourage and celebrate family literacy engagement. Together, these strategies build families’ confidence and create a consistent bridge between home and school to accelerate reading growth.

Strategies

1. Share practical, evidence-based reading activities that align with classroom instruction.

Families benefit from specific, easy-to-use reading activities that connect directly to what their child is learning in school. General tips like “read with your child” are helpful but often lack the specificity needed to build targeted skills. Principals can support teachers by sharing evidence-based activities grounded in foundational reading skills, such as phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

For example, activities could include playing syllable clapping games to build phonological awareness, sorting word cards with consonant blends to strengthen decoding, reading aloud and asking WH- questions to build comprehension, or practicing high-frequency word flashcards to build automaticity. The REL K–3 Teacher’s Guides recommend framing each activity with: What the activity is, why it matters, and how to do it at home. Teachers can embed these activities into weekly newsletters, reading folders, or online learning platforms so families can integrate them easily into daily routines.

Implementation should include aligning family activities to the current scope and sequence of reading instruction. For example, if first-grade students are learning short vowel sounds, teachers can send home a “Short Vowel Word Hunt” activity where children find words with short vowels in books or environmental print. If second graders are learning r-controlled vowels, activities could include sorting words with “ar,” “or,” and “er.”

Principals can support this work by reviewing grade-level family activity menus during team meetings and ensuring consistency and alignment across classrooms. Additionally, leaders should encourage teachers to explain how each suggested activity reinforces classroom instruction. This helps families understand their role in supporting learning and ensures that at-home practice aligns with instructional goals, rather than introducing unrelated strategies.

Example

At Evergreen Elementary, Principal Howard worked with grade-level teams to create “First Grade Family Reading Menus” for each reading unit. For a unit on vowel teams, the menu included activities such as a vowel team word sort using sticky notes and reading short vowel team books aloud together. Teachers sent home the menus with simple explanations like, “Sorting words by vowel teams helps your child notice patterns when reading.” During conferences, teachers reviewed the menu with families, demonstrated an activity, and encouraged families to choose at least two activities to try that week. Families reported feeling more confident knowing exactly how to help at home.

2. Model and coach families on implementing reading activities effectively.

Many families appreciate receiving reading activities but feel unsure about how to implement them correctly or wonder if they are “doing it right.” Research summarized in the REL K–3 Teacher’s Guides shows that modeling and coaching build family confidence, increase fidelity of implementation, and improve reading outcomes. Principals can create systems where teachers demonstrate how to use activities with children, explain why they matter, and coach families to practice them correctly.

Implementation can occur during family literacy nights, family-teacher conferences, classroom events, or through videos sent home. For example, during a literacy night, teachers might demonstrate how to use Elkonin sound boxes to build phonemic awareness by pushing counters for each sound in a word. Families then practice with their child while teachers circulate to provide feedback. During conferences, teachers can demonstrate reading strategies, such as prompting students to decode unknown words using beginning sounds and context clues. Short videos filmed by teachers or reading specialists can also model these activities and be shared via text or school platforms, allowing families to revisit demonstrations anytime.

Principals can support this strategy by embedding modeling into existing family events, ensuring every reading night includes demonstrations and family practice time. Leaders can also schedule video recording sessions during professional learning, where teachers record short modeling clips for high-frequency reading activities aligned to grade-level goals.

Example

At Maplewood Elementary, Principal Owens organized monthly “Reading Together Nights.” Each event focused on a reading skill aligned to current instruction. In November, the focus was blending sounds to read words. Teachers demonstrated blending using magnetic letters, then families practiced with their children using letter cards provided by the school. Teachers walked around offering coaching and praise. Families left saying they felt confident practicing blending at home and appreciated seeing exactly how to support reading development.

3. Provide materials that make at-home reading practice accessible.

Families are more likely to engage in at-home reading activities when schools provide necessary materials, especially for families who may not have books or literacy tools readily available. Many families (particularly those experiencing economic hardship) lack decodable texts, leveled readers, or tools such as word cards. Principals can ensure all families can support at-home reading practice by organizing systems to distribute take-home literacy kits or integrate book lending programs into classrooms.

Implementation might include creating reading folders sent home weekly with leveled books matched to the child’s reading level, decodable readers aligned to phonics instruction, and bookmarks with comprehension questions. Literacy kits can include flashcards for high-frequency words, magnetic letters for blending practice, and simple games like sight word bingo. Schools can partner with libraries, local businesses, or community organizations to acquire donated books and materials if budgets are limited.

