

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm Eric Neal, and today we're joined by Barbara Boone. She's the director of the Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University. Thanks for joining us. How are you, Barbara?

Barbara Boone:

I'm doing well, Eric. Thanks so much for the chance to come and talk with you today.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. We're talking family engagement, something near and dear to my heart. Tell us about the Statewide Family Engagement Center and the work that you do there.

Barbara Boone:

Sure. Our team is at the Ohio State University and we are located in the Center on Education and Training for Employment. And that's a center in the College of Education and Human Ecology. Our center is a translational research center. That means that we take the discoveries of research and try to apply that to our schools, to our communities. We want to take research-based ideas and get them in use so that they benefit all of our students and our families and our community.

Barbara Boone:

We're in a translational research center, and we are a Family Engagement Center, a Statewide Family Engagement Center. We received one of 11 federal grants two years ago to be a Statewide Family Engagement Center. And that means that we are providing technical assistance and training and resources to school professionals and to community members, but also for families.

Barbara Boone:

In our center, we have a website that's a really robust website, full of resources for families and education professionals and others who are interested in supporting families and schools working together. We also provide training, as I said. We do a lot of our training with Ohio School Districts and school leaders and teachers, but also directly with families.

Barbara Boone:

Last week, I got to spend some time with grandparents who are raising school aged children, talking with them about how to support their grandchildren's education during this time of virtual learning. And then one of the things that we did recently in the area of training is on September 17th we had a summit, Family Engagement Leadership Summit for Ohio. We had over 900 folks register and take part in that event. We provide a lot of training, and then technical assistance is also...

Barbara Boone:

That's where we get the phone calls and folks asking is, can you help us out here? Can you consult with us? Can you kind of give us that expert advice? We are available to do that with districts. We also work really closely with the Ohio Department of Education. When they were developing their restart guidance for schools, we were able to partner with them to really help develop the part around working with families at this time. Or just yesterday, the Department of Education released the Whole Child framework, and we were a partner in writing that.

Barbara Boone:

There are a couple of sections in there around working together with families is really how we go about having a holistic approach to education for our kids. And also, we provide technical assistance in the areas, really understanding all the requirements around how schools work with families that are supported by Title 1 funds or our students with exceptionalities or families who are fostering students or families experiencing homelessness. We really try to be very well-rounded in our guidance that we offer to folks.

Barbara Boone:

We have a state advisory council that's made up of over 60 people, and most of them are parents or caregivers or high school students and also other folks from state agencies in Ohio who really helped guide our work, who we share things with, who help us to have sort of eyes and ears around the state of Ohio. And that really helps us be connected in many ways to the needs and the interests of families around Ohio.

Barbara Boone:

And another thing that we really try to do is to just provide guidance in a timely way to Ohio schools and families, and we do that through some guidance. We have a monthly newsletter that's really guidance around different topics of family engagement that we put out every month. We have over a thousand subscribers now, and I hope we'll get more from this podcast.

Barbara Boone:

People who subscribe in each month were connecting and trying to provide recommendations, sort of research-based guidance, good ideas and examples from schools around Ohio as well. And we're on social media too, because you just have to be, right? We have to be on Facebook and that's really... We have a Facebook group for families primarily, and then we use Twitter quite a bit also to sort of...

Barbara Boone:

We really want to lean in and help people understand where family engagement fits across the so many issues and important initiatives in education. That's what we do.

Eric Neal:

It sounds like you guys really just touch every part of the topic. That's exciting work that you're doing over there. We hear a lot about family engagement and people throw that term around a lot these days, but why is family engagement in education important?

Barbara Boone:

Well, it's important. Why is it important? Well, let me share with you, family engagement, what I like to say, is a lot like mission control for a space launch. Just this week, this incredible space mission took place where this OSIRIS-REx, which I know very little about, I know hardly anything about these things, but I'm amazed by them. NASA sent off this space craft years ago, that's landed on an asteroid that's 200 million miles away and it took a sample of it.

