



A LEADER CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS ON FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

School districts, just like families, don't need to be saved—they need help. That help comes in the way of guidance, support, and understanding the needs of their district and community. The mindset had to change from how to “get” families involved to how to “let” families be involved.



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH THE SAGINAW SAFE SCHOOLS/HEALTHY STUDENTS FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT VIDEO.](#)

→ CHALLENGE

Saginaw Public Schools, is an urban district with just over 6,500 students (see SPSD Fast Facts). Within the halls of the buildings there was no disagreement that engaging families was a critical factor for students' physical, emotional, and academic success. However, when ways to engage families were discussed, like in many other school districts, staff members' shoulders shrugged or hands were thrown up in defeat over a long-standing problem with no apparent solution in sight.

As a struggling urban district, they tried to be intentional about engaging families. They complied with the guidelines for family engagement within Title I; secured evidenced-based family engagement programming; and insisted that each building's team include family engagement strategies. When their efforts resulted in just a handful of engaged families, their belief that “nothing works” became a self-fulfilling prophecy. With this firmly embedded mindset, the staff who were making traction in engaging families were looked upon as “lucky” rather than a success story that warranted further investigation. These so-called “lucky” ones held the answers, but as is typical, when the majority speaks with conviction it's easy to doubt yourself and safer to stay in your silo. As Neil Postman said in *The End of Education*, “People in distress will sometimes prefer a problem that is familiar to a solution that is not.” This certainly seemed to be the case for Saginaw Public Schools when it came to family engagement.

What would it take to move out of the problem mindset and look for solutions? **Help!** Help in the way of support, leadership, and having an open mind and heart for family engagement.

→ SOLUTION

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grant paved the way for Saginaw's success in family engagement. The SS/HS grant contained five elements in which grantees had to reach their goals and objectives. The elements weren't ranked; all five held equal weight. One of the five was Family and Community Engagement. This became an opportunity to step up and step in to level the playing field for all families.

School districts, just like families, don't need to be saved—they need help. That help comes in the way of guidance, support, and understanding of the needs of their district and community. Barb Flis of Parent Action for Healthy Kids (PAFK), the Parent Engagement Specialist for SS/HS at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), was available to Saginaw to guide, support, and learn about their community. Likewise, in order to authentically engage families, Saginaw Public Schools didn't need to save families, but to guide, support and learn about those families. The mindset had to change from how to “get” families involved to how to “let” families be involved. This required a district leader who understood and would do the “hard work and heart work” it takes to bring schools and families together in partnership for the success of young people.

Saginaw Public Schools had in their midst Tiffany Pruitt. Tiffany had experience in the education arena, having been in the district for 14 years in various capacities, all of which included some form of family engagement. She had been involved in a previous grant (Safe and Supportive Schools) at Saginaw High School that had a family engagement component. When the district was awarded the SS/HS grant, Tiffany was given the position of Parent, Family, & Community Engagement Specialist. This appointment did not come easy. There were many meetings and some outside-the-box decision making that led to setting a precedent in the district with a full-time Parent, Family, & Community Engagement Specialist position.

Tiffany Pruitt created a “no fear” zone, putting parents, staff, and community partners in one room, giving everyone a voice and choice. All stakeholders walked away realizing they all wanted the same thing. Through this “no fear” zone, barriers to communication came down, and family engagement was no longer something to be feared, but valued.



SPSD FAST FACTS

Saginaw Public School District

Schools: 15

Student Population: 6,500+

- Black: 63%
- White: 21%
- Asian: 2%
- English Learners: 5%

Even before the ink was dry on her appointment, Tiffany was off and running. She worked side by side with Barb Flis, of PAFHK, to unite schools and families. They knew this was their golden opportunity to engage families by utilizing all of the elements of SS/HS. Through knowing families and what they needed, Tiffany was able to take the content of each of the elements and make it meaningful to families. On the other side of the equation, the dynamic duo of state and district parent engagement specialists had to get to the hearts of those who touch the lives of students every day—the staff. When data (using the Family Engagement Perception Instrument) revealed negative attitudes and beliefs among staff toward engaging families, Tiffany created a “no fear” zone, putting parents, staff, and community partners in one room, giving everyone a voice and choice. All stakeholders walked away realizing they all wanted the same thing. Through this “no fear” zone, barriers to communication came down, and family engagement was no longer something to be feared, but valued.

→ RESULTS

Under the leadership of Tiffany Pruitt, the Parent, Family, & Community Engagement Specialist, Saginaw Public Schools has engaged over 6,000 stakeholders over the course of 3 years, opened a District Family & Community Engagement Empowerment Center, established and maintained over 50 community partnerships, and received the 2017 and 2018 Johns Hopkins University’s National Network of Partnership Schools District Leadership Award for Family & Community Engagement. The district was also featured in the 2017 and 2018 *Promising Practices* book for best practices implemented in schools.

These amazing results didn’t come from one person doing family and community engagement. The results came from having a leader, who through heart and hard work, helped everyone to see that family and community engagement is everyone’s job, and that this work pays enormous benefits not only to students but to all other stakeholders.

→ SUSTAINING SUCCESS

Parents, families, and all stakeholders have received extensive training in all elements of SS/HS and beyond. Parent, family, and community engagement has taken hold in Saginaw Public Schools. As the SS/HS funding comes to an end, the Family & Community Engagement Specialist position has been placed under the Title IV grant.

“What we pay attention to grows,” says Barb Flis, PAFHK and SS/HS Family Engagement Specialist at MDE. Saginaw Public Schools recognized the need for district-level personnel who could provide a full-time focus on family engagement electing the right person for the task was instrumental to their success. Tiffany Pruitt paid attention to families, and staff and family engagement grew. It can be done, if you have the will and the heart to do it.

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