

## Barriers & Grassroots Efforts to Family Engagement - A Workshop

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*Family Engagement Panel by Louisiana based organizations at the Spring 2019 STEM Learning Ecosystems Community of Practice Convening in New Orleans, LA in April 2019.*

**Speakers:** Heather Kleiner, North Louisiana STEM Alliance; Toccara Huckaby, North Louisiana STEM Alliance; Ebony Mitchell, North Louisiana STEM Alliance; Victoria Dymock, Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Partnership in Western New York (Buffalo, NY) and Wendy Mistretta, Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Partnership in Western New York (Buffalo, NY)

This Ecosystem to Ecosystem, E2E, workshop reviews promising practices the North Louisiana STEM Alliance and the Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Partnership have found to resolve common barriers to effective family engagement in their work.

The Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Partnership (ISEP) works to enhance STEM educational experiences in Buffalo, New York public schools. ISEP mentions the two most common barriers encountered in their family engagement work: 1) a limited understanding of STEM by parents and families; and 2) a disconnect between teachers and other school personnel and parents or guardians.

To address such challenges, ISEP uses grassroots efforts to inform parents about the greater education system and the importance of STEM. Part of such programming, includes the provision of stipends for parents attending these professional learning meetings. Based on feedback from guardian participants, ISEP learned these stipends made family members feel like equals and that their time and input was valued.

“True engagement requires challenging our assumptions,” says Wendy Mistretta, president of the Buffalo Public School’s District Parent Coordinating Council and member of the ISEP STEM Ecosystem. “One of the big things is this idea of ‘being’ versus ‘doing’. I hear a lot of what we’re doing, but it’s a challenge the ‘being.’ To me the ‘being’ of parent engagement is the true valuing of the collaboration.”

ISEP hosts a day long Parent STEM Retreat, which serves as a space for families to get to know each other and discuss common concerns and share experiences. A Saturday Camp for parents is held at the Buffalo Museum of Science, giving families a voice and a safe space to use that voice. The program is held within a STEM learning environment to promote greater comfort in that setting for all families. ISEP also hosts a student summit, similar to a science fair, which includes families as active partners alongside teachers and students.

*“It’s about building those interpersonal relationships and really getting to know who you are working with and being creative and being able to work from where they’re at,” says Victoria Dymock, project manager for ISEP.*

During the workshop, pre-existing, multi-generational attitudes towards school and the school

system came up as another real barrier to deep family engagement. A culture where teachers are to be respected as figures of authority can inform a guardian's understanding of their role in their child's education. Ecosystem leaders explain there is not one solution to address myths about the roles of families and educators.

The presenting ecosystems discuss building relationships with the community as a promising strategy to engage families. Involvement with local community parent groups or associations working with parents help facilitate trust and communication.

ISEP leaders note the significance of acknowledging every parent has something to offer and helping them find out what their contributions can be. "Truly meeting meeting families where they are means sometimes accepting parents for doing the best they know how to do. Then we communicate with them to explain that we hope they can do more," Mistretta says.

Organizations and ecosystems must collaborate with families to build or adapt activities around their own skills. Collaborating with families helps ecosystem partners create programming that helps families teach children about STEM in practice on a day to day basis.

The application of growth mindset to family engagement work was identified as an effective practice in Buffalo and Louisiana. Growth mindset, the belief that abilities can be developed through effort and practice, is a concept that can be applied to both educator and family interaction with children.

Despite the main challenges identified by session attendees including time constraints, limited transportation access, lack of communication, funding constraints, and limited participation, the session outlined several ways ecosystems could better partner with families. Barriers exist, however must not be used as an excuse to not attempt better engagement, communication and collaboration practices.