Additionally, principals should ensure materials reflect student cultures and languages where possible. Including bilingual books, culturally relevant stories, and vocabulary cards in students’ home languages affirms family assets and encourages reading practice across languages, which research shows builds overall language and literacy development.

Example

At Pine Grove Elementary, Principal Washington launched “Literacy Backpacks” for each grade level. Kindergarten bags included decodable readers with CVC words, magnetic letters for word building, and a reading strategy bookmark with questions like “What happened first?” First grade bags included vowel team flashcards, a fiction and nonfiction book, and a word family game. Teachers previewed the backpacks each Monday, modeling activities for students to do with their families at home. Families returned backpacks each Friday, and students shared which activity they enjoyed most. Teachers observed improved reading skills and greater family involvement in learning.

4. Create systems to encourage and recognize family literacy engagement.

Recognition and encouragement build motivation for families to engage in reading activities consistently. Principals can establish systems that celebrate and reinforce family involvement, creating a school culture where literacy partnership is valued and visible. Research shows that recognition increases family confidence and signals that their efforts matter for student success.

Implementation options include classroom reading logs where students track books read at home with family signatures, home reading challenges with certificates or small prizes, or “Family Reading Spotlights” in newsletters highlighting a family’s favorite reading routine. Principals might host quarterly reading celebrations where families are invited to share a book they enjoyed reading together. Teachers can write positive notes home recognizing specific family support, such as “Thank you for practicing vowel teams with Jayden this week. He read his words confidently today!”

Recognition systems should be designed to be inclusive rather than competitive. Emphasizing participation and effort over volume of books read ensures all families feel welcome and celebrated, regardless of their starting point.

Example

At Harmony Elementary, Principal Lee initiated a “Families Reading Together” program. Each classroom had a reading tree on their bulletin board where students added a leaf for each book read at home with family. Teachers highlighted student and family reading efforts in newsletters, and each month, Principal Lee invited families to a “Reading Recognition Breakfast,” where students shared favorite books read with their families and received a new book to take home. Families expressed pride in being recognized, and teachers noticed greater excitement and accountability for reading at home.

Potential Roadblocks



Families may feel unsure how to implement reading activities correctly.

Suggested Approach. Principals can ensure teachers model activities during family events, conferences, or in videos sent home. Teachers can invite families to practice during events, providing encouragement and feedback to build confidence in using the activities independently.



Some families may not have materials needed for suggested reading activities.

Suggested Approach. Principals can organize take-home literacy kits with books, word cards, and tools aligned to instruction. Partnering with libraries or local organizations can increase availability of resources for all families.



Teachers may feel they lack time to create family reading activities.

Suggested Approach. Principals can facilitate grade-level teams creating shared family literacy menus aligned to instructional units, reducing individual preparation time while ensuring consistent home-school connections.

Additional Resources

Parent Power: Build the Bridge to Success. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513862.pdf>

Practical tips for families to support learning at home.

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center Resources. Ohio Department of Education.

<https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/resources/>

Tools and templates for family literacy partnership.

A Kindergarten Teacher's Guide to Supporting Family Involvement in Foundational Reading Skills. REL Southeast. <https://ies.ed.gov/rel-southeast/2025/01/kindergarten-teachers-guide-supporting-family-involvement-foundational-reading-skills-0>

Practical family reading activities by grade level.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Climate	 Strong

RECOMMENDATION 4

Strengthen literacy partnerships with strategic communication systems.

Principals should lead the development of communication systems that build strong, sustained partnerships with families to support student literacy success. Effective communication ensures families know what and how their child is learning, understand reading data, and feel confident using strategies at home. This recommendation includes four strategies: developing a clear, schoolwide literacy communication plan; using multiple accessible formats to reach all families; aligning reading messages and tips across classrooms; and gathering and acting on family feedback to improve communication. Together, these practices build trust and create an environment where families feel informed, included, and empowered as partners in literacy learning.

Strategies

1. Develop a schoolwide communication plan for literacy.

Principals can strengthen family engagement in literacy by facilitating a team to develop a schoolwide literacy communication plan. Without a plan, communication varies by teacher and may lack alignment to school goals, creating confusion for families. A clear plan outlines what reading information will be shared, how often, by whom, and in which formats, ensuring consistency and clarity.

