



## Parents as Partners 2020

The primary commitment of all educators is to help their students learn. As we seek the best ways to reach our achievement goals, we must always include parents as partners in the endeavor. Parental involvement is a vital and necessary component in students' schooling so it should never be treated with indifference or inattention. Today it is more important than ever before.

Since the support of parents is so critical, it begs the question: **What are the most effective ways to involve parents as we address the impact of Covid-19?** It is truly mind-boggling when educators grapple with the decisions that must be made, and to figure out the best way to proceed. Pandemic was once just a vocabulary word in a history lesson. Now that it is a reality in our daily lives we have to embrace new ways of thinking. All of us, educators and parents alike, are frustrated, anxious and even afraid.

A good place to begin is with recognizing, respecting, and responding to the variables in today's families. Families come in many different formations and structures. The traditional two-parent home may no longer be the norm in many schools; instead, the family dynamic may include step-parents, single-parent homes, same-sex parents, or multi-generational settings. Today's parents and caretakers differ widely in their ages, races, cultural backgrounds, political and religious affiliations, technological skillfulness, and economic standings.

In addition, families are dealing with unforeseen dynamics they never thought they would encounter including unemployment, lack of income, being isolated in their homes, providing food and other necessities, monitoring children's learning, and keeping all family members safe and protected from the virus. Given all these diverse and unpredictable variables, it is necessary for educators to be purposeful in deciding how to communicate with and involve the families that make up our school communities. To inform our decision-making processes, we need to build repertoires for reaching out to and listening to parents. Additionally, we need to be aware of the myriad ways families want to be involved and knowledgeable about what the research says about what kind of parental involvement makes the most difference.



## **Reaching Out to Families**

It was very difficult to include parents when the pandemic first hit since teachers and administrators struggled during the final quarter of the last school year to devise the best plan to make distance-learning work. This monumental task had to be determined quickly when the impact of the pandemic closed our buildings. As home schooling became the norm and then distance learning from schools was added, children and their parents were suddenly thrust into the unknown. With time to incorporate the thinking of parents, better decisions will hopefully be the result.

Schools and districts are still in the process of making decisions about how, when and if buildings will reopen. In order to make decisions, districts are holding public meetings and enlisting opinions through surveys to their constituents. The frustrating reality is that, as hard as we may try, not everyone will be satisfied.

Whatever final decisions are made, one important truth is that if parents are to become productively involved in their children's education, they must feel invited. While this finding may seem obvious, the conclusion should cause schools to examine their current practices and to determine if they should be taking a more proactive role in making parents and caretakers feel welcome as partners. Schools across the nation have already taken specific steps to show their parent population that they are sincere about wanting parents to be actively involved in the educational process.

Certain parameters/conditions that never previously existed must be taken into account as schools work with families. Who knew that hand sanitizers, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing would become the standard. In-person communication may be difficult, inconvenient, or impossible. Conversations may be limited to virtual office hours via conferencing apps, phone calls, emails or text messages. The possibility of face-to-face meetings may be an option as long as safety measures are in place. However we reach out to parents, certain practices are important to keep in mind:

- Treat each and every parent who visits or calls the school with respect, dignity, and genuine concern; the importance of first impressions including a friendly voice on the phone or a welcoming greeting by the front office staff cannot be underestimated.
- Set up virtual or face-to-face meetings for specific populations including parents of second language learners, students with special needs, and accelerated learners in order to clarify services available to their children, reduce distrust between home and school, and provide insights as to how to parents can best support their children and their teachers as they navigate the system of available services.
- If possible, make selected home visits prior to the beginning of the school year to increase parents' comfort level with school personnel.
- When appropriate, hire parent liaisons to help build cultural and linguistic links between minority parents and the school.
- Reach out to the PTA and other parent and community groups to connect and build a community of teachers, parents, and community members focused on the well-being and learning of students.



