



Professional Practices

For the 21st Century Leader

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Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

About the Author



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The focus for this month's *Professional Practices for the 21st Century Leader* is Standard 8 of the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community*. My 25 years of experience as a teacher, principal, director, and mother have reinforced the belief that the vast majority of us in the field of educational leadership are passionately interested in improving the lives of all students in our care. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders compel education leaders to approach every decision based on what is best for the students in our care. At the end of each day I reflect on two essential questions:

- Did I make a difference today for our students?
- **Did I focus on what matters most for their learning and their well-being?**

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015

- Mission, Vision, and Core Values
- Ethics and Professional Norms
- Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- Community of Care and Support for Students
- Professional Capacity of School Personnel
- Professional Community for Teachers and Staff

• Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

- Operations and Management
- School Improvement

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Yesterday & Today

Where We've Been and Where We're Going

Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Are business-like, purposeful, directive

Are approachable, accessible, and welcoming

Invite parents to open house and conferences

Create and sustain productive relationships to benefit students

Communicate by informing, educating, and telling

Engage in regular two-way communication with families and communities about school

Share prepared remarks for PTA meetings. Presence limited to supervision of staff and students

Maintain a presence and create a means for partnerships to promote student learning and school improvement

Distinguish school as a place for students and teachers

Develop and provide school as a resource

Focus on the business of schooling students

Advocate publicly for the importance of education

Solicit volunteers to work in the schools

Build and sustain partnerships with public and private sectors

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I look at, and feel differently about, meaningful engagement/involvement being the parent of a school-aged child. I listen more carefully when my son describes the community and culture of openness. I observe the events planned and unplanned for their inclusion of others. I participate in activities and feel for the approachability of the principal and staff. I notice when a school is open, welcoming, and inclusive. This starts with the principal greeting every child every day by name and with a handshake. His words, actions, and interactions show his approachability and inclusiveness. My son's school and many others understand the importance of creating this positive culture that includes families in real and meaningful ways. We have had a New Parent Welcome, an Opening Day Ceremony, a Grade Level Meeting where expectations and goals were shared, a PTA potluck, and Back-to-School Night is tonight. It has been a busy and exciting start to the year

Research shows that students with involved parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and pass their classes
- Attend school regularly and have better social skills
- Not engage in drug use or other risky behaviors
- Go on to postsecondary education

When families, schools, and communities work together:

- Student achievement improves
- Teacher morale rises
- Communication increases
- Family, school, and community connections multiply

I made some significant observations early in my principalship relating to family/community involvement in the school:

- People, even those without school-age children, care about having high quality education.
- Parents are involved with their children, although we may not recognize, understand, or appreciate the involvement. It is presumptive to assume that lack of "face time" in the school building equates to lack of involvement, concern, and support.
- Parents want to be better parents and want better for their children than they had as children.
- Grandparents are raising many children for a variety of reasons including parent substance abuse, homelessness, incarceration, and general inability to parent. Grandparents have different needs.
- When students feel good about their teachers and their principal, they communicate that to their families. The confidence the students show in us, encourages their families to get and stay involved.
- As the principal, the quality and quantity of the family and community involvement began with me. I needed to be approachable, clear, and inclusive.

Web Resources for Engaging and Involving Parents

www.nea.org/tools/17360.htm

<http://nnps.jhucos.com/>

www.ptotoday.com/parent-involvement

www.readingrockets.org/article/getting-parents-involved-schools

www.projectappleseed.org/

www.pta.org/

www.ed.gov/parent-and-family-engagement

www.partnershipschoools.org



Clarifying and Defining Responsibilities in Schools

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being. In my role of principal in four very different settings, I worked hard each day to build and keep strong relationships between school staff and families. I saw parents as an asset and the first and most important teacher for their child. I sought ways for parents to come together for supporting, having fun, and learning. I felt that if I was able to involve parents in activities that engaged them with their own child, their neighbors and friends, and if it was fun, that I could move them towards helping with homework and other academic activities.

I recognized the need to be approachable, open, clear, welcoming, and inclusive in all my interactions with families and community members. This didn't mean agreeing with all that was said. It didn't mean having no guidelines for involvement. It did mean acting fairly with integrity and advocating for the students. I needed to understand other's perspectives and clarify roles. If an idea for involvement fit within our school-developed Family-Community Involvement Policy, we would move ahead. If it didn't align, we didn't move forward. Putting the needs of students at the forefront makes saying, "we appreciate the offer, but no, thank you at this time. However, here is an area we do need help with" easier.

