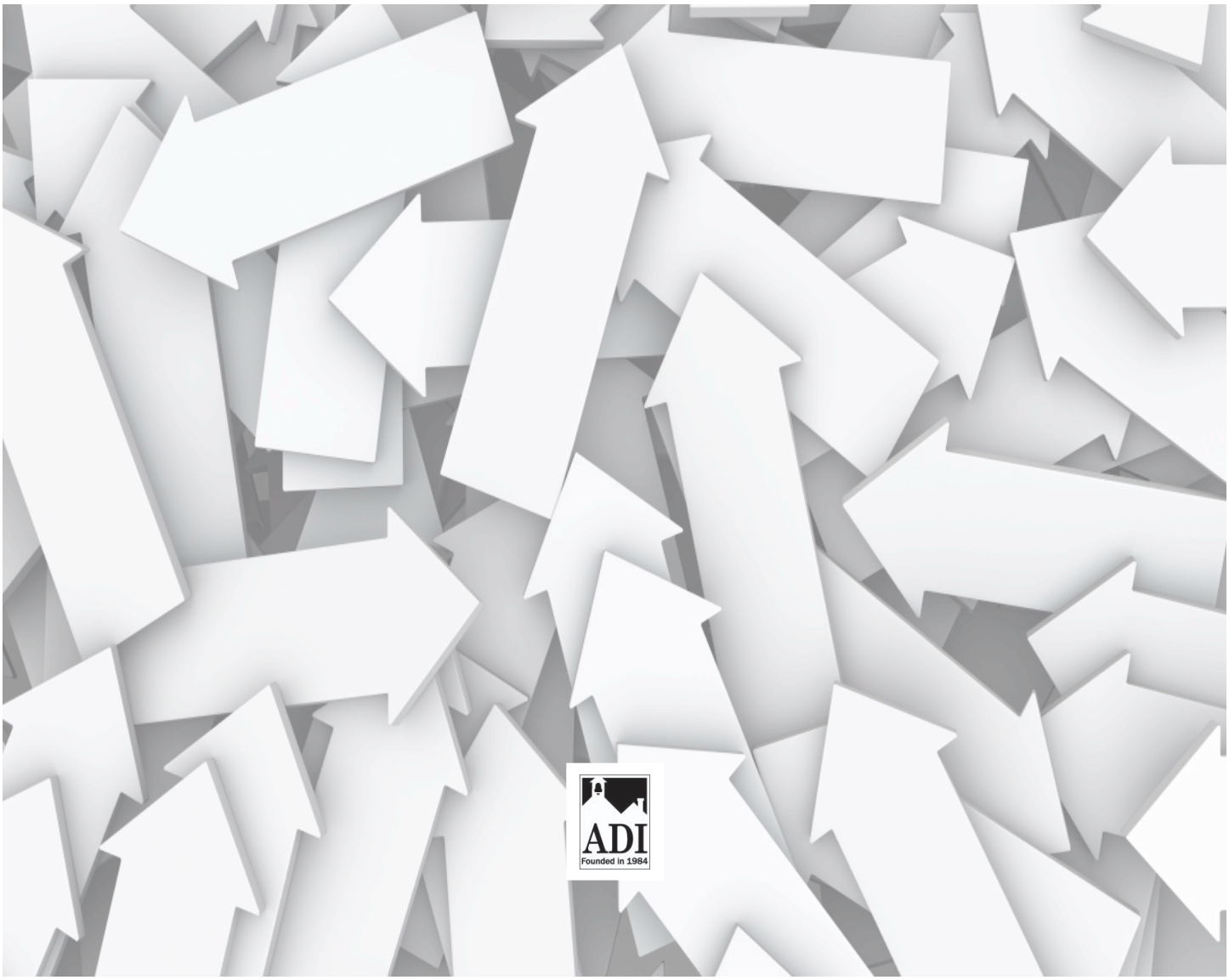
Parent Involvement Analysis

Wise Ways®



Building Block: Policies
Compact

Many schools have developed Compacts that outline the responsibilities of students, teachers, parents, and sometimes principals. Title 1 schools often call these “Learning Compacts.” Some schools use the U.S. Department of Education’s “Reading Compact” process.

