

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS: STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract

Teachers strive to establish partnerships with parents to support student learning. Strong communication is fundamental to this partnership and to building a sense of community between home and school. In these changing times, teachers must continue to develop and expand their skills in order to maximize effective communication with parents. This article presents a range of communication opportunities available to teachers, including the emerging use of technology. Some of these practical suggestions may seem very basic to those already actively promoting parental involvement, but unfortunately, many teachers have not been trained in nor are they practicing proactive communication with parents. Barriers to effective communication are considered in conjunction with potential solutions.

Keywords: parent involvement, teacher-parent relationships, school-home partnerships, communication

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, schools and parents are responding to increased expectations, economic pressures, and time constraints. In these changing times, effective partnerships between teachers and parents become even more essential to meet the needs of the children they "share." Indeed, Epstein (1995) describes communicating with parents as one of six major types of parent involvement practices critical to establishing strong working relationships between teachers and parents. Cultivating the teacher-parent relationship is also considered vital to the development of schools as learning communities (Schussler, 2003). Unfortunately, many teachers are not specifically trained in the skills they need to communicate effectively with parents (Hradecky, 1994; LawrenceLightfoot, 2004). Because school communication practices are so fundamental to involving families in the education process, Caspe (2003) suggests that teacher preparation and professional development programs should actively promote the development of communication skills for teachers. The goal of this article is to outline a range of communication opportunities and strategies to maximize partnerships with parents. Barriers to effective communication are also considered, as well as potential solutions.

AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication may involve impressions created or words expressed. In fact, communication begins with the welcome sign when the parent first enters the school building (Chambers, 1998). Welcome signs reflecting the range of ethnic languages spoken in the school community create an even more inviting atmosphere (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). The next impression may be the smile or, conversely, lack of acknowledgement by office staff. Parents may also be positively influenced by the cleanliness of the school grounds, student artwork on the walls, and the sounds in the hallway. A "customer-friendly" school environment reflects how highly communication with parents is valued by school staff (Chambers, 1998). Expressed communication involves one-way or two-way exchanges (Berger, 1991). One-way communication occurs when teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or student progress through a variety of sources, such as an introductory letter at the beginning of the school year, classroom or school

newsletters, report cards, communication books, radio announcements, school Web sites, and so on. Two-way communication involves interactive dialogue between teachers and parents. Conversations may occur during telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities. Teachers should actively incorporate both strategies to maximize sharing information with parents.

ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION

“Written communication is probably the most efficient and effective way we can provide valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home” (Williams & Cartledge, 1997, p. 30). Written communication is a permanent product that requires careful consideration regarding format and content. The goal is to organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it. Newsletters are commonly used to share written information with a parent community. Consistent application of several specific strategies can make classroom and school newsletters even more effective communication tools. Teachers should incorporate the same color, quality, and paper size for all newsletters to create a communication “set;” use everyday language (a readability level of sixth grade or lower; many word processing programs include an option that will automatically show readability levels); and ensure grammar, spell checks, and proofing of the information (Aronson, 1995). Chambers (1998) further proposes that schools develop a descriptive brochure to provide helpful information for new families moving into the school community. School-to-home notebooks are another commonly used written communication technique. Many teachers use daily communication books to share information with parents, particularly for children who have special learning needs. Several authors propose strategies to enhance the effectiveness of communication books (Davern, 2004; Williams & Cartledge, 1997). Initially, it is important to clearly establish what information will be communicated, by whom, and how often. Teachers should be sensitive to a balance of good and bad news contained in the message, and educational “jargon” should be avoided. The use of titles (such as Mr, Mrs., Ms.) establishes respect in the relationship. To maximize efficiency, alternate day or twice weekly notes may be adequate, as long as the communication is frequent enough to

