

This transcript of the T/TAC William & Mary podcast ***Family Engagement, Michael Andrews, Director of Leadership Development, Flamboyant Foundation, Washington, D.C.***

***Intro Music.***

**Cami Williams:** Alright hi, my name is Cami Williams and I am with TTAC William & Mary and today we are going to have a conversation about family engagement. Thinking about the population of students that we work with at TTAC, students with disabilities and also students that do not have a disability, family engagement is essential and is very important to student learning. So I'm joined today by Michael Andrews who is going to talk to us today about why family engagement is so essential to student success and what effective student engagement looks like and then we are going to wrap it up with how administrators, educators, and parents can work together to make sure that they are building those effective relationships between the schools and the communities and parents. So let me give you a little bit of information about Michael Andrews. He is a man that has a big passion for education and motivating any and every one he comes in contact with. He also has served as the keynote speaker for our 2017 MOVE Conference that is sponsored by the I'm Determined Project that is sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education. He comes to us from Brooklyn, NY, born to Cuban and Trinidadian immigrant parents, having received both his masters and bachelor degrees from James Madison University he is a very proud double Duke and has worked in the educational realm for over 15 years spanning from elementary to colleague level and he is currently the Director for Leadership Development at Flamboyant Foundation with one of the office location in Washington, D.C. and the great thing about Flamboyant and why he is just a perfect person for us to talk to today is that Flamboyant Foundation's focus is improving family engagement as a needs to accelerate student learning. Did I cover everything Mr. Andrews?

**Michael Andrews:** It sounds perfect. Thank you.

**Cami:** You're welcome. So let's just open up our conversation today with why family engagement is so important to schools and to parents and students.

**Michael:** Great. Well, thank you first for that great introduction. It's always a little uncomfortable to hear all those things about yourself, but I appreciate it. First of all, why family engagement? So based on tons of research we know that families and students that are engaged with teachers you will see reduced dropout rates and higher graduation rates so families that are better engaged with teachers and so on and so forth like will have a stronger connection to stay in school. We know also that families that are engaged, students have higher level of achievement so we will see higher GPAs, we will see students that are more involved in school and out of school.

Students will have a higher persistence and attitude towards learning in general. There is just better social skills for students when families and educators are engaged so those are just some small, I guess they are big examples why family engagement is important. And we also know that when we are looking at schools that are turning around, so schools that might be in different urban or rural or isolated environments, whenever you are trying to school around, family engagement is one of the measures that will... A school can't get better if families are not engaged. So for those reasons we know that family engagement is really important.

**Cami:** I really like the statement you made that schools can't get better if families are not involved and engaged because I think that when you work in a building so often you kind of have tunnel vision that everything that is going to make your school successful is going to happen within those four walls and that is just not the case so I'm really glad that you made that statement. So again for TTAC working with students with disabilities, we know that family engagement is extremely essential and is necessary. One obviously for the IEP process, but beyond that I want administrators, educators, and parents alike that are listening to really understand that there is so much more to creating an effective relationship with their families and with the schools that goes beyond that IEP meeting and getting those legal documents signed. That's huge. We need it. It's necessary. We get it, but there's also some things that can happen to create a richer learning environment for the students when the administrators, parents, and teachers are working together. Let's move into what effective family engagement looks like.

**Michael:** Sure. So since that was a framework for effective family engagement, what we usually talk about and what we are thinking about is what type of foundation is that. What type of foundation of effective family engagement? That's really the relationship between the teacher, the educator, and the student, and the family and that relationship has to be one that is a trusting relationship. So students have to trust the teachers, teachers have to trust the families, teachers have to trust the students, and with that added foundation that is what is going to make family engagement really effective. What also boosts and what leads to the trusting relationship is ongoing communication so we know that when parents, when families and educators are in constant or regular contact that it will lead to more academic partnering and academic results for students. Now the thing that is different. I wouldn't even say different. The thing that is just important to note is that when you and I might have gone to school, years and years ago that ongoing communication was different right because a lot of times our schools were in our neighborhoods. Effective family engagement back in the golden days meant that families had to come to school. It meant that how many people are at back to school night? How many people came to parent teacher conferences? How many people assisted with PTA and went to bake sale. In 2017 or 2018 and

leading into the future there is so many different ways that we know our students are communicating with each other. We know that parents and kids are on cell phones in 3rd and 4th grade and so ongoing communication between teachers and families also have to evolve to be a little bit more reflective of the 21st century. Where it's perfectly acceptable and should be a common practice where teachers and families are emailing often or as necessary. Even text messaging. It's a common practice for teachers in younger grades to take pictures of their students and send them to parents. Hey look Mike was very active today. He made this awesome painting and thought it would be great for you to see your son in action. Those are things that are going to develop trust. It's going to show that the teacher has the student's best interest in mind. That small little text message or email or conversation can have huge gains in the mind of the parent, especially students with disabilities. I think it is really, really more so important for educators that work with and teach students with disabilities to think more outside of the box when it comes to how they communicate with families.

**Cami:** Absolutely. I think we often talk to educators about you know. Don't let something bad happen in your classroom and have that be the first contact you make with the parent because their pretty much in the dark when their student is at school all day and they are at work or at home or wherever they are so letting the parent in to what is happening is absolutely essential and I like that idea about building the trust because all relationships have to have a high level of trust if they are going to work and family relationships with the school are no different. Is there is anything as far as what effective family engagement looks like that you want to speak to as far as administrators are concerned?

**Michael:** Yes, definitely. I mean administrators whether it is assistant principals, principals, all educators in the building really have a responsibility to create an environment where family engagement is not just an afterthought.