Barbara Boone:

And it's going to bring this back. I'm just amazed by that. Or when recently, we had that combined launch with SpaceX and NASA bringing astronauts to the International Space Station. This is what stuck with me when I read about that was one of the lead people on this launch, particularly of the first launch that went to the asteroid did that, after a decade of planning, this team was celebrating. And they're still working, but it was a decade of planning, and family engagement and education is a lot like that.

Barbara Boone:

It's a long-term commitment by a lot of people, a lot of different roles. Because for a mission control launch, we need mathematicians. We need physicists. We need engineers of all kinds. We need so many people playing different roles to make that a successful launch. And it's just like launching our kids to success. We need families. We need our educators. We need teachers. We need administrators. We need school counselors and social workers and community members, coaches.

Barbara Boone:

All those people who wrap around and work together to overcome the challenges, when we make mistakes, when things aren't going well, when we're really working against some really significant challenges like we are now. When these people are all working together, that's when we see success. And that's why family engagement is so important, and that's sort of what keeps us really working at it each day at the Statewide Family Engagement Center. We see benefits for families.

Barbara Boone:

We see benefits for students. We see higher attendance rates, higher graduation rates. We see kiddos who are completing homework more often, who have higher literacy rates, who feel like they belong at school, who are really more motivated to learn. These are a lot of the benefits that we see through research when families and schools are working well together. And we see benefits for schools even against all odds. There are studies in the city of Chicago, across the country year after year.

Barbara Boone:

What we see is sometimes the difference maker when we compare schools and one that we really see student achievement, has small gaps, and that students are achieving well and others that are really struggling more, one of the consistent factors is that the school that has higher achievement has significant efforts towards really working well with families. So that's why we see that this work is important. And we see benefits for teachers.

Barbara Boone:

One of the really strong impacts for teacher job satisfaction is their level of support they feel from families. And so that's why we want to continue with this work. We want longevity. We want support for our teachers. We want schools that are successful at reaching and teaching all students. We want our students to be supported, and families benefit as well. So all around, we see a lot of benefits from this work of engaging families. But what we realize now, and I don't think anyone would disagree with us, is that we see this opportunity.

Barbara Boone:

We see these great impacts for students, for schools, for teachers, but we realize that not everyone, not every student is experiencing that yet. Not every family is really engaged. That's what keeps us working

and keeps us learning and keeps us wanting to sort of talk and train in the ways that we are learning are the most effective ways of reaching all families and working well with all families.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me. I really am interested in systems work. A lot of times... My wife teaches third grade and she's just one of those people who naturally has that gift of engaging families. And in her mind, she's like, "Well, everybody does this." It's not always that way. Unless you're doing things systematically, it's really hit and miss for what you're going to get as a family. I have school aged children.

Eric Neal:

It makes a lot of sense that you really would want to focus in on that real planning and the structure of setting it up, so the teachers all feel supported and able to do that important work, and the families are all recognizing it. You kind of spoke about some families traditionally being left out. I know a lot of the traditional things we used to do didn't really reach everybody.

Eric Neal:

How have we evolved from things like the back to school night or those real traditional things that were kind of just, here, it's the one and done, we engage people, now we're moving onto the regular work?

Barbara Boone:

Eric, I think we're seeing a shift and we're really working towards a shift from sort of engaging and working with families because we have to, right? I think you kind of alluded to that, because we kind of know it's the right thing to do, but it's not seeing it as critical to our work or necessarily as a part of our instruction or our positive behavioral supports or in our interventions and what we know. And I'm so glad you used the word systemic or systematic.

Barbara Boone:

Family engagement that's effective, we see is systemic. It's not sort of good in second grade and in fifth grade, but not in between. It's not one teacher here or one teacher there, but it's really when a school system has training for educators, but also policies and practices that support educators and families working together. We have made a shift from events. We still hold events there. They can be beneficial.

Barbara Boone:

But what we're noticing is that too often our focus was on sort of counting the number of heads that came to an event and then calling that a success. We had 200 people come. This was a success. Oh, we only had 15 come. That wasn't a success. And really you and I know that it's not the number of people who come, but it's really what impact do we have. And the shift we want to make is from working with families for sort of in a non-direct or non-goal oriented way, but to say, we have students who we are supporting in a learning trajectory here.