A school needs only one Compact, whatever it is called. Some of the items in the Compact may vary by grade level. The sample Compact on the next page provides a model. If the school already uses a Compact, that Compact can be modified to include the essential elements listed below.

Essential Elements of a Compact

- **Includes goals for reading, study habits, and respectful/responsible behavior.** Other goals may also be included, and the suggested goals below may be modified to fit the purposes of the school. Schools should include special attention to the three areas of greatest shared responsibility between the school and the home—reading, study habits, and respectful/responsible behavior—as well as ways students, teachers, and parents communicate with one another.
- **Lists the responsibilities** (some schools prefer the term “expectations”) of parents/families, students, and teachers. May also include list for principal.
- **Provides guidelines for homework and home study habits.**
- **Provides guidelines for parent-child reading and teacher’s reading assignments.**
- **Provides guidelines for encouraging respectful, responsible behavior.**
- **Provides guidelines for communication within the school community.**
- **Encourages attendance at parent-teacher-student conferences and open houses.**
- **Encourages parents to participate in parent education programs offered by the school.**
- **Outlines ways the school partners with families to enhance students’ learning and mastery of standards.**

Look over your school’s Compact if it has one. Develop one Compact for your school that includes the essential elements above. Check the items above to be sure they are included in your Compact. Submit your Compact for inclusion in the School Improvement Plan. Distribute the Compact to teachers and parents (it’s a good idea to have parents and student sign a copy and return it to the school). Include the Compact on the agenda of parent-teacher-student conferences. Talk about it at open houses. Review it at faculty meetings.

If your school includes a preschool program, or if you would like to include guidance for parents about their preschoolers, consider how each “responsibility” in your Compact might apply to preschool children. For example, preschoolers may not have homework, but it is still a good idea to encourage interactive, parent-child learning activities. You may want to add specific “responsibilities” that clearly apply to preschoolers. If your school includes a preschool program, then it should be clear that parents of preschoolers are included in open houses and parent-teacher-student conferences.

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Building Block: Policies
Homework Policy

Homework Policy and Practice

From research, we know that homework is a powerful means for increasing children's learning. We know that homework helps children form the habits of independent study. We know that homework is the school's primary extension into the home. We also know that homework is a source of conflict between many parents and children. Homework is also the topic of complaint many parents raise against schools. Parents who accept the responsibility for seeing that their children attend to their homework are often perplexed that homework practices vary so widely from teacher to teacher. Parents are confused that some educators tell them that homework is important but some teachers do not assign it. They find that some teachers grade homework, and some do not. In some classes, homework is counted toward the report card grade, and in some classes it is not. Parents are surprised to hear from their children that they have completed their homework at school. What is homework if it is done at school rather than at home?

Because a school community wants its teachers, parents, and students to work in harmony, with clearly understood roles in the education of children, homework is a topic that every school community must address. Because school communities are concerned with children's habit formation, they know that positive habits are best built with consistent reinforcement from home and school. Independent study is an important habit, and homework can be a strong tool for helping children acquire the habit of study.

Research on homework tells us that:

- Required homework is more effective than voluntary homework.
- Having no homework assigned at one grade level adversely affects performance at subsequent grade levels.
- Homework is most effective when returned promptly by the teacher with comments and a grade.
- We also know that some kinds of homework are more effective than others. Homework is most effective when it is:
- Frequent,
- Directly related to in-class work,
- Used to master rather than introduce new material,
- Graded and included as a significant part of the report card grade, and
- Returned to the student soon after it is collected, and marked, with comments particular to the student.

A great quantity of homework is not as important as the regular assignment of homework. A rule of thumb is that students should study at home a minimum of 10 minutes per grade level per day, five days per week. Of course, this time expands when students prepare for tests or write major reports.

How can a school community enhance the benefits of homework? The process begins with a clear policy that states the roles of teachers, parents, and students. But policies are no better than the paper they are written on unless:

The people to which they apply are given assistance in carrying them out, and

Actual practices are monitored to detect and correct problems.

What is included in an effective homework policy?

Elements of a Homework Policy

Importance. Explain why homework is important.

