Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 205 – “Parent Engagement”

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello, and welcome to another edition of Equity Today, the EAC Region VIII podcast. I’m your host Tyler, I’m here again with our own Marilyn Chipman, and she’s joining us to speak more on Early Childhood. Thank you for sitting down yet again.

Marilyn: Thank you Tyler, I’m delighted to be back in the studio with you again, you’re always such a gracious host. Thank you.

T: Ah, well thank you! You’re an excellent guest to have! So again, continuing with our discussion of early childhood, I understand that a big area of focus for you is family engagement; and through the EAC you will often do trainings or technical assistance, so I guess, both kind of telling us what family engagement is, and how you became interested in it?

M: Alright then, we’ll just jump right off into this. Yes, you are correct in saying that one of my primary areas of focus within the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII is this whole matter of parent engagement, and although I deal with this across both elementary and secondary levels, my primary focus is always early childhood learning, because that defines so much of who I am and what my career has been about. So how did I get into this? That’s what you’re wanting to know. Alright, back in January 1991 when I was a brand new faculty member here in the teacher education department at Metro State University – then we were Metro State College – I first heard about a course that had a strange title to it, at least it seemed to me that it was a very strange title. It was called, “Parents as Partners in Education.” And to my way of thinking, I couldn’t imagine why anyone would need to spend an entire 16-week-long semester in a University Teacher Preparation program, just to explain to the students that parents were important. I just assumed that everyone would know that if you’re going to have the good of the youngsters at heart that you have to involve their parents. So let me explain why I thought that way. In my career, as a public school teacher in both the state of California and then later here in Colorado, I had taught preschool, kindergarten, and first grade for a number of years so you can see that my focus was early childhood education. So, as a teacher in kindergarten, first grade, preschool, the idea of not including the parents in the
process of their education never once entered my mind. To me, those parents, or anyone in the parenting role, be it grandparents or adoptive parents, older family members, caretakers, guardians, whatever, if they were in that parenting role by definition they were valuable to me. They were valuable as resources of every sort. As supporters of what I was doing in my multiple endeavors, as helpers in the classroom, helpers in decisions, as innovators, and in some instances, even as friends, because, many of them kept in close contact with me after their children had left my instructive care, these parents still invited me to the events of their children’s lives, even up to and including high school graduation. Now that was a real eye-opener for me, when the child I taught in Kindergarten, I was receiving an invitation to his high school graduation, but it kept going. College commencements, weddings, baby showers, and so to me, parents helped to make my job literally more enjoyable. Now, I cherish the close relationship that I had with the parents throughout the years; somehow it never dawned on me that a group of them would get together and place my name in nomination for the Colorado Teacher of the Year award, I think I mentioned this before. Now, this happened in 1986 and I was elated to receive a lovely framed certificate, indicative of the fact that I received honorable mention, in that whole process, so the certificate carried great significance, but you know what moved me to tears and emotion, that choked me to overflowing? Was reading letter after letter after letter from the parents of children whom I taught 1 year, 5 years, 10 years, 15 years before, and I was literally overwhelmed at the things that they wrote, and I have kept every one of those letters that they have given to me as part of what they had had to submit in placing my name in nomination. So, as I thought about it much later, I became totally convinced that one of the reasons that those parents thought I had a special love for their child was because of the way that I involved them in their child’s education. So the fact the parents felt welcome and wanted and appreciated, enabled them to form a valid impression of me as their child’s teacher. So, fast forward to January 1991 when I came to Metro State, and I looked at this course, and I just couldn’t imagine why it was necessary. However, as the years have gone one, I have become more aware that culturally relevant parent engagement is not as commonplace as I had thought it was. Research findings indicate that if a school is in a relatively deprived part of town, a socioeconomically disadvantaged part of town, and the teacher is from a higher social class than the students, there can be a disconnect, a terrible disconnect. In these instances, the teachers could be prone to view the home life of the child as deficient; to think their own role is somehow to remediate the parents as the ultimate goal in helping the child. Now, this deficit model is problematic. It begins with something as simple as lack of expectation. Now, I have 9 grandchildren, and that would be a podcast for another day – but in a small town in Texas I was invited to one of my grandchild’s school, for their very first ever grandparents breakfast. It was held at 7 o’clock in the morning, because they knew that, you know, grandparents frequently had to go on to work; on that day, the planners of this event, this grandparents breakfast, they ran out of tables, they ran out of chairs, they ran out of Danish rolls and fruit and orange juice and coffee, before the long line of grandparents even had all gotten into the cafeteria. The staff of the school was totally surprised, they kept walking around saying, “we never
expected, we didn’t know! We didn’t know! We’re sorry, we ran out of everything! We didn’t know so many were coming!” They were frantically trying to cut the Danish rolls in half, and pouring glasses of orange juice half full trying to stretch it, and still they ran out. So the administrators stood there red-faced, and took the microphone to apologize openly to the parents. The staff was surprised at the number of grandparents who came. I was surprised at the staff. I was surprised at the staff, at the administrators, because their lack of expectation led to a lack of planning, which in turn sent a message that the adults in the child’s life were just not that important; they were not perceived as partners in the educational process. Probably because they were deficient due to lower socioeconomic class or ethnicity or whatever. This is unconscionable. This is why the matter of parent engagement becomes so pivotal in our own setting here at the Equity Assistance Center, to be sure that teachers are aware that their expectations carry weight. All too often, discussions about culturally diverse families, which of course much of what we do here working at the center is working with equity issues surrounding diversity; but a lot of the discussion centers around what the parents lack, what they lack. There’s almost this perception that these parents don’t even care about their children, which of course is saying that economically deprived parents are the only parents on earth who come with this thing of not caring about their children. This cannot continue, this type of thinking. We need a paradigm shift to eliminate that. So this is why I am trying to replace that perspective with one that recognizes the strengths which parents have and try to develop those strengths into leadership, this is what parent engagement is all about.