Barbara Boone:

We're supporting this growth and development and learning for all students. Our family engagement efforts should be aligned to that, should be working with us, so that we're helping families understand, these are the things your child is learning to do. These are all things that they're going to know by the

end of this grade, and here's how you can help. Here's how you can be aware of their progress. Here's how you can help your child.

Barbara Boone:

This is the particular area he or she is working in, and here's how you can be talking to them about that. And so you can be aware about that. Really head counts have little meaning. Sometimes our actions are more vague. We're going to have an open house, or we're going to have muffins with mom. We have these sort of less vague, or we do it because we've always done it, or we feel in some way we have to do this. But we know we're not reaching all families when we do things like that.

Barbara Boone:

If you think about a typical literacy night, it's going to be on a certain day of the week, in a certain location. And there are people who are working who won't be able to attend. There are people who are very busy working with family obligations.

Eric Neal:

Transportation can be a big issue.

Barbara Boone:

Yes, transportation can be a big issue. Other issues around families who know that it's going to be difficult to understand. And I don't actually know that.... We all are, especially now, we all have such little margin in our time and energy. We're all weighing. Even before the pandemic, I think on any given night, we're all weighing. We have all these things we could be doing tonight. What are the things I'm going to do during the day? We're having to choose.

Barbara Boone:

If it's not clear to me that this is really going to benefit my child, that there's really anything that's super important that I need to know. There are many reasons why. And then we have to think about families who may have had numerous negative-

Eric Neal:

Experiences.

Barbara Boone:

...interactions with schools. Right. And sometimes that can be generational, right? We have families who for generations have just not had great experiences with education system, in those ways. So, what's the shift? I'm talking about the problem too much. Let's talk about this shift. Really what we're we're talking about is number one thing being very goal oriented in what we want we do. And that goal should be around student learning, student development, well-being of students, right?

Barbara Boone:

As we look at that, then we really need to think about who all do we need to reach and how can we reach them? We like to, in our center, talk about universally designing family engagement. I think a lot of teachers are familiar with universal design for learning, where we design our instruction so that every

student in the classroom can access it in a way that they can understand, can express their learning. For family engagement, it's much the same way.

Barbara Boone:

It's how do we design this so that every family can access it, whether it's language, time, the way that we provide it. It could be an event at the school, but perhaps you can also read about it, perhaps you can also watch a recording of it. Maybe also you can just talk to another parent and they'll give you the high points and the information that you need. There are so many different ways.

Barbara Boone:

If we think about family engagement and say, "What's the goal," we're focused on the goal for students, what families need to know and be able to do, what we want to share with them, and then we sort of think about how do we universally design this so everyone can have access to this information and have a way that they can support their child's education.

Eric Neal:

It sounds like it's really a move away from being an activity to building a culture of engagement in your organization to really make it just part of who you are and what you do to get the best outcomes for kids. That's really exciting that you guys are pushing the work in that direction. A lot of us, our only experience is the back to school night. And it sounds like you guys are being really intentional about moving to a new paradigm of that.

Barbara Boone:

We are. What we're working to do is also to show how family engagement is... We want to move it from this very broad concept of family engagement, because I think sometimes if we had 20 people in a room and we said, family engagement, 20 people will have 20 different ideas of what that looked like. I sometimes say it's like you and I saying, "Let's go play sports outside." Well, what sport and then what position? There's a lot more specificity around this.

Barbara Boone:

We are looking at effective family engagement in order to promote attendance, effective family engagement around high school and middle school, an effective family engagement around supporting positive student behavior. Or when students are receiving an intervention to support their behavior, what does it look like to engage with their families? Or when we think about students with exceptionalities and post-secondary transitions, how do we engage families well there?

Barbara Boone:

So really digging down to the work that schools are doing and thinking what is the most effective way to engage with and partner with and support and equip families in this way, in this aspect. And part of that is also when we think about culturally relevant or responsive family engagement. That's also another way... In order to be sort of effective in our practices, we need to make sure that we are responsive to that.

Barbara Boone:

It's part of that universally designing family engagement is thinking about what are the cultures of our students and our families. Number one, being aware and knowing them. Number two, valuing them. And number three, saying, how do we really connect and make this real and relevant? And we see that happening in Columbus at Eakin Elementary School. We have some videos of them on our website.