Roles. Clearly state the roles of teachers, parents, and students in the assignment and completion of homework.

Frequency. Provide guidelines for frequency of homework.

Quantity. Provide guidelines for amount of time students might be expected to spend with homework (this will vary by grade level).

Weight. Establish the weight of homework in determining report card grades.

Correction/Return. Establish guidelines for prompt return of graded homework to students.

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Building Block: Policies
Parent Visits to Classroom

The school must be a safe place for students and teachers. It must also be an orderly place where learning can take place. So policies are in place to direct visitors to the main office and require them to sign in. What are your policies and procedures for dealing with friendly visitors, especially parents?

Classroom Visit Policy

1. Is advance notice required? If so, how much in advance? Whom does the parent call to request a visit? Where does the visitor first report when entering the school?
2. How is the teacher notified?
3. What is the role of the parent when visiting? Where is the parent to sit? How much is the visitor to be involved?
4. What is the role of the teacher? Greeting. Explanation of what is going on in classroom.

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Building Block: Shared Leadership
School Improvement Team

A School Improvement Team –

- is a group of people who represent your school community (teachers, parents, community leaders, and administrators) who are interested in making your school a better place for learning and teaching
- decides what your school should do to improve student performance
- gathers and analyzes information that can be used to make decisions that drive changes in your school.

The purpose of the School Improvement Team is to oversee the School Improvement Plan. The Team develops and revises the plan, setting each year's objectives and outlining the activities related to the objectives, and establishing evaluation procedures to determine effectiveness in meeting objectives. The School Improvement Team reviews student learning data (including state assessment scores), program descriptions, curriculum, schedules, and the allocation of resources. The School Improvement Team regularly solicits the input and feedback of teachers, parents, and students.

Building a School Improvement Team

Choosing a representative team: To ensure diversity, the school improvement team must collectively represent all the students enrolled in the school. The team should include teachers, the principal, parents, support staff, community partners, and students (especially at the high school level).

Size: Generally a team of seven to twenty members would be optimal. Team size is dependent on the size and complexity of the school it represents.

Incorporating existing groups: If the school has different teams/committees working in the school, identify the work each one is doing. Ask: Does the work correlate with what the school improvement team is working on to improve teaching and learning? If yes, include representatives of the different teams or committees so the improvement team can coordinate the work of all of them.

Making it Work – Putting the School's Needs First Means Working Well as a Team

Before your team begins

- Decide how often the team will meet. The team should meet as often as it needs in order to get the work done. Most teams meet once or twice each month. Remember that there will be more work than can be completed at the meetings. Smaller work groups of representative team members may need to meet between regular meetings.
- Members should agree that they want the team to be an authentic, high performance group and acknowledge that it takes time for a group to learn how to work together.
- Establish written agreement/ground rules about how the team's members will interact. This agreement should be seen as a work in progress and a reflective tool, not as a list of rules. Develop standards for the team's various functions and work by setting clear meeting schedules, preparing agendas, developing procedures for recording decisions, and planning between meetings.
- Create ways to critique and challenge the team so it remains dynamic and creative.
- It is critical that the team learn to assess its own progress and adapt the rules or structure accordingly.

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Building Block: Shared Leadership
Parent-Teacher Organization

Action Steps for an Effective Parent-Teacher Organization:

- Develop a team of parents that have a clear understanding of the purpose of the organization
- Develop guidelines for organizing your team by having expectations of each member: meeting schedule, procedures for recording decisions and planning between meetings, etc.
- Connect with other committees in the school that have similar goals, Ex. School Improvement Team
- Review the school's Parent/Family Involvement Policy
- Develop an Action Plan that includes:
- Objectives
- Activities
- Implementation plan – assign tasks so activities run smoothly
- Evaluate the work of the organization and adjust accordingly

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Building Block: Shared Leadership
School Community Council

What is the role of the School Community Council?

The primary purpose of the School Community Council (school-based team) is to build a school community, uniting the efforts of parents, teachers, and students so that all children establish a solid foundation of reading, studying, and responsible behavior. The Council is the steering committee for the school community, the coordinating body, the group that maintains a focus on children's learning.