engage parents and to monitor student success. Finally, Davern (2004) notes that it is important to consider when a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate than a written exchange, depending on the issue. Report cards are the traditional mode of conveying permanent, written evaluative information regarding student progress. Report cards should be clear and easy for parents to understand. These records should provide an analysis of academic development across content areas, information about student strengths and learning style, an assessment of the child's social development, specific goals for the student to work on, and associated suggestions for the parent (Aronson, 1995). Report cards also generally provide an invitation for the parent to respond, usually in written format. Teachers should review parental responses in a timely manner to determine any required follow-up. Carefully prepared report cards, coupled with parent conferences as needed, provide effective communication regarding student learning. Significantly, teachers can prevent confrontations with parents by ensuring that the report card is not the first communication when concerns exist. Rather, frequent progress reports phone calls, and/or e-mail messages should support and improve student performance prior to the traditional report card (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1998). Teachers have used a range of other creative approaches to communicate with parents. Grande (2004), for example, created "literacy bags" which were sent home with first-grade students. These were developed to help parents understand grade-level expectations and to provide them with materials and specific activities to support literacy development in their child. Students took the bags home on a rotating basis, and parents were asked to contribute through a feedback journal. An independent survey of parents' understanding of grade-level expectations supported the effectiveness of this approach.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Two-way communication occurs when teachers and parents dialogue together. Effective dialogue "develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, and an appreciation of contrasting perspectives" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). A teacher may contact parents to celebrate a child's successful school experience. However, more frequently, the contact is to share a concern about the child, which can be a source of significant tension for both teachers

and parents alike. Teachers should strive to make these interactions as productive as possible. One popular communication strategy is a phone call home. As the teacher of a multi-age class, Gustafson (1998) called the parents of each child in her class monthly to discuss concerns or to answer questions. She noted that these contacts provided her with valuable information about the lives of her students, including extracurricular activities, bullying experiences, and a death in the family. Gustafson concluded that the solid academic performance of her students came, at least in part, from positive communication with parents by phone. Love (1996) advocates the use of “good news calls” to recognize the child for progress or a job well done as a way of promoting positive relations with parents. By keeping calls brief and leaving messages as needed, Ramirez (2002) developed an efficient way, during school hours, to contact all of his 160 high school students’ parents. He notes that these initial positive phone calls set the stage for more collaborative interactions later if needed, because parents were already an “ally.” Another traditional occasion for dialogue is the parent-teacher conference. Effective parent-teacher conferences are an opportunity to create a successful partnership, but they may be anxiety provoking for both teachers and parents alike (Minke & Anderson, 2003). Indeed, Metcalf (2001) suggests that “instead of viewing the conference as a reporting session for what is not working in school, teachers can construct an opportunity to discuss what is working with the student” (p. 18). Metcalf advocates a solution-focused approach based on past student successes in order to alleviate blame and move forward with an individualized intervention plan. Indeed, putting the child at the center of the parent-teacher conversation will allow for a focused discussion on the “whole child,” including both strengths and weaknesses (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). To be effective, parent-teacher conferences require thoughtful and welldeveloped planning. Price and Marsh (1985) developed a series of practical suggestions to address all aspects of the still traditional parent-teacher conference. In planning for the conference, Price and Marsh encourage teachers to select an appropriate meeting time and location, advise participants in advance, review the student file in advance, develop a clear purpose for the meeting, and identify information to be discussed including positive aspects of the child’s performance. Teachers are advised to begin the conference with a friendly comment and brief,

informal conversation and then to explain the student's progress in a straightforward way, carefully listening to parent input and ensuring time to summarize the discussion and plan recommendations. Establishing a specific time frame at the outset of the conference, followed by close adherence to the agenda, allows for more comfortable termination of the meeting. Lastly, teachers are encouraged to follow-up the meeting by preparing a written conference summary in line with school board policies. Additional follow-up activities might involve making appropriate referrals, discussions with relevant teachers, or planning specific instructions or strategies. Effective parent-teacher conferences also require important interpersonal skills on the part of the teacher (Evans, 2004; Perl,1995; Studer,1994). Communicating a genuine caring for people, building rapport, conveying interest and empathy, reflecting affect, and using clarifying statements to ensure an accurate understanding of parental views are all highlighted. Use of everyday language and a non-threatening tone encourages conversation. Appropriate open- and closed-ended questions also help gather information and seek parental input. Use of the S-O-L-E-R technique (Square posture, Open position, Lean toward the other, Eye contact, and Relaxed position; Egan, 1990) can help teachers ensure good listening skills. Perhaps most importantly, Lindle (1989) reports that surveyed parents wanted to be treated with respect and as equals when communicating with educators. Parents are not looking for a cold, professional approach from school staff. Rather, teachers who develop a "personal touch" in their communication style achieve enhanced school relationships. Similarly, teachers need to convey a value for the "authority and wisdom" of parents (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Parent-teacher conferences can also be a "prime situation for cross-cultural miscommunication" to occur (Quiroz, Greenfeld & Altchech, 1999, p. 68). Child-led conferences with Latino immigrant parents, for example, appeared to be culturally incompatible and ineffective. Rather, a group conference model was far better attended and more positively received by the participants. Thus, teachers need to consider whether the traditional conference approach will meet the communication needs of the parent community served.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

