

Family interviews

An approach to learning about students' interests, assets and challenges from students and families.

Team-based practices are approaches that leverage multiple adults in order to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

Strategy: Educator teams begin the process of learning about students by engaging students and families in a family interview at the start of the year.

Frequency and duration: Once, at the start of the year.

Adapted from: [Big Picture Learning](#)

Educators at Big Picture schools understand that to teach students effectively, you must first know them. Holding family interviews at the start of the year requires a substantial time investment, but the pay-off is worth it. Educator teams hear multiple perspectives on student interests, assets and challenges, which is a key first step in meaningfully deepening and personalizing student learning. Building relationships with families from a place of honoring their knowledge and care for students helps cement school-family partnership and ensure fruitful future collaboration. Read on to explore an adaptation of Big Picture Learning's family interviews.

▶ The educator team develops interview questions

The educator team develops a set of interview questions for students. Taken together, the questions are intended to help the educator team better understand student interests, assets and challenges.

Example questions:

- What do you like to do in school?
- What do you like to do at home?
- What is your favorite thing to learn about?
- What is something you're good at?
- What is something you'd like to improve on?
- How do you learn new things?

Once the list of questions is finalized, the team creates a second, parallel set of questions for sharing with families. (E.g., If the team plans to ask students, "What do you like to do in school?" then they rewrite the question for families as, "What does your student like to do in school?")

Tip: Do you know families' home languages? If so, engage a translator to create versions of the family-facing questions in the appropriate languages. Interpretation may also be needed for the interviews.

▶ The educator team plans the flow of family interviews

Educator teams determine the agenda and flow for family interviews. Interviews often include greetings, student interviews, comparison of student and family perspectives and open discussion.

Example agenda:

- Greeting: We will take a moment to introduce ourselves.
- Setting the purpose: We will discuss the goal of our time together today.
- Student interview: The student will share about their interests, assets and challenges in response to interview questions. Educator team members will take notes on their responses.
- Exchanging perspectives: Families will review the written record of student's responses, while students will review the written record of family members' responses.
- Discussion: We will discuss similarities and differences in our perspectives about the student's interests, assets and challenges. We will talk together about how we can use our learning about the student's interests, assets and challenges to ensure we are supporting the student this upcoming school year.

▶ **The educator team manages scheduling and family communication**

Accommodate working adults by scheduling interviews at mutually available times. Work to meet transportation needs by considering off-site meetings or providing transportation vouchers, if needed. Determine how many families should be in the space at a time and how many educators will participate in each interview. (Ideally, the entire educator team could meet with a student's family to engage in the interview process, but this may not be feasible with a large roster of students.)

In an initial communication, the educator team shares the following with families:

- The purpose of family interviews
- The list of family-facing interview questions
- Directions for how and when to respond to the family-facing interview questions
- The flow of a typical family interview
- The interview sign-up process
- Offer of resources like transportation vouchers and interpretation

Teams might opt to send home hard copies of questions or digital copies via email. They might request that families return responses in advance of interviews or bring their responses to interviews. The approach a team takes should align with and be responsive to what the team knows about families' communication preferences and access to reliable internet.

▶ **Students, families and educators engage in interviews**

During family interviews, students, families and educator team members gather together to engage in the process they outlined during their planning. The educator team records responses to questions and tracks action steps that may have been generated during discussion.

▶ **The educator team debriefs**

Educator teams typically engage in debrief conversations following a cycle of family interviews. These conversations are important, as they are an opportunity to stamp next steps; ensure all team members have the opportunity to learn about all students; ensure all team members know where to access interview responses should they wish to consult them at a later date; and discuss changes they might make in order to improve upon the cycle for the next school year.

Why educators, students and families enjoy this practice

Family interviews provide educators with a unique and personalized diagnostic for each student, giving the educator team keen insights into students' interests, strengths, challenges and learning styles. Additionally, they forge strong, positive relationships with families, the necessary foundation for partnership to support student success.

Considerations for implementing this practice

Generate a back-up plan: Changing work schedules, care for family members and last-minute transportation challenges are just a few of the reasons families may be unable to attend interviews held on school grounds at pre-established times. Consider how the team can ensure all students and families have the opportunity to engage in family interviews even if they are unable to attend at their scheduled time. Big Picture schools typically conduct family interviews as part of home visits, but teams might also consider video conferencing for a remote interview and discussion.

Be patient with the process: Family interviews represent a change from traditional practices and, as with any change, students, families and the educator team may experience bumps along the way as they adopt this different approach. Families may have had negative experiences with school communication and/or home visits in the past. Be patient with the process and intentional in communication, and remember that the move to family interviews aligns with the goal of deepening and personalizing learning for students.