Establishing Effective Communication with Parents

To meet the needs of diverse families in today’s transient and fast-paced world, savvy educators employ creative methods to connect with parents, students, and the communities they serve. To that end, schools today must expand their vision of traditional practices and explore new options for bringing parents and the community into a partnership. Such partnerships provide opportunities for everyone to make significant contributions to schools. Thus, schools that establish strong relationships with parents recognize the importance of viewing families as assets contributing to student success.

When communication fails, misunderstandings occur that affect student achievement. Often, this miscommunication can be attributed to different levels of knowledge between parents and schools regarding the best way to serve students. When faced with creating the kinds of school-family partnerships that lead to greater student achievement, Larry Ferlazzo, author of the Educational Leadership article “Involvement or Engagement?” (2011), recommends schools differentiate between what it means to foster parental involvement and parental engagement.

“When programs and initiatives focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families, and community members, they are effective in creating and sustaining family and community connections with schools” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 43).

Though both methods undoubtedly help students, true engagement—or as Ferlazzo deems it, “leading with the ears”—results in the greatest impact, because it brings people together under a common purpose. It requires that schools take a service approach, viewing parents as clients whom they wish to attract to the school. In contrast, parental involvement takes a more directive leadership approach, where schools identify their needs and goals and tell parents how they can contribute.
Parents as Partners in Schooling

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(Ferlazzo, 2011). For some communities, although the needs may seem obvious to teachers, the best approach is to collect as much information as possible from parents and the community regarding their needs and provide opportunities for ongoing conversations between schools and the communities they serve.

Making Connections

Making the lines of communication transparent is paramount for successful school-family partnerships. Schools should take advantage of all forms of communication to connect with parents and create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school. The PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships recommends that schools implement the following action steps to make parents feel welcomed and more connected to the school and the community:

- Make use of all channels of communication, such as cable television, newspapers, radio, automated phone systems, text messaging, and school and local PTA websites.

- Identify parents, community members, local organizations, and businesses that can help strengthen home-school communication.

- Make sure all information is communicated in languages and formats that reach all parents.

- Sponsor events that allow educators and parents to interact socially, in addition to parent-teacher conferences and regular school meetings. (PTA, 2009, p. 17)

Teachers often think negatively about the lack of parental involvement in school. Indeed, nothing is more frustrating than a parent who fails to return phone calls or attend back-to-school night. This perceived lack of parental involvement often translates to teachers as a parent not caring about his or her child. However, in Mobilizing the Community to Help Students Succeed (2008), Hugh Price argues that low-income and minority families, in particular, frequently feel that they should just
trust teachers’ decision making and not interfere with their children’s schooling. Admittedly, a few parents don’t get involved in their children’s schooling, because they don’t want to—perhaps due to negative associations with school or lack of time, interest, or energy. Other parents may want to get involved but don’t know how to go about doing so (Price, 2008, p. 16).

**Reaching Diverse Families**

In their *Educational Leadership* article, Andrea Sobel and Eileen Gale Kugler assert that, “In most countries outside the United States, the unspoken norm is that it’s the teacher’s job to educate a student” (Sobel & Kugler, 2007, p. 64). Thus, immigrant parents particularly demonstrate reluctance in reaching out to the teacher for fear that it may come across as an insult to the teacher.

Schools can overcome these types of cultural differences by taking a proactive approach to reaching out to families and making them feel connected to the school and the community at large. Schools can take advantage of many ways to reach out to families, according to the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University (NNPS), including conducting some of the following activities:

- **Family Literacy Centers**—Opening up the media center one evening a week for homework help, free library and computer access for students and parents, and parenting classes.

- **Fun Friday for Parents**—Dedicating time on Fridays for parents to engage in fun physical activities with their children.

- **International Family Nights**—Hosting monthly theme-based meetings that educate immigrant parents about topics of interest to the community.

- **Day with My Dad**—A way to get more dads involved with students by allowing them to spend all, or part, of the day with their children. (NNPS, 2010)
These are just a few ways schools have established successful activities that engage and connect to the community at large. Keep in mind that prior to establishing any outreach program schools should survey the community to determine where the greatest needs lie.