Understanding other's perspectives is critical for the success of districts and schools. Working in underperforming schools requires a lot of heavy lifting and everyone wants to help. My advice to leaders is to be crystal clear in your expectations for involvement. You can and must put the students ahead of the helpers. I find that many social agencies and local businesses are involved in the schools, some working at cross purposes with each other and usually removing students from the critical instruction to participate in a tutorial or counseling session. For instance, well meaning local businesses might encourage their employees to volunteer at schools during their regular working hours, often logging hundreds of hours. Teachers often assigned their lowest readers to be tutored by volunteers. I was shocked to see this practice and immediately took steps to redirect the well-meaning parents and the volunteers

in ways to truly benefit students; many are described in this issue. Clarifying responsibilities for those who want to assist in our schools makes for productive outcomes and honest management of expectations. Here's what I did.

Parent Involvement

Parents want to be involved and need guidance. For those who wanted to come to the classroom, they were assigned duties within (organizing libraries, collecting forms, readying materials, making copies, cutting materials), but not teaching, not supervising, and not grading work. Most of my own volunteering was done from home making materials, typing documents, washing work mats, making copies, creating game parts, and collecting and organizing manipulatives. School leaders need to offer activities that involve parents and community volunteers meaningfully and meet teacher and student needs. You decide what activities are best and when!

Community Involvement

Community volunteers also want to help improve schools. In each of my school communities, I asked the business owners to meet with me and I described the roles I would like them to play in the coming years. I shared data with them showing that the students who were being tutored in reading were no better off and further at risk, although the affective aspect of a caring adult coming to school to read with a student provided structure and reliability for many children. I felt a moral responsibility to our students and their parents for providing them a high quality education from a high quality teacher, not a volunteer tutor. We drafted a plan that we presented to the current (and any future) volunteers that outlined when they could volunteer for activities. All volunteers were assigned to afterschool activities that were supportive of academics. They were asked to attend a volunteer meeting where they were provided with a structured program to guide their work. Volunteers were also asked to administer afterschool formative assessments to track student performance and met with me several times during the year to evaluate the model and student growth.



Critical Leadership Attribute

Approachability

How many leaders do you know...

Who are approachable? Approachable leaders listen more than they speak. They connect with people and are open. While not instigators, they don't shy away from conflict or controversy. They are honest and direct.

Who put you at ease and make it easy to talk with them? Approachable leaders are curious and ask questions to help get to the root of the issue and seek common ground.

Who spend extra time really listening? Approachable leaders are good sounding boards. They take the time to really help. Sometimes that means simply listening through the anger of a caregiver who just wants help and wants to know that you care about their child.

Who make you feel comfortable? Approachable leaders show compassion and empathy. They smile freely, wave, and find joy in their work.

Who have patience? Approachable leaders don't rush to judgement or a solution. They problem solve with the caregiver to engage and support.

Critical Leadership Attribute

Willingness to Work at Two-Way Clear Communication

Building and maintaining positive relationships with parents and community members requires clear communication and consistent expectations.

Tips for Building Relationships

- Build relationships one at a time
- Be friendly and make connections
- Ask parents questions
- Tell parents about yourself
- Accept parents the way they are
- Assume parents want a relationship
- Be persistent
- Invite parents to be involved
- Enjoy parents and their children

Tips for Maintaining Relationships

- Pay attention to parents
- Communicate openly with parents
- Appreciate each parent
- Extend yourself to parents
- Volunteer in their organization
- Challenge each parent to do better
- Support parents when times are tough
- Lead conversations with good news
- Share resources with parents



Critical Leadership Attribute Inclusiveness Begins at the Top!

Making a school welcoming is much more than a list of things to do. It's an attitude, and one that starts with you—the leader! Anthony Moyer, the principal at Willow Lane Elementary in Macungie, Pennsylvania, offers practical and wise strategies about how to engage parents.

Establish collaborative partnerships. Parents can offer support and assistance in the classroom. Parents can also serve as valuable allies in the community once they realize how hard you work in the classroom or in the school setting. Welcome their input and involvement and they will appreciate you and be your community ally.

Start positive and stay positive. Begin parent conversations with positive news. Parents love to hear what their children do well. As a principal, schedule time every week to call parents and tell them positive news. These calls have a profound impact. Parents cherish these messages about their children, no matter the age of the child.

Deliver your message in the most personal way. If you have sensitive information to share, try to tell parents in person. If that's not possible, call them. Parents appreciate the time you spend communicating with them and they appreciate hearing the sound of your voice. Avoid sharing sensitive information by email: email can be impersonal and emotionless, and written text in email can be easily misconstrued.

Aim for a response time that is prompt, but not hasty. Parents appreciate when you respond to them within 24 hours. This time frame lets them know you are responsive. This time frame also allows you the time you may need to collect your thoughts and draft a professional response on paper or in your mind, in the event that parents have said something that startled, frustrated, or upset you.

