

Issue: **Effective Teacher-Parent Communication**

Parent support and interest, more than any other factor, explains why certain students and schools outperform others according to many educators and researchers.¹ Around the globe, educators search for how to engage in successful teacher-parent communications and relationships to promote academic success. Because you are a parent's first and main contact, it's crucial for you to have effective and reliable communication between home and school. Here are some tips:

Strategies to Consider:

Start early. First impressions do matter! It takes only seven seconds to make a first impression, so jump straight to success. Send e-mails or letters home on the first day (or at least the first week of school) introducing yourself and letting parents know how to contact you.

Encourage a parent share. Ask parents to share information about their child that they think will lead to them having a successful year. Parents want a competent teacher who knows and cares about their child. Ask parents to tell you about their kids' strengths, needs, learning styles, and hopes for the year. One of the best ways to begin a conversation when meeting a parent for the first time is "Please tell me about your child. After all, you know her/him better than anyone here at school does."

Ask parents to contact you if there are any issues or events that will impact their child's performance. To make parents feel comfortable in sharing information you must be able to pledge that you will handle the information professionally. To encourage parents, you might send out small reminders of "Things you can do to help me" every few months. A proactive approach can help reassure those parents who otherwise might conceal information because they are afraid a teacher will think less of their child.

Be positive, plus make one or two brief positive calls, emails, or texts home every few weeks. If poor progress or bad behavior is all you communicate to parents, parents understandably will be defensive. Your positive plus calls are a good time to touch base with parents generally. Asking for parent input should not be a one-time event!

Keep it up. Throughout the school year, engage parents successfully by keeping them informed. Not all parents will be able to receive telephone calls or emails at work. Not all families will have internet access at home. Most people do have cell phones, however. Regardless of the system of

¹Education Testing Service. 2007. *Standards, Accountability and Flexibility: Americans Speak on No Child Left Behind Reauthorization*. Princeton, NJ.

contact between teachers and parents, as long as there is a synchronized effort to communicate between school and home, academic motivation is higher and absenteeism and problem behaviors are lower.

Use e-mail for simple things. Parents tend to be the ones who initiate e-mails, usually to get updates on how their child is doing grade-wise, to find out what they are missing, or how their child can improve the grade they currently have. While simple, factual information may be alright for e-mails, any discussion of personal issues should be shared through phone calls or in person, for everyone's protection.

Buffer your feedback. When you report negative information to parents it is vital to always include something positive and specific. Then state your concern, followed by a concrete suggestion for a way the child can improve: "John participates well in class. He is eager to join the discussions. But I have some worrying news. His grade is a D. I have trouble getting him to turn in his completed homework. If he does this, he could improve his grade to a solid C." This is respectful and offers a hopeful way for both you and the parent to collaborate on ways to resolve the situation.

Respond with empathy. Parents may get nervous about talking with their child's teacher for many reasons. Most want to make a good impression and be a strong ally for their child. What they might not reveal is how uncomfortable they feel when trying to communicate with you as a school official, whether that's due to language or cultural differences or their own past experiences with school. Some parents believe they lack the know-how and resources to "make" their child behave better, or they may be frustrated with school bureaucracies or policies they find impossible to understand or change. "You have a point." "I hear what you're saying." "I know we both want this to work out for your daughter/son." Using neutral words and phrases can help you come to an understanding with a parent and keep a conversation from becoming disagreeable – without meaning that you agree or give in!

Suggest recommended study skills and home conditions to support learning. While many parents may not feel they can respond to specific homework problems or writing assignments, they can be involved in ensuring their child has a suitable place and time to study at home and the equipment s/he needs to do their homework. Let parents know that by asking about homework and what their children are learning they are supporting the learning process. Building parent responsibilities helps reaffirm the life lesson that students are being taught – accepting responsibility. (See academictips.org.)

Explain your class expectations. If your courses have web sites, advise parents to check your course website regularly for key information about their child's grades, any missing assignments, dates for tests

and projects, and expectations for each unit of study. Let parents know exactly whom to contact if they have problems with your website. Suggest that key dates be written on a family calendar at home.

Know your community. Understand issues related to your school community's demographics and culture. Most parent-teacher problems stem from misunderstandings. Some single parents, for example, may work two jobs and lack transportation and childcare, and therefore are not able to meet for teacher conferences during regular school hours. They are not "lazy" or "uncaring" parents. Instead, your school may need to hold teacher conferences on evenings or weekend mornings to accommodate such families.

Team up. When you anticipate an angry parent in a conference, have another teacher or administrator who works with the child in the meeting with you, too. Meaningful parent involvement is accomplished by a team approach, where teachers, principals, the district and the parents giving the same message.

Also consider:

Center for social organization of schools (Johns Hopkins University)

Parent, family, community involvement in education (an NEA Policy Brief)

Study skills

Hill, N.E. & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology* 45(3),740-763.