
Core Function: Family Engagement in a School Community

**Effective Practice****Provide two-way, school-home communication linked to learning**

Overview: Schools must regularly communicate with families about their expectations and the importance of the “curriculum of the home.” This communication must be an ongoing, two-way conversation that is candid and supportive about student learning. Teachers can communicate to parents how they can promote their children’s learning at home through home reading/language activities, appropriate studying techniques, and interactive homework that involves parent input and engagement. Teachers and school staff will likely need professional development in order to promote culturally appropriate two-way communication. Frequent and ongoing substantive communication with families is essential and is made easier with electronic resources such as email, school management systems, and informative school websites.

Evaluate Your Practice: How can schools effectively communicate the importance of the curriculum of the home to families? What are other ways schools can facilitate two-way communication with families?

Introduction

Positive two-way communication between home and school, which involves listening as well as informing, sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect (Byrk & Schneider, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Unfortunately, many parents complain that they rarely hear from their child’s school unless there is a problem with behavior or student grades (NEA, 2008). Meta-analyses suggest that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate frequently and effectively will be successful (Jeynes, 2010). Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Epstein & Salinas, 1992, as cited in NEA, 2008; Redding, 2006).

Two-way school-home communication that is linked to student learning is a key component of effective family engagement, and schools must have candid and supportive ongoing conversations with families about how they can support their student’s learning outside the school day.¹ Effective research-based practices in these areas are described below.

How can schools effectively communicate the importance of the curriculum of the home to families?

A substantial amount of research has documented the influential role of the family in student learning and educational attainment (e.g., De Fraja, Oliveira, & Zanchi, 2010; Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013); family involvement in school may benefit low income and minority students the most (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research has also demonstrated that schools can improve their students’ learning by engaging parents in ways that directly relate to their children’s academic progress, maintaining a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Redding, 2000; Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the schooling years (Swap, 1993). This is vital for all students at all grade levels, in all settings (urban to rural), and even more so for those with disabilities and English language learners (CII, 2011).

¹Recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires each district to reserve at least 1% of its Title I funds to carry out parent and family engagement activities, with priority given to “high need” schools (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016).

The “curriculum of the home”—the bundle of attitudes, habits, knowledge and skills that children acquire through their relationship with their family and that facilitates their school learning—is more predictive of academic learning than the family’s socioeconomic status (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Redding, 2000, 2006). Walberg (2007) notes “cooperative efforts by parents and educators to modify alterable academic stimulating conditions in the home have had beneficial effects on learning for both older and younger students” (p. 96). When teachers reach out to parents by meeting face to face with them at the beginning of the year, send weekly materials on how to help their children at home, and telephone routinely with news about their children, math and reading performance can improve substantially (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2002, as cited in Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Interactive homework (homework assignments that require help from family members), especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication, can be especially effective in bridging home and school with powerful, positive outcomes for students. For example, the TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) program increased students’ grades and homework completion, as well as parent involvement (Van Voorheis, 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Bennett-Conroy, 2012). Teachers can help their students’ family members to be aware of what they can do outside of school to encourage their student’s academic success at each age and grade level (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Walberg, 2007).

What are other ways schools can facilitate two-way communication with families?

It is important to note that schools must recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers, such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is “the philosophy of working in collaboration with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or

low education by showing how to recognize and build on families’ strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). Learning about families’ funds of knowledge can in turn provide culturally relevant prompts to encourage verbal interaction between parents and students.

Teacher training is even more essential when the teacher and the students’ families have different home cultures, with some teachers holding a deficit view of low-income families and others simply unaware of ways that these families and communities can contribute to children’s education (Shumow & Harris, 2000). Something as basic as eye contact can easily be misinterpreted by those from different cultures—school personnel born and raised in the U. S. expect to have eye contact during conversation as a basic sign of attention and respect from the listener. However, for many people in other cultures, the opposite is true—looking away or down shows respect and deference to the speaker (Kugler, 2012). As Ferguson (2008) states, “When school staff have a better understanding of their students’ home cultures, families’ parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning” (p. 14).

Two-way communication, which involves the importance of listening as well as informing, has been successfully targeted within professional development programs that involved training teachers to use active listening and other communication skills used by counselors (e.g., Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Professional development is enhanced by opportunities for teacher practice and reflection; giving teachers time to consider ways they can connect their teaching to what they learn from their students’ families can maximize the benefits of the training (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005). In addition, it is imperative that administrators and school boards also participate in preservice and ongoing professional development on the importance of and strategies for cultivating positive home–school relationships (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Hiatt-Michael, 2006, 2010; Sheldon & Sanders, 2009).

Teachers and other educators should regularly share information and create opportunities for families to communicate their insights, concerns, and hopes for their

children; such attention to affective as well as academic concerns can build trust between the school and home. Communication should be child-centered, constructive, clear and concrete (avoid educational lingo and acronyms), and continuous (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissburg, 2011). The school should also provide culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet one another and share norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes. Another way to enhance two-way communication between schools and families involves providing class meeting times to discuss curriculum and learning rather than focusing exclusively on classroom “nuts and bolts” such as behavior rules or supply lists. For example, teachers can discuss their approach to teaching and encourage parent discussion of ways they can foster their children’s learning at home. Teachers can also ask parents around midyear what they think is going well with their child’s learning and if they have problems or concerns; teachers can then compare this information to their own classroom experiences with the child (Henderson et al., 2007).

Finally, information technology in education can be helpful in bridging the communication gap that frequently becomes more challenging as students progress into the upper grades. Parents can initiate and maintain contact with the school outside of normal school hours via email, and can access information on their child’s grades, attendance, and behavior by logging into student management programs. School websites can provide easy access to these electronic reporting systems through a link on the school’s main webpage. School websites also provide a convenient and effective way of keeping communication flowing between parents and the school by housing useful information such as calendars, teacher contact information, homework, and club and organizational information. Parent resource sections of the website can post tips for parents on helping their child succeed, provide links to parent resource websites, allow for the download of school forms, and request volunteer helpers. These resources can remove barriers to two-way communication between schools and families by allowing easy and efficient ways to connect with one another to promote student learning and success (ADI, 2011).

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