Be an active listener. If parents are upset or disappointed, show them that you are actively listening to their concerns by telling them “I hear what you are saying.” You do not need to agree with them. Simply give them the time and space to share what they need to say and acknowledge their words.

Consider compromise. If conflicts arise, consider compromise. By showing parents that you are willing to work with them, you'll earn their respect. For example, if a parent is unable to volunteer at a requested time, consider creating a customized volunteer schedule for that parent so that they can play a role in the classroom or in the school.

Present parents with a range of specific roles they can choose from in the classroom. Parents like the opportunity to make choices. Present them with a range of different jobs that they can do in the classroom. Additionally, be specific about what each job entails. Parents who are given the opportunity to select the job that best matches their skill set and interests will be eager to lend a hand.

Be appreciative. Always thank parents for their assistance. Brief, personal notes are greatly appreciated. Remember to let parents know how important they are to you and to the academic success of their children.



Strategy Alert

First Impressions Matter

We tell our son that you only have one chance to make a first impression, so make it your best. This is also great advice for school leaders! Here are some ways you can make a first impression that matters:

Front office staff. Be sensitive to how the furniture is arranged to allow for movement and interaction. Do staff face guests and are they prompt and helpful? Conversation should be professional and greeting protocols should be in place.

Custodians. The curb appeal of the school speaks volumes. Spend a little money on some flower pots and mulch. Clean restrooms send important messages to families, visitors and students.

Phone calls. My practice was to have phone calls answered no later than the third ring. Answering machines would not be on during the school day. Paper messages were taken for teachers and placed in their mailbox. A routine script was taped to the desk near every phone in the school.

Waiting area. Never have students waiting to see the principal wait with parents or other visitors. We partnered with PTA to buy rocking chairs for our lobby and a TV to be able to broadcast student news, performances, honor roll names, parent events, etc.

Lunch with students. Parents sometimes wanted to join their children for lunch. The cafeteria can be noisy and crowded, so we partnered with a local hardware store to donate picnic tables for a small patio area. Students would invite a friend to join them on the patio for lunch.

Parent bulletin board with take-aways. Grade levels took turns making the bulletin board each month and posted regular parenting tips and take-aways.

Class directories. With permission, we made class directories. This helped parents arrange carpool, group project work, play dates, birthday parties, etc.

Parent resource centers. With Title I funds, we built a parent resource room near the office, not near classrooms. The space housed computers, copiers, laminators, videos, coffee, books, and comfy furniture. It became a place where we host small parent book groups, help parents complete job applications and lunch applications, as well as house facilities for volunteers to make copies or materials for classrooms. A parent volunteer staffed the room and worked with other parents to offer learning sessions on topics of need and importance to them.

Translators. In linguistically diverse schools, being able to communicate can be a challenge. Finding someone on staff who can help translate when needed helps make all parents feel valued and included.

Election days. Many schools are open on election days and act as polling places for the community. Sometimes our voting lines would be long and we used the opportunity to sell donuts and coffee for PTA and invited students to greet the voters and while in line would share their learning with them.



Attendance Matters

Improving School Attendance Starts at Home

We had a slogan...On Time, Every Day...that was communicated frequently and was posted on our doors. My interest was rekindled by a September 6, 2016, Washington Post article, “American Schools Have a Chronic Absentee Problem,” authored by Joe Heim. A new analysis of data collected by the Education Department’s Office of Civil Rights looked at the 2013-14 school year showed that 6.5 million, or 13% of students in grades k-12 missed 15 or more days of school. The data showed instances of chronic absenteeism in almost every school in every school district. The report by **Attendance Works** points out that the problem of chronic absenteeism disproportionately affected student with disabilities, African-American, Pacific Islander and Latino students. Hedy Chang, **Attendance Works** executive director said the scope of absenteeism matters “because chronic absence is really a proven early indicator of academic risk as early as preschool and kindergarten. Further, by middle and high school, it is a sure fire predictor of kids being on the path to drop out.”

Let’s face it, it isn’t the 8-year old’s fault he is late for school or even absent. Upholding the responsibility to be at school on time and every day first begins with the parent. Parents must understand how important the regular school routine is and establishing that routine is to their child’s success in school. That conversation has to start at kindergarten and continue. All the best instruction in your classrooms doesn’t make difference if kids aren’t there to benefit from it. Bad attendance habits begin early and are hard to break as students get older. In my house, staying home from school happens when there is a fever and/or throwing up; there is really no other reason. Also in our home, if you’re on time, you are late. We prepare and plan to arrive at our destination 5-10 minutes early. This allows for unexpected traffic, loss of shoes, discovery that homework isn’t in the backpack, the car needs gas, etc. Arriving a little early helps set the calm and relaxed stage for learning, not a rushed and anxious arrival.

