Family-Teacher Partnerships

Parents and Teachers as Partners

The education of all children is a shared social responsibility in which parents and educators play critical roles. Effective parent-teacher partnerships view the relationship between teachers and parents as one of equality and respect. A critical task for teachers is to establish and maintain cooperative relationships with parents as an avenue for growth and change.

Parent involvement and parent-teacher partnerships will look different for each family. Successful parent-teacher partnerships often depend on the educator's ability to:

- Identify individual family-involvement strategies, building on what is already in place
- Understand social, cultural, and economic issues that affect families and influence how parents become involved

Importance of Developing and Maintaining Partnerships with Parents

Parents who feel valued and respected by educators are more likely to:

- Feel more confident in assisting and supporting learning in the class and at home
- Encourage cooperative attitudes and behaviors by students
- Support educators by enforcing rules and expectations
- Turn to school staff as a resource for solving problems
- Hold positive opinions of educators
- Develop positive attitudes about postsecondary education

Educators who establish and maintain positive relationships with parents are more likely to:

- Experience higher morale
- Be perceived more positively by parents
- Observe higher student achievement and improved classroom behavior
- Develop a positive presence in the community
- Gain access to valuable community resources

Communication

Clear and appropriate communication between home and school is the foundation of successful parent-teacher relationships. Good communication with parents focuses on these messages:

- Mutual respect between the school and the family
- Shared responsibility for student success
- Mutual goals for students

- ◆ Academic progress
- ◆ Positive self image
- ◆ Appreciation for learning
- ◆ Development of appropriate social skills
- ◆ Preparation for transition to adolescence and adulthood

Developing a foundation for effective communication with parents is crucial. Communication should focus on the positives rather than on problems or deficits. Focus on ways to reduce the likelihood of miscommunication.

- Ask parents how they prefer to communicate (written notes, email, phone calls, in person).
- Do parents require an interpreter and translated materials?
- Make follow-up phone calls when necessary to be sure that parents receive information.
- Encourage parents to ask questions to clarify your meaning.
- Ask questions to help you clarify what parents tell you.
- Don't assume that you understand. Summarize statements, and wait for a confirmation.
- Remember, understanding information does not mean everyone agrees.
- Be willing to discuss different points of view.
- Understanding other perspectives is critical.
- Be open to compromise.
- Avoid hasty judgments, decisions, and actions.

Importance of Genuineness and Empathy

Parents know when educators are sincere and have a genuine interest. Encourage conversations that allow parents to share thoughts, information, and suggestions. Let parents know that you are interested their child's success.

- Send home welcome letters to all new students.
- Make positive phone calls to parents.
- Send positive notes home.
- Verbalize concerns in a clear and respectful manner.
- Ask parents to share their ideas and concerns.
- Respond promptly to communication initiated by parents.
- Look for informal ways to communicate with parents so they can become acquainted with you.
- Lack of reciprocation does not mean that your efforts are unappreciated.

Purpose of the Communication

The focus of parent-teacher dialogue is the student's education. It is important that teachers and schools provide parents with the information they need to support their children's educational progress.

- *Sharing information*—explaining teacher expectations, grading polices, purpose of assignments (e.g. reading journals)
- *Identifying educational goals*—communicating what students will accomplish
- *Achieving educational goals*—outlining how students will accomplish goals
- *Making requests*—using parents as resources, encouraging parents to use educators as resources
- *Problem solving*—identifying issues, strategies for change, time frames, and available resources

Communication Styles

The communication style of the teacher strongly influences how parents respond.

- *Inclusive*—encourages dialogue, shares information, allows for compromise
- *Instructional*—provides specific information and guidance, allows for dialogue
- *Directive*—one-sided communication, commanding

Barriers to Effective Communication

- *Unequal relationships*—The teacher maintains an authoritarian role, attempts to exert power, does not use parents as resources. (Uses instructional or directive styles of communication.)
- *Miscommunication*—Unclear information, language barriers, jargon or technical/administrative terminology.
- *Differing styles of responding to conflict*
  - Assertive and verbal responses are often interpreted as threatening and aggressive.
  - Passive responses are often viewed as agreement or compliance.
  - Parents who choose to include an advocate or administrator when a conflict arises are seen as manipulative and not trustworthy.
  - Focus of interaction often moves away from student well-being.
- *Differing agendas*—Purpose of the communication is unclear, issues may be approached from a "right" or "wrong" perspective, attempts to place blame may occur, power and control becomes more important than cooperation. The well-being of the student becomes secondary.
- *Cultural influences*—Language barriers may exist, and educational concerns or priorities may vary. Minority and low-income families may be treated differently because of faulty assumptions. Appropriate resources are not available (translations, interpreters, cultural and community support). Parents are not given appropriate information.