Barbara Boone:

We think they're just such a wonderful example, and we know that's happening all around Ohio, or we see the after school programs from Columbus State, or just another place where we see that happening in a really beautiful and effective and authentic way. Also, another thing is the importance of the voice of families informing and effecting our systems and our education. We plan for family engagement. And I like to say, we're kind of guessing unless we have families at the table, unless we have family input into that.

Eric Neal:

I think about that a lot, because you think about the student engagement from an instructional standpoint. And a lot of time you'll be having a discussion with an educator whose just a really expert in their content area and has a lot of the teaching experience and has some really well-designed amazing lessons. They are like, "Oh, I'm going to the vault. I'm going to pull out this great lesson."

Eric Neal:

But if you don't know what your kids are interested in and what they care about and those type of things, you can't plan properly to engage those kids. This is kind of the same thing with the families. Like if you don't know them well and what they care about and what they need, it makes this work difficult. You're just throwing darts and kind of hoping for the best.

Barbara Boone:

You say that so well. That's so true. Folks in our field will sometimes talk about the family's funds of knowledge. There was a researcher, Oliver Mole, who was the person who sort of first coined that phrase. When we work with teachers, we like to give them tools and perspectives around, how do you sort of get to know the families of your students, so that you can make those connections to your instruction?

Barbara Boone:

When we engage with families well, we have a relationship enough with them and an understanding of culture, of interests, of home life, their values, what Oliver Mole calls funds of knowledge, right? When we pull this together, then our instruction can be so much more effective. And then students are able to make that, sometimes we call it the prior knowledge, right, connections with prior knowledge or pulling...

Barbara Boone:

Or if we think about the relevancy in learning, that connection of, when am I going to ever use this, how does this apply to life, that's where families are often the connectors. This idea of like you're saying of really knowing our families helps improve our instruction.

Eric Neal:

That's amazing. With everything that's going on in the world right now, what are some strategies to help support educators and families as we navigate this current virtual and blended environment we're dealing with?

Barbara Boone:

Yeah. Well, I think that communication between home and school is always priority one. Thinking about that in the current environment, I think there's another thing about communication that is always true, and I think in family engagement what we're kind of seeing now is these things that are always true, but now let's interpret it from now. Communication being two way. We call it sometimes reciprocal, right? So that we are informing, we are also hearing from, we're listening to families.

Barbara Boone:

That's really important now. And for school districts and schools that were doing that really well, they were able to just sort of pivot and say, "Okay. Well, this is how we communicated well. This is how we were listening to families. We'll just do it in a different way now." But if we didn't already have that system, it's hard to sort of just pivot, right? Because we might have to start something new that we hadn't done before.

Barbara Boone:

There are some good things about communication, and one of them... I think schools are good at informing families. It's the listening aspect. We like to talk to schools about developing a culture of listening we can listen in some ways. When that's regular, families can expect it, right? So I know that there's going to be regular office hours. There's going to be a regular Zoom meeting with the superintendent. The teacher, I can reach the teacher at this time and won't be disturbing the teacher in some way.

Barbara Boone:

I think we're all very aware that everyone's working really hard right now. For some families, I think we need to acknowledge that we may be thinking, well, why aren't they contacting? But sometimes it's, well, who am I to ask? Who am I to question? So being accessible, making sure that as professional educators we're making ourselves accessible in a regular, dependable way. I think surveys can be effective.

Barbara Boone:

And sometimes that's a way of sort of getting the pulse on many families, but they are more effective if we can say to families, "Because of what you said, we have now done this." It's that responsiveness. This is what we heard from you and reporting back to folks. Otherwise, we all get kind of tainted on surveys. I think you probably have felt that way before. I mean, supporting families with like interests. If we have families of new kindergarten students, that's a real interest group there.

Barbara Boone:

So speaking to groups of families and helping families connect with one another. Families are a great source of information for each other as well. And when we see school districts like Cleveland Heights-University Heights, I think right now is a great example of a school district that's pulling together groups

of families and supporting them. They might host the meeting. Families with like interest. It might be families of graduating seniors.

