

Two-Way Communication

Effective communication requires a two-way exchange of information. Schools seem to have several structures in place for distributing information. School newsletters and websites are two of the most common ways that parents receive information about the school. Schools focus on sending information to parents, but if you wish to engage parents then you must look at the entire picture. What appears to be missing and what administrators need to consider is how to involve parents in the communication exchange.

Two-way communication occurs when information flows back and forth. Administrators should ensure that feedback from parents is not only actively solicited but also utilized by the school. Ideas can be generated with the faculty about how to develop opportunities that promote two-way communication with learning as the goal.

Findings from research indicate that family involvement linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. Also, it is noted that family involvement that supports student learning at home is connected to improved student achievement. Since administrators set the tone for the school, they must take the lead in facilitating parental involvement by opening channels for positive communication. Teachers should be taught to use open communication.

Parents must be shown that their thoughts are valued. Educators must recognize there is information that only parents can provide. Keep in mind that communication strategies must be tailored to the school's population. If there is no access to the Internet at home, then email could limit communication, even though you might open the school's computer lab for parent use.

Often, educators are content with the numerous ways they communicate such as school newsletters, conferences, PTA/PTO meetings, notices, and weekly calendars. Parents may perceive this as overwhelming amounts of information that might go unread, or they may feel there is no time for two-way conversations. The point is schools need to establish meaningful conversations with families that support student learning, which includes more than telling or sending information "to" families.

Ways to Develop Two-Way Communication

- Invite dialogue. This can occur with phone calls, written notes, or a journal. Host informal chats with the principal in a neighborhood location where many families reside. These are all ways that invite parents to enter into home-school partnerships. Remember, it is important to know your families and to communicate in the language that has meaning.
- Support teachers in their efforts to create home opportunities for students and families to learn together. Response notebooks can travel between the home and school to encourage dialogue with parents about different topics. Examples of topics include how parents use reading, math, and writing at home or in the workplace.
- Use open-ended questions to learn from parents. Open-ended questions can be asked in order to better understand students and the needs of parents. Questions such as, “What does your child like most about school?” “What questions would you like to ask?” “Is there something you would like to share that would help our school be a better place for your child?”
- Develop relationships while establishing two-way communication. Home visits, informal conversations at out-of-school activities, and student-led parent and teacher conferences are ways to gain and demonstrate respectful communication.

When administrators and teachers actively listen to families, they show they are willing to learn from each other. Providing families with ways to become actively involved in their children’s education at home is one of the most effective ways to engage parents. Educators move beyond school-to-home communications when they create intentional dialogue that can lead to and improve student learning.



Barriers to Successful Parent Engagement

For administrators to be able to increase parent engagement, the barriers to success must be recognized. Once these are acknowledged, the school can determine how to address the barriers and develop more successful parent engagement opportunities. Parents are the most important partner in a child's education, thus schools can greatly benefit by capitalizing on parental support.

Potential Barriers

- Schools may not engage parents because they think they cannot, yet this can be a misperception. Parents might appear to not want to be involved, but it may only be because they do not know *how* to engage.
- Parents hesitate to become involved due to lack of extra time, transportation, finances, or childcare.
- A disconnect exists between parents and families due to language differences. If parents do not speak fluent English, they think they cannot be active participants.
- A welcoming environment may not be perceived by parents. When they walk into the building or the office or a classroom, parents might feel as if they should not be present.
- Classroom schedules and time available often do not match the time that parents have to communicate or become involved.
- Past experiences in or with the school that were unsatisfactory often lead parents to think being involved will not be a positive experience.
- Culture may affect input and prevent communication from being two-way. When parents are unfamiliar with the American culture, they are uncertain how or when to communicate or to be involved in the school.
- Trust between the school, administrators, teachers, and parents is not present. Parents are sometimes intimidated by educators unless trusting and caring relationships are cultivated.
- School leaders and teachers might communicate that input is not sought or welcomed.

- Parents misinterpret the meaning of the communication. This can occur with any type of communication, electronic messages, written notes, or face-to-face. School leaders must think about this prior to sharing any information. Often, being aware of the tone and body language or providing examples or opportunities for clarification will help.
- Levels of parental involvement may be dependent on the outreach of the school and teachers. Sometimes parents only involve themselves in response to how they are asked.
- Teacher preparation and knowledge may be lacking in how to partner and communicate with parents.

A quick self-assessment and frequent monitoring can help determine if these barriers are present in a school. Parents need to be shown that the school:

- respects their time.
- recognizes demands on their finances.
- empathizes with family situations.
- welcomes their feedback.
- listens to their insights.
- cares for their children.
- understands their children as learners.

Awareness of barriers can clear pathways and open doors to successful parent engagement. Despite the communication barriers listed, schools can overcome these barriers and any others that might arise. The solution for eliminating barriers is for schools to be intentional in their efforts and to nurture relationships that can benefit the students, parents, staff, and school.



Engaging Hard-to-Reach Parents

Principals and teachers sometimes encounter hard-to-reach parents. This can be challenging especially when support from parents is needed for the success of students. Schools must make every effort to engage all parents in their children's education.

Barriers

Many barriers exist that cause parents difficulties in engaging with the school. Parents may not have access to a phone or computer, so information cannot be easily communicated to them. There may be parents who cannot read or those who have poor English speaking skills. Transportation or lack of childcare for younger siblings can hinder the ability of parents to engage with the school. Some parents work two jobs or long hours preventing them from attending school events. In addition, homelessness can be an issue for some families. Parents might be intimidated by attending school functions.

Addressing Barriers

Principals and teachers can plan ways to overcome the barriers that keep the lines of communication open with hard-to-reach parents. Consider the following practices.

- Create an inviting school atmosphere.
- Be sensitive to parents who might feel intimidated in the school setting.
- Welcome parents when they visit the school.
- Build relationships with parents as opportunities allow.
- Be visible on campus and in the community.
- Ask teachers to keep ongoing records of conversations, conferences, and attendance during school activities and events of their students' parents; monitor periodically.
- Encourage teachers to maintain communication with parents who are difficult to reach.
- Make every attempt to identify the causes or underlying reasons parents are difficult to reach and offer support to teachers.

- Utilize parent liaisons, visiting teachers, or attendance officers to visit parents in their homes.
- Accompany teachers during home visits when possible. If necessary, ask support personnel to accompany teachers during home visits if school policy allows and if this is a safe practice.
- Solicit assistance from interpreters to translate when language is a barrier.
- Provide transportation and childcare when possible during school-wide events and activities.
- Schedule events on Saturdays or evenings for those parents who work long hours. Compensate teachers (if district policy allows) when they work during these times.
- Partner with community-based organizations (e.g., homeless shelters, Boys and Girls Club, community shelters) who might have relationships with parents; have joint conferences or send communications to parents using these avenues.