T: So parent engagement is I think pretty clearly, vastly, vastly key to a complete education of a child, and it sounds like you really put an emphasis in family engagement in the early years. What is it about these early years that makes it so important?

M: Well, of course, and knowing me, that is where I would put it. Statistics have shown, Tyler, that the category under age 5 is one of the fastest growing segments of our population. This comes directly from data from the 2010 United States census. It indicated then, in 2010, and of course now we’re in 2013, that over 2,200,000 children under the age of 5 were counted at that time. That’s a lot of children. Now of course we know that the number has increased since then, and that is going to continue to grow. Demographically, our population is just swelling, and subsequently, our early classroom settings are finding more and more youngsters within those 4 walls. So, we have the important, and awesome task if you will of impacting their very young lives for good. So this is why parent engagement in the early years needs to be focused on, because this segment of the population, this age group is growing faster than any other. Now, having said that, we need to talk about culturally relevant parent engagement in order for it to add to the child’s educational success. Now, the term culturally relevant does not refer to teaching children about their culture; because you have to realize, before they ever darken the door of the schoolroom, they’ve already been immersed in their culture for the first four or five years of their young life before they even began their preschool or
kindergarten experience. Dr. David Briseno, he’s a member of the executive board for the Alliance for Multilingual and Multicultural Education, was quoted as saying, “you don’t teach culture. You respect culture. You respect it when it comes through your classroom door. You don’t change the children parents and community come to you with. Instead, you change your ability and your skill at understanding what they come to you with and in valuing that.” So in essence I think what he was saying is that, both teachers and parents are important in helping the child to learn. The sooner the teacher recognizes this, as well as the sooner the parents recognize it, the better for the child. The child’s first teacher has always been the person at home. And the schools cannot take the child and begin to negate all the things that have been learned at home. They can add on to it, they can perhaps modify it, for a situation, meaning, in school we act this way, but you say that without negating what they may be doing at home. If they do otherwise, we’re sending a message to the child that, the first teacher, who is your parent, is wrong, and I’m going to teach you what’s right. And that is not acceptable, again. We can lay things side by side, we can modify them if need be, but we never ever try to make a separation in the mind of the young child that says “home is wrong, school is right.”

T: Yeah. I think value judgments is a huge part of this, especially language-based value judgments.

M: Absolutely.

T: I think there’s a distinct sense, especially in academia of standard American English, and when that isn’t meant, there’s a perceived deficiency by some. Obviously, people with their heads on straight are not perceiving it this way, and are trying to eradicate that perception in others.

