

Partnering with Schools



Key takeaways from the second of five sessions for social service professionals who want to improve outreach to kin caregivers

Experts: **Dr. Barbara Boone** is the director of the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, at The Ohio State University. **Dr. Angela Tobin** leads the Kinship Caregivers Connect program in Ohio.

Why This Topic Is Important: Schools (including early childhood education settings) are the one place most kinship/grandfamilies are guaranteed to be found. School staff can help identify kinship/grandfamilies in need of support and promote programs to a ready-made audience.

“So it was after my daughter got in trouble and we got her five kids and they were going to school, that the school sent home a plain white envelope to give to me. And in there was about grandparents raising grandchildren [...]. And when I went to the group, I just sat there and cried because I didn't know that it was anyone else going through this. I didn't know there were solutions to certain things that I was going through [...]. And as I began to talk about things, they were so supportive and they said, ‘Oh, I went through that. This is what you do.’ It was just amazing.”

– Victoria Gray, GRAND Voice

How to Partner with Schools

- ▶ **Understand barriers that may exist when establishing partnerships with schools.**
 - Your program may serve families located in multiple counties, making it difficult to build relationships with schools in each locale.

- Outreach to schools sometimes means getting sent from one person to another to another, none of whom see the immediate value of connecting with your organization. Keeping at it and staying positive and proactive are critical.
- ▶ **Identify some entry points in your local school system—the “open doors.”**
 - Find out how the school districts you serve are organized. Identify the titles of people who might be able to help. At the district level, it might be the person in charge of student support services or vulnerable youth populations or special education. Look for the person whose role is focused on working with outside family-serving organizations, for example, director for partnerships or community relations. At the school level, the school counselor might be a good place to start. Principals, assistant principals, school social workers, and family liaisons or ambassadors are also good possibilities.
 - Think about how you can make someone’s job easier even as you ask them for something. How can you be a resource for them? For example, you might provide fliers directing grandfamilies to community services or offer to make a presentation to staff members on how to address grandfamilies’ needs.
- ▶ **Engage schools to identify and connect with the grandfamilies they serve.** Identifying families is important; most kinship families are not part of the child welfare system and therefore have no official status.
 - Schools know their families—they know who picks a child up from school every day, signs permission forms, shows up at “parent” conferences, etc.
 - Caregivers are part of the team that advocates for educational supports, like 504 plans or individualized education plans/programs (IEPs).

“We had a call from an 82-year-old grandmother caring for an eighth-grader and she was desperately looking for a tutor. She had called the Help Network and they referred her to us. And I called the educational service center and they just told me to call the local district. So I called the local district and I was passed around and passed around and passed around. It felt like I was invading their territory.”

– Professional from an Area Agency on Aging

- ▶ **Help school personnel (counselors, teachers, administrators, nurses) become aware of the needs of grandfamilies in their community.**
 - Schools may be unfamiliar with the terms “kinship family” and/or “grandfamily,” just as kin caregivers are.
 - Schools need to know that the education system is just one of many systems grandfamilies must navigate, which can be exhausting and overwhelming. But there is also an opportunity for schools to assist families by partnering with other systems, kinship navigator programs, and/or community-based organizations that typically serve these families.
 - Schools may not be aware of the unique dynamics of kinship families, for example, the legal obstacles to school enrollment or the trauma children may have experienced in their parents’ care.
- ▶ **Help schools recognize the benefits of partnering to reach grandfamilies.**
 - Schools have a commitment to their students beyond academic success.
 - Know your “why.” This is your five-minute pitch. What is kinship care and why is it important to support kinship families?

According to Dr. Tobin:

“A lot of times kinship families, especially the kids in care, can benefit from many different supports. Recognizing the role of trauma in children’s lives before coming into care can be important as well. So, when a child is coming into care, they might not have had the medical care they needed before. They might have not always had that academic support. They might have not always had X, Y, and Z, whatever it is. So really getting those supports in place for families, especially early on, is crucial for supporting their wellbeing and the caregiver’s wellbeing. But it can be really overwhelming for caregivers. So how can we all come together to support the child and family? And also, just knowing if a child is in a kinship family, maybe this is something to keep an eye on to see how they are doing in school and see if more supports are needed. It can be considered a yellow flag. Try to focus on the strengths of families as well.”

- Understand the school’s “why.”

Dr. Boone:

“Schools are about academics. When schools are assessed as to whether or not they are effective, we’re assessing student math achievement or attendance, graduation rates, what kids are doing after they leave that school, what are they prepared for?”

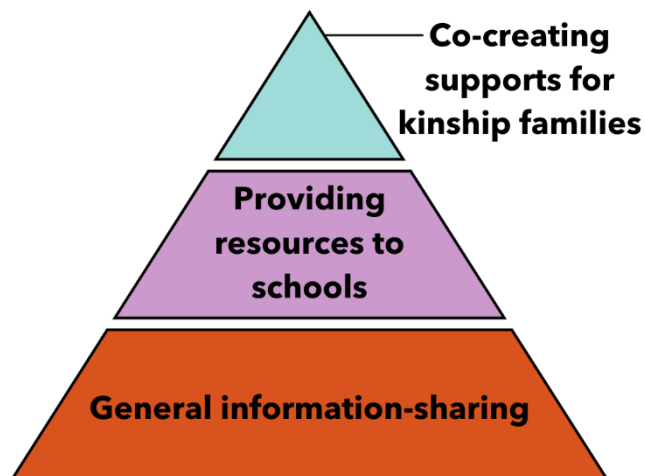
“And if you're speaking about a child in particular, you might reference how much that child is missing school. Chronic absenteeism, which is missing 10% [or more school days in an academic year], is an issue across the country, in every state. Everyone is trying to figure out how do we improve attendance.

“[Support for kin caregivers] is going to support this student and their family. So, they will be able to attend school more regularly. They'll be there every day. We know that when we support grandparents, we see academic success improve. Share those things, so their ‘why’ and your supports come together and they see [your work] as really contributing to what they're doing.”

Dr. Tobin:

“Kinship families are so important for child wellbeing in many different ways in terms of their safety, stability and permanency, mental and behavioral health outcomes, improved attendance and academic performance, and also being more connected to their culture and their family identity.”

Tiered Partnerships with Schools



Institutions often adopt a tiered approach to tailor services to client needs. This model may help school personnel envision the level of collaboration that would be most useful to their families, starting with less intense collaborations at the bottom of the pyramid.

► Tier 1: Share General Information

- Share fliers and fact sheets. (Check out this [sample flier](#) from the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center.)
- Connect through mailing lists and social media.
- Attend community and school events.

► Tier 2: Provide Resources to Schools

- Provide professional development opportunities, such as [Grandfamilies 101](#).
- Provide toolkits and strategies.

- Connect individually with school professionals.
- ▶ **Tier 3: Co-Create Supports for Kinship Families**
 - Create kinship-focused programs and events in schools. This can include support group sessions right after drop-off or before pick-up. (See this [resource for starting support groups.](#))
 - Identify and connect caregivers to resources.
 - Enlist caregivers as program co-creators. (See this [resource for engaging kin caregivers.](#))

Resources

- ▶ [GrandUnderstandings](#), from the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at The Ohio State University
- ▶ [Research Brief: School Family Engagement with Grandfamilies in Mind: Research-based Strategies for Educators Engaging Grandfamilies](#)
- ▶ [Webinar: Kinship Connections – How schools can partner with kinship families](#)
- ▶ [Education Podcast: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#)

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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