Barbara Boone:

We're helping to bring groups of families together. We're listening to all families in some ways. And then with teachers, our teachers are able to connect with families regularly. We advocate for having sort of a system, so we know that we've touched base with everyone. We're hearing from folks. And then when teachers do hear of a need or an interest of families, that they're able to relay that to our school counselor or social worker or principal or family school liaison, someone who can take action and support if we need families connecting to other resources and things.

Barbara Boone:

That listening is super important this time. Doing that through technology and also offering it for some families. Like I talked about universal design before, it could be a phone call. It could be on Facebook and a Facebook group, right? There's so many ways. I'm probably going to say two things out. I don't feel like I'm talking at odds with myself. So we want to be able to offer families multiple ways, right, and a way that they can access it and understand it, make use of it.

Barbara Boone:

The other thing though is sometimes, and you might be experiencing this yourself, if you are a parent, imagine this, you have a single parent who has four children. The single parent is a working in healthcare and those children might be in elementary, middle, and high school. All of those children's teachers are assigning different learning platforms, different websites. They each have a different way to connect. You then have a family member, a parent who...

Barbara Boone:

I have a high school student who might have six different teachers and they're all using different way. It becomes overwhelming. We really advocate for schools, if not whole districts, to have consistent platforms, consistent tools that they are using to reach families, so that families aren't torn in so many different directions.

Eric Neal:

Oh yeah. I mean, we've a two parent household and everybody's employed and no one's been sick. We've been very blessed to make it through a very difficult situation, and it can really push us to our wit's end just trying to manage the children that are school age. They're in school right now and the different things. We have an intermediate school age child and a high school student. I can't even imagine.

Eric Neal:

You really do need to kind of think about it from a place of empathy and understanding for what are you asking these parents to do just to make it possible for them to participate in education, let alone engagement or anything like that. You're right.

Barbara Boone:

Yes, and I wasn't talking about having the resources, the actual equipment, and having space and having connectivity.

Eric Neal:

Oh my gosh, yeah.

Barbara Boone:

Absolutely. I think that computers and wifi, it's becoming the pencils and paper of education. We need to really be advocating for and supporting our families and having the resources. It's much like if we want families to read with their young children. We want them to talk about the words on the page. We want them to be sharing and having their child read to them. They don't have access to books.

Barbara Boone:

It's just paying attention to what equipment do families need and how do we help families have access and get that equipment and be able to use it in a way that's helpful to their children. I think information too, like I talked about listening, supporting conversations, being regular and dependable in that, accessible, being like streamlined looking across the system.

Barbara Boone:

And that's really kind of having a family focused approach to say that the learning platforms, kind of getting into the seat of the family member and saying, what is their experience? What is the user experience of this? But it's also though if we're offering other supports, if we're offering meals, if we're trying to connect folks to other resources for families, are we doing it in a way that is sort of child by child, school by school disjointed?

Barbara Boone:

Or are we doing it in sort of a very unified way that, okay, in your family, you have that high school or middle schooler, elementary schoolers. Here's a family oriented approach to meeting needs and supporting you versus kind of the scattered or less family oriented, right?

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. This has been such a fun conversation. How can people get a hold of you if they want to know more about what you do and the things they have available over there?

Barbara Boone:

I can't tell you how happy I would be if people reached out to us. Our website is probably the best sort of one place to go, and then you can find out other resources from us and other ways to connect. Our website is ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu. So it's all one word, ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu. And from there, you can subscribe to newsletters and find our Twitter and our emails and locate all kinds of resources as well.

Eric Neal:

All right. Well, once again, I'd like to thank you. It's Barbara Boone from the Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University. Thanks for joining us today. If you'd like to know more about upcoming family engagement events and the work we do here at the SST 11, go to our website.

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We're at sst11.org, or give us a call at 614-753-4694, or hit us up on Twitter. We're @sstregion11. For specific family engagement questions and SST support, email Kim Fausnaugh.

Eric Neal:

She's at Kimberly.fausnaugh@escso.org. And if you'd like to get a hold of me, I'm at eric.neal@escso.org. Until next time, I'm Eric Neal. Thanks for listening.