- Establish a **Parents Resource Center** on the district, school, and/or classroom website(s). Include there logistical, scheduling, upcoming changes/disruptions, FAQs, and links to external or internally produced podcasts and webinars that would be useful to parents. School social workers, counselors, nurses, PTA contacts, and others often add to the richness of the information available there.
- Recruit teachers who are dual-language speakers to improve communication with families.
- Provide food pick-up services at school for families that have difficulty feeding their families. This is an especially important step to take since it shows families how much you care.
- Reach out to religious leaders, including imams, rabbis, and ministers, in order to improve relations, answer questions, and clarify school practices.
- Work with businesses and other community organizations to establish and enhance support for school programs.
- As the school year gets underway, provide assistance for parents on a variety of topics including parenting skills, second language acquisition, managing finances, getting medical help, improving computer skills, and obtaining employment.

### **Improve Communication**

As the school year gets underway, it is even more essential to keep the lines of communication open. Our approach to teaching and learning has changed dramatically as a result of Covid-19 so we need frequent feedback via short online surveys and comments we hear/read in our interactions with parents via multiple means.

If we want parents to believe that their input and involvement is important, there are some tried and true practices that have been around long before our current crisis arose as well as some newer technology-based approaches to consider.

- Make positive home contact; do not wait for problems to occur to contact parents.
- When making a relationship-building or announcement-type phone call, immediately let the parent/caretaker know that there is no emergency.
- Send out five or more postcards to students and/or their families each month. Make sure that each student gets a least one. Many will no doubt end up on the refrigerator.
- According to the Pew Research Group, 85% of parents own cellphones, and 97% of parents live in households where at least one family member has a cellphone. Free mobile apps you can use include **ClassDoJo**, **Bloomz**, **Edmodo**, and **Talking Points**.
- Communicate via emails; they can be used to send information and reminders as well as positive messages to parents. Emails should not, however, not to be used for negative messages. My colleague Paula Rutherford in ***Why Didn't I Learn This in College?*** recommends the following sites as resources for crafting productive and positive emails to parents: [www.coolcatteacher.com/email-etiquette/](http://www.coolcatteacher.com/email-etiquette/) and [http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/29\\_2/helarticle/email-dos-and-don%E2%80%99ts-for-educators\\_565#home](http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/29_2/helarticle/email-dos-and-don%E2%80%99ts-for-educators_565#home).
- Have students complete **Tickets to Leave** to share with families. The tickets could include prompts such as “What I Learned Today” or “What Made Me Proud of My



Work” or “A new word or skill or an interesting or puzzling idea from school today is...”. These stems are good discussion starters for daily family debriefings. This strategy can be used in virtual or brick-and-mortar classrooms.

- Have students create class newsletters with instructional information; parents may be more inclined to read communiqués produced by children rather than adults.
- When small problems begin to emerge, contact parents for their input and support before the situation becomes magnified.
- When making a call to discuss a problem, always begin with good news; parents need to know that the school personnel have a balanced view of their child.
- Respond to emails, texts, phone calls, etc. as soon as possible; a good rule of thumb is to respond within 24 hours.
- Make any communication, whatever the message delivery format, a mutual problem-solving session; remember the value of compromise in determining steps to be taken.
- Always listen and do not interrupt even when you might not agree with the parent; your time to talk will come.
- Let parents know with specificity what they can do to support their children’s learning at home; we must remember that most parents want to help their child but they simply do not know what they should do or when or how to do so.

### **Reinterpreting Family Involvement**

Today, previous priorities have taken a back seat. Most likely the number one concern in the minds of parents is student safety, especially how schools are addressing COVID-19. Before they send their children back into school buildings, they want to know, in as much detail as possible, what schools are doing to keep children safe.

As the school year progresses, it is critical that schools stay in contact with parents. Families must be encouraged to let schools know how things are progressing from their point of view. Stories have emerged about how collaborative efforts between parents and school personnel during the final quarter of the past school year led to creative solutions to issues that were causing frustration. We must all keep open minds as we encounter the unusual circumstances will no doubt continue to arise.

### **Reporting Student Progress**

If buildings are open, student safety is of the utmost concern for many parents. What is possibly next on their list of concerns is how their students are progressing in school. Understanding and interpreting information from schools can be a perplexing process for parents. For example, it confuses parents when there is one set of terms in elementary school, another in middle and high school, different criteria for state assessments, and still another for nationally-normed standardized tests. Helping parents interpret achievement information and using consistent understandable terminology can be very helpful.