In recent years, educators have experimented with various technologies to communicate with parents in innovative and time-efficient ways. Integrating technology can help schools communicate quickly to a broad parent community (Ramirez, 2001). Classroom phones and voice mail, video technology, radio announcements, and school Web sites are all examples. Phones in each classroom permit teachers a flexible opportunity to contact parents from their classrooms when students are not present. Use of voice mail to augment phone communication has been specifically explored to enhance communication opportunities with parents. One creative teacher, for example, maintained a daily one-minute voice mail message for parents and students to call at the end of each day (Clemens-Brower, 1997). The recorded message provided updates on homework assignments, classroom highlights, and also invited parents and children to respond with a message of their own. Cameron & Lee (1997) conducted two studies to explore satisfaction by teachers and parents regarding the use of voice-mail technology. Findings demonstrated enhanced communication in both quality and quantity for upper elementary-aged students. Aronson (1995) further suggests that schools create a brief 10-minute video to welcome new families to the school including an introduction, tour of the school, portions of a “lesson in action,” and an invitation to become involved. One school expanded this idea and developed 50 short videos to be circulated to families on a variety of topics (Clevenson, 1999). For example, one 12-minute video outlined how parents could help their Grade 8 child with a science research project. Clevenson (1999) noted that this particular video significantly impacted student success by dramatically increasing the number of projects completed. The use of video technology has also proven effective as a communication tool for parents of students who have severe disabilities. Alberto, Mechling, Taber, and Thompson (1995) utilized progress videos, “picture report cards,” and video illustrations of procedures to encourage maintenance and generalization of new skills at home. Videos were also used for summer homeprogramming activities, to demonstrate successful integration activities, and to assist with transition planning. Parents reported the videos enhanced communication with teachers and understanding of their child’s school program (Alberto et al., 1995). Radio announcements are often used to provide specific information related to weather and school activities. However, one radio station and school

district took a novel approach and organized a series of “book reports” presented by 4th to 6th grade students (Winger, 1995). These brief radio reports communicated student achievement to the school community in a unique way.

Internet technology is the most recent tool used by schools to communicate to a parent community. Increasingly, school Web sites are used to convey a broad range of school information. Students often become involved with both the technology and the content of the Web site and may work together with teachers to create and maintain the site.

Teachers trained to use the school Web site can provide updates easily accessed by parents regarding homework assignments, test schedules, resource links, and so on. In fact, use of the internet can serve as an “interactive tool for individualizing homework and supporting the involvement of families in the homework process” (Salend, Duhaney, Anderson, & Gottschalk, 2004, p. 65). They noted a homework Web site can start with a simple format providing basic information to parents and students, and gradually increase in sophistication to create electronic assignment logs and individualized homework modifications for students, incorporating appropriate password protection. Technology also holds promise to allow teachers communication opportunities “not limited by school hours or location” (Brewer & Kallick, 1996, p. 181).

Student performances can be videotaped and presented to a larger audience at convenient times. Students may create digital portfolios that can be shared with parents on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, student learning plans may be accessed online, enabling goals and progress to be shared with parents.

Indeed, the capacity to link homes and schools with new technologies provides many novel opportunities to enhance communication with parents beyond the traditional formats.

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