M: Exactly, exactly. And that’s a prime example, you could not have brought up a better example, of laying another way alongside the way that the child has brought from home, without negating, or putting down what they brought from home, but simply saying, “I’m not going to add to the language that you already have, by overlaying, or laying next to it, a second means of communication.” This is even true within the African American culture, where Ebonics, or Black English, is spoken, as opposed to, quote-unquote, standard English. So rather than a teacher saying, “the way that you talk at home is wrong,” you’re simply going to also teach this child standard English, but not ever negating the language that is spoken by mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, cousin, friend.

T: Yeah, it’s how they communicate, theoretically, with their whole community.

M: Exactly, exactly.

T: So you want to open up more doors, not shut old doors, or not even old doors, the original door. You can’t shut that on a child.
M: Exactly.

T: There’s a, as we all know, there’s a bit of a jargon that goes around in these types of studies and I’ve heard of both family involvement and family engagement. They sound the same to me, what’s the difference?

M: Excellent question. To create an effective partnership with parents, we have to understand the difference between family involvement and family engagement, and for years, those terms were, or would have been seen, as being synonymous, but there has been a distinction made in the current rhetoric. Larry Ferlazzo, who is an educator in Sacramento, California, makes this distinction. He says that involvement implies doing something to the parent, where as engagement implies doing something with. And so, to explain that, he gives this illustration. He says that a school which leans towards parent involvement uses its mouth to tell the parents, “I’d like for you to help out in the gymnasium during one of our bake sales,” or, “we need five mothers to go on our field trips, could you be one of them? And could you also round up the other four?” Or to say, “We need you to help by calling all your friends to encourage them,” or “if you could come in next Tuesday, you could read a book to the children while I work with the others.” In other words, these eager parent volunteers are listeners. They are being told what they can do to help the school, and Larry Ferlazzo says, that’s parent involvement. The school uses its mouth to tell the parents what it needs the parents to do. We need you to go on a field trip, we need you to work in the cafeteria, we need you to read, telling them what to do. And that’s involvement. But, he says, engagement is when a school uses its ears to become the listener, rather than the mouth to tell, it uses its ears to become the listener, to listen to the parents as they talk about their hopes and dreams for their children, it listens to the ways to make the school-home connection better, it listens for ways to empower the parents to work within the school framework, and then once parents are engaged, they will automatically become involved.

T: It sounds like a complete world of difference between these two when you explain it. The way I’m hearing it is, it sounds like involvement is pretty much schools making up for a deficiency in hands, like they just want these people to help in things they don’t have enough hands for, where as engagement is more, come, let’s talk about it, let’s work on things together, and that’s great.

M: Yes, and in engagement, the school, he gives a particular illustration of where there was a problem of a lack of computers, and the school did not allow. So the parents were asked, “what types of strategies can we come up with?” and so the parents were given the empowerment of solving the problem, rather than saying, “you know, we were thinking of doing a carwash, and we want you parents to come.” And the parents didn’t come up with the idea of carwash at all. They came up with the idea of getting community involvement to resolve the problem, and so that’s a perfect example. So family involvement and engagement, they’re not
opposite terms, but they function differently, and the question is, which one is better. And so, the engagement is definitely, seems to be. So in essence, it's like, engaged family members are communicators, are problem solvers, are strategists, and are even decision makers. They're focused on how they can help, not just children, but also help the teachers, and help the school, and help the community. This is what they're all about. So yes, parents want their young child to succeed, but often they just need to have someone show them how to have an active part in making that happen. So a school that believes in parent engagement will help the parents discover for themselves what they are capable of doing, and then give them the skill and the opportunity to do it. It could be inside an actual classroom but it could also be something that they're doing in their home or bringing to the school, or in the community. The bottom line is that it's based on the adult's own individual situation, every bit of engagement is validated, nothing is looked down upon, and then they will have developed a sense of belonging to the school that their children are attending.

T: That's so important. I mean, we've kind of talked about the general concepts here, but do you have any specific strategies to kind of help with parent engagement and, ideally, culturally relevant parent engagement?