Cultural Aspects of Communication

Communication differences are expected in culturally diverse environments. Parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and students will have differing styles of communication. It is critical that educators develop competency in cross-cultural communication if they are to improve their relationships with diverse groups of students, their families, and communities. Failure to do so will eventually lead to miscommunication, inadequate services, and conflicts. This can have a negative impact on student progress, create a climate of discomfort within the school, and cause students and families to feel unwelcome.

Cultural Beliefs

Attitudes and beliefs about cultural differences often present more of a barrier to cross-cultural communication than language. Educators need to become aware of attitudes and beliefs that lead to misinterpreting cultural differences as academic performance issues and behavioral problems. For example, examine beliefs such as:

- Students with non-English-speaking parents are less likely to be successful.
- Asian American students are more likely to excel academically.
- Low-income Hispanic/Latino families do not place a high priority on education.
- Low-income and single parents are less likely to be involved in their children's education.
- African American students often need special education (EBD) services.
- Native American students have a tendency to be unreliable.

Cultural beliefs and expectations also influence parent priorities and concerns about education. Educators need to be aware of differences in the following:

- Level of adaptation (bicultural, assimilation, acculturation)
- Importance of education
- What should students be learning
- Role of educators
- Role of students
- Role of parents and family members
- Cultural styles of communication
- Cultural customs, behaviors
- Styles of conflict

Creating Respectful Environments for Families

The following tips can help you remove cross-cultural communication barriers. The intent is to create a respectful and nonthreatening environment for all persons.

- Be aware of words, images, and situations that suggest that all or most members of a racial or cultural group are the same.
- Avoid using qualifiers that reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes.
- Avoid using racial identification except when it is essential to communication.
- Be aware of possible negative implications of color symbolism and use that could offend people or reinforce bias.
- Avoid language that has questionable racial or ethnic connotations.
- Be aware of rules for attentiveness during conversation.
- Be aware of rules regarding the distance between speakers during conversation.
- Be aware that objects, characters, and symbols may reflect different beliefs or values for different groups.
- Be aware that cultures may vary in what they consider humorous or taboo.
- Be aware of different rules for taking turns during conversations.
- Cultures may use different standards for loudness, speed of delivery, silence, attentiveness, and time to respond to another's point.
- Be aware of different cultural rules for entering conversations in progress.

Parent-Teacher Problem Solving

Ongoing and effective communication between schools and families can greatly reduce the types of problems many teachers face.

- Parents should never be surprised by a report card grade, a written comment, or curricular content.
- Contact parents as soon as a concern arises.
- Schedule specific times each week that you are available for parents.
- Be informed. If a concern arises, talk with other school staff, and check for changes in student academic performance, attendance, and behaviors.
- Listen to parents' concerns.

A Plan for Parent-Teacher Problem Solving

Communicating concerns about student progress is most effective when you approach it from a problem-solving perspective. It is important to state your concern in a clear and respectful manner.

1. *Describe the problem clearly.* Cite specific behaviors, and avoid using labels.
2. *Encourage parent input.* Summarize, reflect, question, and share information.
3. *Brainstorm.* Identify possible causes and/or solutions. *Remember, no blame!*
4. *Choose a solution.* Come to consensus. Be sure *all* agree.
5. *Develop a plan.* Let parents know that you need their help; define who does what and when.
6. *Follow up.* Create a time line for follow-up and criteria for evaluation.

Introductory Letter to Parents and Students

Introductory letters sent to parents and students before the first day of school positively influence home-school relationships. Parents are more likely to view the teacher as someone who values parent support and is genuinely interested in their students.

An introductory letter needs to convey specific information:

1. Teacher introduction
2. Teacher's telephone number at school and times available for parents each week
3. Description of parent-teacher activities
4. Curricular content, course expectations, goals, and grading procedures
5. Description of classroom procedures and discipline policies
6. School resources available for students and families:
   - Parent groups
   - Tutoring and mentoring programs
   - Scholarship sources for field trips and extracurricular activities
   - Interpreter and translation services

Introductory letters can also be a way to initiate two-way communication. Letters can include parent questionnaires to be returned to the teacher. You might ask about:

- The best times to contact parents
- Preferred form contact (letter, telephone, email)
- Special needs; interpreter, translations, hearing-impaired phone service, etc.
- Parent expectations of the teacher
- Questions about the student. For example: What does the student do well? Where does the student experience difficulties? Are there special needs?

Some teachers also send thank-you letters to parents and students at the end of the year. Teachers can express appreciation to parents and students for their contributions during the school year. They can also offer resources for parents and students during vacations.