To implement this strategy, principals can form a literacy communication team including teachers, reading specialists, and family representatives. The team can identify key literacy messages to share each month, such as upcoming reading units, reading goals, at-home practice suggestions, and assessment timelines. For example, the plan may include:

- **Weekly classroom updates** summarizing focus reading skills and a related at-home tip.
- **Monthly school newsletters** highlighting grade-level reading goals, student book recommendations, and upcoming literacy events.
- **Quarterly data summaries** explaining assessment results in plain language with actionable at-home strategies.

Implementation also includes setting expectations for teachers on how to communicate reading data, strategies, and encouragement to families. Principals can embed these expectations into staff meetings, professional learning, and evaluation systems to ensure consistency and follow-through.

Principals should also ensure the plan aligns with the school improvement plan and literacy instructional framework. Reviewing communication expectations during staff meetings builds buy-in and clarity for teachers.

Sample Schoolwide Literacy Communications Plan

Plan Component	Component Purpose	Examples
Communication goals	Establish literacy communication priorities for school year	• Increase family understanding of grade-level reading expectations and at-home strategies to support them
Key messages	Essential literacy messages and themes	• Current reading focus skills (e.g., vowel teams, summarizing stories) • At-home practice tips linked to classroom instruction • Reading assessment dates and how results will be shared • Available reading support resources (e.g., literacy nights, online videos)
Audiences	Target audiences for communication and outreach	• All families, families of students receiving reading intervention, bilingual families
Communication methods	Formats, tools, and communication vehicles	• Weekly: Classroom newsletters, reading folders • Monthly: School literacy newsletters (print, email, website) • Weekly: Text message reading tips (in English and Spanish) • Quarterly: Family-friendly data reports with at-home strategy suggestions
Roles & responsibilities	Determine who is responsible for creating and sharing each communication	• Classroom teachers: Weekly reading updates with focus skill and tip • Reading specialist: Monthly reading strategy spotlight for newsletter • Principal: Quarterly data summaries and reading celebration announcements
Frequency & timing	Determine how often and when each communication will be sent	• Weekly classroom reading tips sent each Friday • Monthly school reading newsletter sent first Monday of each month • Quarterly data reports sent home two weeks after benchmark assessments

Plan Component	Component Purpose	Examples
Translation & accessibility	Identify how to ensure the communication is accessible to all families	• Translate newsletters and data reports into Spanish, Somali, and Arabic • Use visuals and family-friendly language in all materials
Feedback & improvement	Mechanism to gather feedback and improve communication	• Add a reading communication question to family surveys each semester • Review feedback quarterly with staff and family advisory team to adjust plan

Example

At Riverbend Elementary, Principal Thomas formed a team to create a literacy communication plan. It included weekly classroom reading updates, monthly newsletters with reading tips and featured books, and quarterly family-friendly reading data reports. Teachers used provided templates to reduce planning time. Families reported feeling more connected to reading instruction, and teachers noted increased family use of suggested at-home strategies.

2. Use multiple communication formats to reach all families.

Effective communication systems recognize that families have different preferences and access needs. Using only one format, such as email or printed newsletters, risks excluding families without reliable internet access or those who prefer communication in their home language. Principals can strengthen literacy partnerships by ensuring communication is shared through multiple formats, increasing the likelihood that all families receive and engage with the information.

Implementation begins by identifying families' preferred formats. Principals can survey families asking questions such as, "How do you prefer to receive reading information from school (text, email, paper, phone calls)?" and "What language would you like reading communication in?"

Based on survey results, schools can ensure reading updates are shared through multiple channels, such as:

- **Printed newsletters and reading folders** sent home in backpacks.
- **Emails or school apps** for families who prefer digital communication.
- **Text message reminders** with short reading tips, such as “Ask your child what new word they learned today!”
- **Automated calls or voicemails** summarizing key reading messages, especially for important events or deadlines.
- **School websites** with archived newsletters, video demonstrations, and reading resources.

Principals should ensure communication is translated into families’ home languages and that interpreters are available for reading events and conferences.

Example

At Harmony Elementary, Principal Lee surveyed families and found that 40% preferred communication in Spanish and most wanted short text messages for reading tips rather than long newsletters. The school began sending weekly bilingual reading tips via text, alongside monthly paper newsletters for detailed updates. Families reported they read and used the tips, and teachers noticed students referencing them during reading groups, showing stronger home-school connection.