M: OK, well, I would love to say that the suggestions I am going to give are my own, but I will give credit where credit is due. These have come out of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and that particular organization has set forth many strategies for teachers and administrators to use in order to put this whole matter of parent engagement into practice, so here are some ideas from their idea bank. Again, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and this is what they have said is proven to be effective. Number 1 – and if any of you are listening to this blog on our website, all you'll need to is simply push the little counter back a tad bit in order to see what each one was or to hear me say it again, but then also we'll be sure these are posted on our early childhood website. Links to information. So, number 1: Conduct meet and greet walks through the school neighborhood. Now, that's getting you out of the school building, maybe a bit out of your comfort zone, but walk through the school neighborhood, and personally distribute leaflets through the community concerning school events, meetings, and other activities. Now, this is a little bit different than putting the notice in Johnny's backpack. This is you actually going out into the community, shaking hands, smiling, letting people know who you are as a teacher, and showing that you are interested in them. Number 2: Offer classes to parents on topics that they are interested in, such as helping with homework, reading with children. If you don't know they are interested in, this is a perfect time, a perfect example for parent engagement, to have them discuss what it is they want to know about, and then ask them to present the list to you, rather than you are presenting the list to them. Number 3: Send forth regular school communications on a schedule. So that parents know that every Monday, or the first day of every month, or however often it is, that they know that the schedule is going to come out of whatever is going on in the school. There again it's not random or helter skelter, it's a time when they know to look for it. Number
4: Make time for personal phone calls to invite families, especially to events. Now, you know make those personal phone calls when their child has been acting out in class. Well, make a personal phone call just to say, “we’re having, whatever it is that’s coming up next Friday, I would love to see you there.”

T: Call home with a little good news.

M: Exactly, a little good news and an invitation that says, you know, I’m just so happy to have your child in class that I want to see you at this event. Number 5: On those special events, then, create carpools for parents who may not have transportation. It’s not too much to ask of the school that they have a bulletin board for parents where people can post their needs and things like that. Number 6: Ask parents who already are avid volunteers, just simply to bring along a friend. Maybe just someone would want to come but would say, I don’t know what to do when I get there, or I don’t know who to talk to, but if someone else takes them and familiarizes them with that school environment, then they might become more involved.
Number 7: Let parents know, and this is important, that school gatherings are not just for quote-unquote, mom and dad. School gatherings are for whoever happens to be in the family that wants to come or that can come, because we know that working schedules can vary, different obligations, conflicts would be coming up, so it’s not just mom and dad. And also because family configurations may not have a mother in the home, or a father in the home, and we don’t know who is in that parenting role. So, the next one is, engage family members in dialog, which permits them to express their feelings and their expectations about their children’s future. So I think we can almost wrap it up by saying, Parent Engagement is really about providing ample opportunity for the parents to become leaders, planners, implementers, not just followers. Dr. Bradley Scott, out of San Antonio, Texas, one of the Equity Assistance Center directors for that particular area of the country, he simply says that “parents simply want a voice at the table.” You can’t put it more succinctly than that. Parent engagement means that they have a voice at the table. So, when we are engaging the parents, it leads to stronger connections between the home and the school, strong connections lead to partnerships that will benefit the young child’s development. And then when we strengthen those partnerships, it leads to positive interactions among family, the school, the community. And when parents and other family members know that they are welcome, and a vital part of the school, and a vital part of their child’s educational process, then this is when engagement is raised to its highest level.

T: That’s wonderful. I think that if we as a country could come together and get parent engagement to the maximum of what it could be, it would be like night and day with what we’re seeing. And so, here at the EAC, we can help with all of these things. We can implement all of these 10 ideas, and we can do even more than that if you’re stuck at a point of just parent involvement at your school, either as a parent or even as a teacher or administrator, we can do all kinds of things to help turn that around. Now, I don’t feel like we’ve covered everything there is to even start covering—
M: I’ll come back next time!

T: Yeah, if you’d be willing to come back, I know you mentioned the concept of cultural socialization for young children. Is that something you’d be willing to come back and talk about?

M: Oh yes, Tyler, I would. Thank you so much for the invitation to do that! Cultural socialization sounds like a mouthful. Let me just break it down for you. So thank you for the invitation.

T: Thank you.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.