**Cami:** Alright so you talked about trust being extremely important in building those relationships. So can you talk to us a little bit about how the administrators in the building what their role is in creating family engagement opportunities and relationships within their school.

**Michael:** Sure. So with administrators they are setting the example. They are leading the school in all ways so whether it's the principal, assistant principals or really everyone in the building has the responsibilities, especially leaders for there to be a family engagement mind set in the building. So not that is just something that you do, but family engagement is something that we kind of have to live and it is just as important as instruction, just as important as student safety, it's as important as the leadership itself is how much administrators encourage and make family engagement

an interval part and to the daily fabric of the school. That should be something that administrators specifically are leading the charge.

**Cami:** Family engagement is something that you live. You say some really great points because that is really extremely important. It is just as important as instruction and I think sometimes in the hustle and bustle of day to day running of a building that idea can get lost.

**Michael:** Definitely.

**Cami:** So to round this out and kind of put everything together let's talk about how the three stakeholders here. The administrators, the educators, and the parents can all work together to create this relationship.

**Michael:** Sure so when you think about the role that family play in their students' lives and this is the example I like to use, not the example but the analogy I like to use is that families are the expert of their child. Everything that happens in the child's life teachers can absolutely benefit from knowing as much as they need to or want to know about that student outside of the classroom. It's the same way that families would benefit from the information that teachers and educators have of their child in the classroom. The educator is the expert of what happens to the child in the classroom and the parent is the expert of what happens to the child outside of the classroom. So what we really want to do is merge those things together and we really want to enable families to play some really important roles throughout their K-12 or K-16 educational experience. In the roles that I like to think about it are we want to help parents communicate high expectations to students. Right?

**Cami:** Right.

**Michael:** So we think about that role is, you know we assume and I think the number one mind set to have is that parents want the best for their kids. Right? Ever parent in the world, you know minus a few very, very, very small outliers wants to see their kid to do the best they can do in school. But what if the parent doesn't know quote on quote what "best is". What is the best that this student can do in school so that parents can communicate that to their kids at home? So that's one role we want parents to play that to communicate high expectations. We want parents to be able to monitor their child's performance so what does that mean. Weather there is a system that your school works with or whether there is an online system or an old school grade book that parents should have access to. We want parents to know how their student is doing. There should never ever be a time where a parent has to go to an eight year old and say, "how are you doing in math"? Because guess what? That eight year old will say "fine" and we don't want to put the responsibility on the student. Whatever parents and educators can do to help with that. We want parents to be able to support learning at

home so the way things are going now, I talked about this before, but the way you did math when were in school and the way I did math when I was in school, is very different than the way kids are doing math in school now. So we want parents to have the tools to be able to help students at home do their work. Whatever their work is. We don't want parents to have to reteach or get their teaching license, but we do want them to be able support them the best way that they can. So we want parents to also be able to guide their child's education. That's different than monitor. Monitor is knowing how the student is doing in the classes you know specific grades. Guide your students education is you know we all know that when you get into high school if you are preparing for college and life after college everything is about your course sequence. Like what classes you take in sequential order that's going to prepare you for life after high school. That's really guiding the child education so that parents are going to want to have as much information as possible to help that process. And lately it's we want to help parents advocate for their child so that means Jessie is in remedial math, but maybe he might be able to take advance this one quarter. So how do we provide parents with information when they could advocate for their child with as much information as they have. So that was really long winded, but the primary thing to take away from that is teachers need information about students from families and families need information about what is happening in school from educators to best play their individual role and come together to support student success. That's really what I'm saying.

**Cami:** That was excellent and I think what I'm leaning from that is the same way that we are to approach our students with high expectations we need to do the same for the parents and the families that we work with and like you said have that expectation that they want the best from their child. However things seem to look from the teacher's perspective sometimes we get a lot of, "Well the parent hasn't called" you know "I haven't heard from the parent", but you want to go in assuming and understanding that the parent for what it looks like for them, they do want the best for their child while they are with you. A couple things that I wanted to end with that you said. You said that we want administrators and teachers to live family engagement and it's more than just the simple communication of "here's a progress report" and "here is access to this system where you can check to see what your child is doing in my classroom". It has to go beyond that because that is where you begin to build trust. Right now those are very basic things, you know. Here's there grade, here is this progress report, but that is not allowing the parent into what is happening in the classroom and in order to build that trust you have to do that. By doing so you are empowering the parent to communicate those high expectations that you should have in the classroom. You are allowing them to communicate that at home and you are also empowering them to advocate for their children which we know for students with disabilities is extremely important. Our I'm Determined project which is sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education is all about that and it is about the self-advocacy so if we can reach the parents and allow the

parents to begin to learn what it looks like to advocate for their child than we can definitely use that as a spring board to get the child to begin to advocate for themselves because as you pointed out we talk about K-12, but after those years of public education those students need to be able to take those skills on their own and learn to advocate for themselves and be self-determined and have control over what's happening in their lives and they are not going to be able to do that if we don't show them what that looks like. That starts to with the parents.

**Michael:** That is very true.

**Cami:** Thank you. I like all the points that you pointed out here today and I hope that all administrators, teachers, and parents that might listen to this will walk away with an idea, a goal or something to work on or strive towards as far as their engagement is concerned with the other stack holders. So for a parent what can I do better to communicate to the teacher so that the teacher is getting the best from my child. As a teacher or administrator what can I do to make sure that I'm bringing the parent in so that I'm able to best reach their student? Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion?

**Michael:** I think you summed it up perfectly. Family engagement is just as important as the other facets that make up a school building and that's really how everyone should be thinking and thank you for having me. I hopefully I've added some thoughts for people to think about.

**Cami:** Thank you Mr. Andrews for talking with me today.

**Michael:** Thank you.

***Ending Music***