3. Share consistent reading messages and tips across classrooms.

Literacy communication that is consistent across teachers ensures families receive coherent messages and know how to support reading at home. Without alignment, families may receive different or conflicting information from teachers across grade levels. Principals can lead grade-level teams in developing shared reading messages and tips aligned to instruction.

Implementation includes:

- Facilitating planning sessions where grade-level teams identify focus reading skills for the week and agree on a simple at-home tip to share with families.
- Creating shared “reading tip banks” with strategies aligned to units of study, such as segmenting sounds, decoding multisyllabic words, or summarizing stories.
- Encouraging teachers to include the same vocabulary words in newsletters or apps to reinforce schoolwide literacy goals.
- Reviewing tips during team meetings to ensure clarity, alignment, and accessibility for families.

For example, all second-grade teachers might share the tip, “Practice reading words with r-controlled vowels like ‘car,’ ‘bird,’ and ‘corn’ this week,” while third-grade teachers focus on summarizing nonfiction texts.

Example

At Maplewood Elementary, Principal Owens noticed inconsistency in reading messages across classrooms. She worked with grade-level teams to create weekly reading tips aligned to their phonics and comprehension instruction. Teachers included the tips in newsletters and text updates. Families appreciated the clear, unified focus, and teachers observed students using the tips across subjects, improving reading outcomes.

4. Gather family feedback to improve communication systems.

Effective communication systems are responsive to family needs and preferences. Gathering feedback ensures that literacy messages are accessible, useful, and engaging. Principals can establish structures to regularly gather and review family feedback on reading communication practices.

Principals can add literacy communication questions to family surveys, such as “What reading tips have been most helpful for you?” and “How can we improve the reading information we send home?” Schools can include feedback slips in reading folders where families can check “This reading tip was helpful” or write questions. Principals can also hold listening sessions or include family representatives in communication planning to provide ongoing input.

Principals should review feedback regularly with staff, identify actionable improvements, and communicate changes back to families to show their voices matter.

Sample Family Survey

Family Literacy Communication Survey

1. How helpful are the reading tips and updates you receive from school?

- ☐ Very helpful
- ☐ Somewhat helpful
- ☐ Not very helpful
- ☐ I don’t receive reading tips or updates

2. What is your preferred way to receive reading information from school? *(Select all that apply)*

- ☐ Text message
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Paper newsletters
- ☐ Phone calls
- ☐ School website or app
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

3. What language would you like reading communication in?

- ☐ English
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Somali
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Other: _____

4. What types of reading information are most helpful to you? *(Select all that apply)*

- ☐ What my child is learning in reading
- ☐ My child's reading progress or assessment results
- ☐ Tips and activities to practice reading at home
- ☐ Book recommendations
- ☐ Information about reading events or programs
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

5. How confident do you feel helping your child with reading at home?

- ☐ Very confident
- ☐ Somewhat confident
- ☐ Not very confident

6. What would help you feel more confident supporting your child's reading at home?

7. Please share any suggestions to improve how we communicate with you about reading and your child's progress.

Example

At Evergreen Elementary, Principal Howard included reading communication questions in the spring family survey. Families shared that while they appreciated newsletters, they wanted more short videos demonstrating reading strategies. Teachers responded by filming three-minute clips showing blending, reading comprehension questions, and sight word games. Families reported the videos built their confidence to support reading at home, and Principal Howard shared these results with families to show their feedback shaped school practices.

Potential Roadblocks



Teachers may feel overwhelmed by new communication expectations.

Suggested Approach. Principals can provide shared templates and tip banks to reduce preparation time and ensure consistency. Collaborative planning builds buy-in and efficiency while clarifying expectations.



Some families may not engage with current communication formats.

Suggested Approach. Survey families to learn their preferred communication methods and languages. Adjust formats accordingly, ensuring reading messages are shared through multiple channels for accessibility.

Additional Resources

Effective Communication with Parents. Reading Rockets.

<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/parent-engagement>

Practical tips for communicating about reading.

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center Resources. Ohio Department of Education.

<https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu/resources/>

Tools for planning family-centered communication.

Parent Power: Build the Bridge to Success. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513862.pdf>

Practical family literacy support ideas for communication.

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