



Communicating with Families

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As background, I write this as a teacher, a school leader, and a parent of a teenager in eighth grade. I've learned a few things over these nine+ months about what's important to communicate and which methods seem to work better for families. I've missed my share of information by skimming emails that were too long, saying I'll go back later when I have more time. I've inadvertently placed the wrong date on a calendar because it was changed three times prior to the final date. Given those and many other experiences, here are my **3 Big Ideas** about communicating with families.

First, Be Empathetic

According to *Psychology Today*, "Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person, animal, or fictional character. Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately. It involves experiencing another person's point of view, rather than just one's own, and enables prosocial or helping behaviors that come from within, rather than being forced." The families of our students need, deserve, and want empathy in the communications they receive.

Empathy Map Canvas		Designed for:	Designed by:	Date:	Version:
<p>1 WHO are we empathizing with? Who is the person we want to understand? What is the situation they are in? What is their role in the situation?</p>		<p>GOAL</p>		<p>2 What do they need to DO? What do they need to do differently? What (do)s do they want or need to get done? What obstacle(s) do they need to make? How will we know they were successful?</p>	
<p>7 What do they THINK and FEEL?</p> <p>PAINS What are their fears, frustrations, and anxieties?</p> <p>GAINS What are their wants, needs, hopes and dreams?</p>		<p>3 What do they SEE? What do they see in the marketplace? What do they see in their immediate environment? What do they see others saying and doing? What are they reacting and reacting?</p>		<p>4 What do they SAY? What have we heard them say? What can we imagine them saying?</p>	
<p>6 What do they HEAR? What are they hearing others say? What are they hearing from friends? What are they hearing from colleagues? What are they hearing second hand?</p>		<p>What other thoughts and feelings might motivate their behavior?</p>		<p>5 What do they DO? What do they do today? What behavior have we observed? What can we imagine them doing?</p>	
<p><small>Last updated on 15 July 2015. Download a copy of this canvas at http://gamestorming.com/empathy-map/</small></p>					



David Gray posted **The Empathy Map Canvas** on **Gamestorming** (See graphic); it is a method for understanding audiences, including users, customers, and other players in any business ecosystem. It gathered some positive press lately because it was featured in Alex Osterwalder's book, **Business Model Generation** a tool for discovering insights about customers. My family has always enjoyed playing board and card games, and the resources at **Gamestorming** are applicable for classrooms and board rooms, remote or in-person.

Second, Be Consistent

The message and the method should differ for the audience (students versus families). Busy families don't need paragraphs of narrative text when bulleted lists can make the point. For families, keeping a predictable and reliable day of the week in a predictable format is useful. Multiple sources report that people tend to open texts more frequently and quicker than they open emails. I do find that there are times when a longer email with attachments is the most appropriate method. I find text alerts as reminders or changes better than email. I also find that the naming conventions used in the subject line can capture my attention and photos/videos are usually viewed. "**The Importance of Parent Engagement: A List of Research and Thought Leadership**," published by **Families and Schools Together (FAST)**, highlights several current thought leaders on family involvement. Each influencer validates the strong relationship between parent engagement and student academic success. You can find a brief summary of each author, as well as their research and practice interests, and a list of relevant articles, books and key findings. This is a link definitely worth browsing and forwarding to your family involvement coordinator.

Third, Go Beyond Grades

Yes, learning is important and yes, grades are important, but not at the expense of learning. With easy and often access to grades on the LMS, families I talk with want to also know about social and emotional skills that are not directly measurable. Affiliated with **Harvard Graduate School of Education**, the **Global Family Project** presents remarkable set of written and video resources.

Holding a family-teacher conference that focuses on goals and needs can give students and families a common roadmap. Regularly checking in with families is good practice and can build relationships for the future and uncover any needs or concerns and help keep the goals in vision. Given that most families care about not only academic outcomes but non-academic skills, consider sending a postcard or making a phone call in which you share about those non-academic skills. For example, the four most recent **NACE** job outlook reports (2018-2021) list the following ten attributes as what employers seek in job applicants. Check out that list reprinted below for what you might discuss. Personally, I'd love to get a call, email, or note from one of my son's teachers saying that he was showing a strong



work ethic and giving me an example. That would mean more than sending a grade.

Attributes Employers Seek on a Candidate's Resume
(Attributes are presented in descending order)

Leadership	80.1%
Ability to work in a team	78.9%
Communication skills (written)	70.2%
Problem-solving skills	70.2%
Communication skills (verbal)	68.9%
Strong work ethic	68.9%
Initiative	65.8%
Analytical/quantitative skills	62.7%
Flexibility/adaptability	60.9%
Technical skills	59.6%

Resources and References

Gray, Dave. "The Empathy Map Canvas." Game Storming. July 14, 2017.
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