



Putting Families First Playbook Educators

Overview

Educators and administrators are deeply invested in the well-being of children, and they often have more direct contact with a child or youth than any other adult in their life. Because of this, and because of their commitment to the children and youth in their schools, educators are critical partners in the Putting Families First child welfare transformation.

This transformation is focused on keeping children and families together by supporting them in-home with resources and services, because research makes clear that families do best when they are safely together.

By continuing to partner with families, educators are supporting safe and thriving families and communities.

Putting Families First in Schools

- Educators often see when children and families are struggling before they come to the attention of the child welfare system. Because of this unique position, educators and other school professionals play a vital role in supporting children, youth and their families.
- Engaging child welfare may often seem like the right answer, but child welfare is not always best positioned to respond.
 - o Child welfare systems have strict statutory guidelines on when they can or cannot intervene in families' lives.
- Child welfare intervention is not always in the family's best interests, either.
 - o In Wisconsin, the most common reason for Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement is neglect, which is often tied to economic stressors.
 - Research shows that impoverished families are more likely to be referred to child welfare – and families of color are much more likely to experience poverty than white families. These and other systemic barriers for families of color can disproportionately increase the probability for involvement with the child welfare system.
 - o In many cases, families need connection to services and resources – like housing, child care, counseling or other supports – versus intervention.

“Cross- system collaboration is critical to supporting our students, families and community. We can better understand and offer supportive services if we know the needs in school and home. Working with our local Department of Human Services increases the support for our students and families. Sometimes having a non-school member discuss outside support with families is more effective. This collaborative approach ensures that children and families are supported in a more integrated, thoughtful way, which leads to better outcomes for all involved.”

- Jennifer Schill
Elementary School Counselor
Barron School District

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- o Research shows us that involvement with CPS – specifically, removing children and youth from their families – has significant and long-lasting negative effects on children, youth and their families.
 - For this research and for more information about the impact of removals, take a look at our resource “Preventing Removals and Investing in Prevention.” (www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/familyfirst/playbook-prevention.pdf.)
- o This is why Wisconsin – alongside partners like educators, administrators and other school professionals – is Putting Families First and trying to prevent unnecessary child welfare system involvement.

What Can Educators Expect Around Putting Families First?

Educators will continue to be key partners in supporting children, youth and families, whether or not they come to child welfare intervention as they do now. They will also continue to be crucial support to children at risk for or already experiencing maltreatment.

Educators should continue to report concerns of child abuse and neglect to their local child welfare agency in their role as mandated reporters. Child welfare professionals will continue to prioritize child safety and maintaining school stability for children and youth.

Educators may also notice strengthened efforts to keep families in-home, including:

- Increased use of services, supports and safety planning that allow children and youth to remain at home when their family is facing challenges,
- Empowerment of the child’s family to collaborate more closely with school staff to understand, participate in and advocate for their child’s educational needs,
- Strengthened efforts to maintain and strengthen children’s connections with people who know and love them,
- Efforts by child welfare agencies to help mandated reporters better understand the difference between child abuse and neglect concerns that should be reported and situations where families need resources, supports or other community services, and
- Collaboration with community partners to develop and strengthen local resources and services that are accessible to all families.

How Can Educators Support Putting Families First?

Build a supportive relationship with the family. A strong connection with a caring professional can be incredibly impactful for a family.

- Parents and caregivers may feel discomfort in an educational setting or meeting. By building empathetic connection and establishing a shared understanding that all parties are involved because they care about the child or youth and their education, educators can develop stronger partnerships with families.

Offer resources to strengthen families. Children do best when their family is supported in meeting their needs, and educators are in a unique role to provide crucial support. When a family appears to be struggling, consider reaching out to them directly. Check in to see how the family is doing and normalize that all families need help sometimes.

- Provide families with information about the resources and services available at school and in the community.
- Consider identifying a “point person” at your school for family resource needs. This person may be able to help brainstorm solutions to provide families before CPS may need to be called.
- Create a bulletin board or community resource hub that makes information visible and easily accessible for everyone.
 - o Families may not respond to offers of assistance, especially at first. Listening to families as they identify their needs is a great and effective way to learn about what will work – or won’t work – for each family.

Continue to center the family. Regardless of child welfare involvement and whether or not the child is in the parent’s home, in most cases the parent(s) remains the legal guardian and most consistent person in a child’s life. They should continue to be invited to school meetings and events, as well as informed of a child’s progress at school.

Partner with child welfare professionals. Participate in multidisciplinary meetings with the family, child welfare professional and other service providers when able. Collaboration can help create a system for regular communication and partnership focused on how to best support the child or youth and their family.

Barron County Partners with Schools to Put Families First

The Barron County Department of Health and Human Services and Barron County schools work closely together to provide ongoing and meaningful support to children, families and each other.

Barron County and its school district share a commitment to do what’s best for children and families. They also understand that doing what’s best for children and families means working together, across systems – child welfare, schools, public health – to provide fuller, stronger support and keep more children safely in their homes.

Their partnership is built on collaboration and communication. They meet frequently to share updates and information about the work being done in schools and Barron County, to set goals and to plan next steps for things like grants and trainings. School and child welfare professionals in Barron County communicate openly with each other and make time to ask and answer questions about options for families, decisions made and more.

This relationship-building is reflected in how Barron County and its schools work with families. School and child welfare professionals will be present in calls or meetings with families, and they consider support options and next steps together. Consistent and open communication is valued in these spaces, too, so families understand the process and expectations for situations like truancy proceedings.

By working together, Barron County and its schools demonstrate what meaningful partnership – for and with children and families – looks like.



Additional Resources

What is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators - a guide for educators that provides an overview of child welfare and describes how educators and child welfare professionals can work together.

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-welfare-guide-educators/>

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators - a resource that provides educators and school administrators with information about how to best work with children who have experienced trauma.

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-trauma-toolkit-educators>