



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Communicating With Families

As a classroom teacher, you realize families have an important role in their children's education. They know their history, home culture, learning styles, likes, interests, strengths, and needs. Families are valuable assets to their children's success and to your classroom. To capitalize on their unique knowledge, establish open and effective communication with the family members of your students.

Benefits of Home-School Communication

When families are valued members of the team, it leads to positive outcomes for all, especially the student. Home-school communication is a key element in student success and the attainment of common goals for the school community. Academic achievement, attendance, and graduation rates increase when families are involved in their children's education, and students learn best when they witness the collaboration among their teachers, families, and community, emphasizing the importance of education.

Other benefits of frequent communication include improved student engagement, more positive social behavior, greater rates of homework completion, increased on-task behavior, and higher levels of class participation.

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The Research Behind the Benefits

Over 50 years of research links student achievement with the various roles that families play in a children's education—as supporters of learning, encouragers of grit and determination, models of lifelong learning, and advocates of proper programming and placements. When schools implement intentional and intensive family engagement strategies to improve communication, there is a significant rise in student achievement scores. Frequent and consistent communication helps ensure that both schools and homes are responsive to students' unique needs and, therefore, support children's overall development.

Strong communication is also linked to the development of successful relationships between teachers and families, and it encourages higher and more realistic family expectations.

In a pilot study of the impact of Latino parent engagement on student academic achievement, results from parent survey questionnaires and student report cards strongly suggest that student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates increase when parents are engaged in their children's education (Araque, Wietstock, Cova, and Zepeda, 2017).

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In her July 2006 article entitled *Family Involvement: What Does Research Say?*, Holly Kreider summarizes the following research beliefs:

- Family involvement can help children get ready to enter school.
- Family involvement can promote elementary school children's success.
- Family involvement can help prepare youth for college.
- Family involvement can benefit all children, especially those less likely to succeed in school.

Establishing Communication

You will have many opportunities to communicate with your students' families over the course of a school year. Your first contact may be prior to students' first day, through a "Welcome-to-school" phone call, post card, a home visit; or you may meet them at Back-to-School Night. It is important to establish communication early and to implement a system of frequent and consistent communication throughout the year.

One-way communication is often used by local educational agencies (LEAs) to share information with family members about programs, events, student learning, and student behavior. However, it is two-way communication that provides educators, family members, and the school community with the opportunity to exchange ideas and information. Through this interchange of dialogue, feedback is received, which can lead to partnership building and development. Be intentional about balancing both types of communication to share necessary information and gain critical insight.

It is also important to ensure that these communicative interchanges are positive ones.

Examples of positive communication include:

- "Your child is showing great progress in _____."
- "Your child seems very motivated by _____."
- "I am really impressed by your child's attendance in school!"
- "Your child is very friendly and gets along well with peers."

Maintaining Communication

After establishing a positive relationship with your students' families, you should also emphasize that you value their input about their children. Families can provide valuable information regarding the strengths and interests of their children, as well as any needed supports. Asking families for input creates opportunities to develop collaborative partnerships between home and school.

You may choose to communicate in a variety of ways, including traditional means, such as face-to-face conversations and phone calls, or digital modes, such as educational portals, texts, emails, social media, or digital apps. Regardless of the mode, ensure that you communicate often. Establishing an open-door policy of communication with families creates opportunities to build relationships and empowers families to participate in their children's education more successfully.

Strategies to Build Communication

- Be aware of cross-cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Ensure that all classroom communications are available in multiple languages and that interpreters are provided, as needed.
- Use a variety of means of communication to reach all families in a manner that is accessible and easy for them.
- Be aware of the types of communication that work best for your families and note whether issues such as lack of Internet or computer access may impact communication.
- Use tools such as newsletters, a class blog, texting, a school agenda, or a home-link folder.
- Be flexible and creative with the scheduling of meetings, allowing for phone conferencing or alternative meeting times or locations.
- Make sure all communications, whether written or verbal, demonstrate professionalism.
- Eliminate unnecessary educational jargon and explain important acronyms and key words.

- Communicate in clear, concise language that represents everyday conversation.
- When families contact you with concerns or questions, respond as soon as possible.
- Be sure to have child-specific information any time you contact a parent.
- Celebrate successes of both academic and social nature, and focus on the positive while you address concerns.

Your job as an educator will be enriched if you keep these communication tips in mind. Utilizing family members as allies and keeping the lines of communication open will make for a richer school year and help your students achieve their potential. In addition, your classroom will be easier to manage and your morale as a teacher will improve. Positive home-school communication is a win-win for everyone involved!

References:

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