During the final quarter of the 2019-2020 school year, many districts did not provide or require grades for students. That will likely change as the new school year begins. Thus, teachers should make every effort to communicate clear learning objectives as



well as assessment criteria that is public, precise, and communicated prior to the beginning of work to both students and parents. (Multiple exemplars are quite helpful to all parties.) The most disappointing comment school personnel can hear from a parent is, “I have absolutely no idea what my child is supposed to be learning in school.” Finally, progress reports or student work sent home with sketchy or confusing comments simply blur the lines of communication. Although it may require extra effort on a teacher’s part to ensure that written/oral communication with parents contributes to their overall understanding about the content and skills students are learning, it can have a huge impact on the parent’s overall impression of the class and the school, as well as their capacity to work as partners with the school.

### **Making the Biggest Difference**

Studies over the past decade have shed new light on the kinds of parent involvement that had the biggest overall impact on student learning and progress. After completing an analysis of the literature on the topic of parent partnership with schools, researchers concluded that many of the commonly-held beliefs about the traditional forms of parent involvement in schools did not have the greatest influence on student achievement. Whereas practices such as attending school functions, checking or helping students with their homework, or establishing rules about how children should study at home certainly contributed to student learning, studies concluded that more effective, subtle actions on the parts of parents made a bigger difference in their child’s academic progress. The research found that parents should establish a supportive but scholarly atmosphere in the home by creating warm expectations that are not stringent or overbearing. Research also concluded that time spent delivering low-stress communication, conveying love and support to children, spending time together, and sharing the importance and value of an education had a greater impact on academic achievement than the more traditionally-held practices. In short, academic involvement without love has a limited impact. As for what schools should do, educators should not hesitate to tell parents directly what kinds of involvement make the biggest differences, and should concentrate on finding the best ways to get parents thinking and acting along those lines.

### **Success Stories from the Field**

As much as possible, leaders should keep their eyes and ears open for fresh ideas that can make a difference. Here are some examples:

- Some parents who are working with their children from home have found ideas that work especially well to keep their children focused and interested in learning. In one case, the parent contacted the school, and, as a result, she made a video of herself working with her student that was then shared on the school website.
- Several parents, who were in close contact online (**What’s App** and **Zoom** are very popular.) and other means discovered methods that worked very well. When they spoke to the district office, they volunteered to conduct small group sessions with parents who were less successful. Parents were very grateful to receive the new insights.
- As is the routine in many districts, teacher collaboration continues to take place. In several situations the teachers shared insights they had received in conversations



with parents. The upshot was that more teachers were able to implement these successful approaches.

- Addressing the needs of special education students has been problematic for some districts. In one particular district, a special education teacher conferred with her parents to learn what was working and what needed adjustment. The teacher then shared online the information she had received from the parents who had been contacted so that other teachers could benefit from her conversations.
- Many districts sent surveys to parents at the end of the last school year to gain an awareness of what changes were needed as the new school year approached. This mode of information/feedback gathering is a great approach to continue through out the year.
- Paula Rutherford points out in ***Why Didn't I Learn This in College?*** that one practice to improve overall communication is for teachers to identify and communicate the hours when they will answer calls and learn when parents with whom they are working are willing to receive calls. She further recommends the identification of an app that works for all parties and then go for it. **Zoom** has swept across the country joining **Facetime**, **Skype**, and **Google apps** as popular parental communication tools. (See also the free apps listed above)

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As professionals, we should view parents as true partners in the education of their children. We should establish protocols that will enhance parental involvement in a variety of formats and in the most positive ways possible. How we create a welcoming environment, initiate positive contacts, respond to concerns and needs, and compromise when we face tough situations, can have a huge influence on parent support in the education of their children.

Paula also includes in each chapter of her best-selling book, ***Why Didn't I Learn This in College?*** an assessment tool that allows practitioners to determine their current level of thinking and practice on a variety of topics including creating a positive learning environment, making learning active, planning instruction, and assessing student progress. One such tool is titled “**Working with Parents as Partners.**” This tool will help educators to determine what practices are working well, what ideas have not been addressed, and what goals can be set to make relationships with parents more productive. Access this tool at <https://www2.justaskpublications.com/Tool-69-Working-with-Parents-as-Partner>.

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