Leaders must know their attendance and tardy data and use it to set goals for improving on-time daily attendance. Here are a few strategies for meeting those attendance goals.

Del Prado Elementary posted a simple sign near the front counter. The sign posted the number of tardy students the prior day with a goal to reduce the number the following day. Parents saw the number when they came in to sign in their late child and realized they were contributing to the tardy problem.

Several innovative schools across the country have recognized the impact having clean clothes can have on student attendance. Supported by Whirlpool, these schools have installed washers and dryers that families can use to ensure students have clean clothes to wear to school, <https://carecounts.whirlpool.com/>

I recognized a tardiness problem that caused student to arrive after their reading block had taken place. For a week I stood at the “late book” and asked students and parents why they were late. The response was usually, “We overslept.” I partnered with Sears and asked for 700 alarm clocks. We were able to give each child her own alarm clock. Teachers showed students how to set their clocks and they went home with a letter to families; there were no more excuses for being late! On time attendance soared! A few families asked for another clock to help with their teenager or themselves to get to work on time.

National Standards for Family-School Partnerships

Parent-Teacher Associations should strive to be an organization that recognizes diversity and values differences and similarities among people through its actions and accountability. These characteristics include age, ethnicity, gender, language and culture, and socioeconomic status, among many different things.

When PTAs respect differences yet acknowledge shared commonalities uniting their communities, and then develop meaningful priorities based upon their knowledge, they genuinely represent their communities. When PTAs represent their communities, they gain strength and effectiveness through increased volunteer and resource support.

The www.pta.org website is a wealth of information, research, and toolkits. These standards align perfectly with the *Professional Standards for Education Leaders 2015*. This can be turned into a survey for parents and teachers. Results can be used to set goals!

Standard 1: Welcoming all families into the school community

Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

Standard 2: Communicating effectively

Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.

Standard 3: Supporting student success

Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

Standard 4: Speaking up for every child

Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

Standard 5: Sharing power

Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.

Standard 6: Collaborating with community

Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.



Strategy Alert

Making Parent-Teacher Conferences a Partnership

When my thinking turns to parent-teacher conferences, I immediately think of Terry Heick's **19 Questions Your Child's Teacher Would (Probably) Love to Answer** (www.justaskpublications.com/areas-of-focus/instructional-leadership/resources/). I sent something like this home with students along with information on signing up for a conference. I feel strongly that the conference needs to be much more than a 15 minute (at best) rushed time for the teacher to tell the parent strengths and needs that they probably already know. We wanted the conferences to be two-way and useful to both the parent and the teacher. This required some work with the teachers to help them hone their communication skills. They couldn't simply talk; they needed to listen and respond. Parents would pick 2-3 questions that were important to them at this time. Teachers had these questions and were prepared to discuss each of them for each student. We went from 50% of parents attending conferences to 96% in two years. Word spread that we cared about and listened to families!participation.

Making Meetings Matter Back-to-School Night

I have attended Back-to-School Nights that were motivating and symbolic and those that were dull and draining. This event is often the first impression we get to make, and we only get one chance at it. This evening is usually one that brings out the most families. Make it awesome! We used this as a time to celebrate accomplishments from the prior year, communicate some goals for the future, set expectations for involvement and pledge our commitment to help our community's children achieve a truly independent future. We declared our individual and collective responsibility and commitment to our school, families, and students by using the **Title I Family Compact** personalizing it to our school community (www.justaskpublications.com/areas-of-focus/instructional-leadership/resources/). A hush came over the room every year when we took our oaths. First, the teachers and I stood and recited our portion. Then, the families stood and recited their part, led by the PTA president. Finally, the students stood and recited their portion, led by a student. All members signed their compact and dropped it off with a teacher as they visited the classrooms. This was one of our best attended events and one that really set the stage for our work together.

Ohio's Department of Education has taken the ideas of Joyce Epstein, renown parent involvement expert, and created a virtual tour of a **Family Friendly Partnership School** combining the concepts of architecture and improvement planning for a sustained program of actions by educators and families. This site was created to illustrate a variety of elements that might be present in your **Family Friendly Partnership School**. Take the tour and check out the links to get some ideas to improve and promote your school and its programs. The links offer new ideas for engagement. I like the **Coffee at the Curb** and **Lemonade Tailgating in the Parking Lot** link. <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Getting-Parents-Involved/Welcome-To-A-Family-Friendly-Partnership-School>



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