The School Community Council looks at the connections between the school and the families it serves and makes recommendations for strengthening the School Improvement Plan's emphasis on family-school connections. They must enlist the support and assistance of the parent organization and faculty to carry out its activities. The council does not typically involve itself with fund-raising. The council does not sponsor activities in its own name, but on behalf of the school as a whole. The council brings people together, unifies, and creates synergy and good will.

This council does not replace or duplicate the valuable services of existing parent teacher organizations. It is a coordinating team that helps to build a strong school community around goals established in the School Community Compact. The council works in cooperation with other groups and organizations in the school, and the work is typically behind the scenes, planning activities and maintaining a focus on the mutual roles of the family and the school in promoting reading, studying, and responsible behavior.

The School Community Council is most effective when it meets twice each month with agendas and minutes, operating with bylaws or a constitution that outlines its scope of responsibilities and the manner in which its members are selected and the term of their service.

The School Community Council:

- consists of the principal, a teacher, counselor or social worker (if none is available, then a second teacher), and four parents; in schools with pre-school programs, a Pre-K teacher and the parent of a Pre-K student are added to the School Community Council,
- looks at the connections between the school and the families it serves, and
- makes recommendations for strengthening the School Improvement Plan's emphasis on family-school connections.

What are Solid Foundation's Building Blocks for a School Community?

In a school community, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and staff all play important roles in helping all students succeed. The building blocks of a school community are:

- Shared Leadership — parents, teachers, and administrators together—especially where the responsibilities of the school and home overlap
- Goals and Roles — working toward educational goals (standards) for all students; teachers, parents, and students all have a role to play in every child's success
- Policies and Practices — based on research and promoting the idea of a learning community
- Communication — an ongoing conversation, two-way communication between home and school, and among members of the school community
- Education — a learning community for everyone, including parents and teachers
- Connections — face-to-face association; forming common understanding; common experience

- Continuous Improvement — continuous improvement through assessment of effectiveness

What is the "ongoing conversation"?

The school needs to use every opportunity for parents, teachers, and students to talk about their mutual roles in children's learning. The Compact, learning standards, and homework policy are good tools for discussion. The open house agenda and parent-teacher-student conference procedures ensure that parents, teachers, and students have opportunities for focused conversation.

Parents appreciate knowing:

- how their children are doing,
- what the school is doing,
- what the school expects of parents, and
- how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school.

This conversation begins when parents first register their child for preschool or kindergarten and continues throughout the child's career at the school. At each open house, the principal and teachers talk about the responsibilities outlined in the Compact, discuss homework and the homework policy, and talk openly about what children need from their parents to do their best in school. The principal and teachers also encourage parents to participate in the parent workshops the school offers for them. Most important of all is the conversation between the teacher, the parents, and the student. This conversation is an opportunity to consistently reinforce the school's goals for students and its expectations of students, parents, and teachers. Frank conversation, encouragement, and practical suggestions help engage parents from the early grades on up and also establish the relationship between parents and teachers.

Beyond the implementation of parent involvement components, the school continues to grow in the quality and consistency of its relationship with parents. Accomplishing this "high-quality relationship" requires:

- discussion at faculty meetings,
- in-service training for teachers,
- a strong and consistent message to parents that the school has high expectations of them, and
- opportunities for parents to contribute their ideas and energies to the school.

In turn, parents will expect much of their school, contribute to its betterment, and children will benefit.

The Academic Development Institute provides a field-tested model for a School Community Council. See www.adi.org.

Source: Academic Development Institute**,** *Resource Manual for Solid Foundation*

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Building Block: Communication Compact

School Community Compact

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Building Block: Communication
Homework

Homework. Work assigned by a teacher that is done outside the regular school day.

Studying at Home. "Studying at Home" is a term used to describe all instances of a child's studying at home, including but not limited to assigned homework. Parents can contribute to the child's habit of study and acquisition of knowledge by establishing study time at home. During this time, children complete homework and, if homework is finished, continue to read, practice, and study on their own.

Ideally, parents will expect their children to study at home for a period of time each school day, and teachers will consistently assign homework. Thus, the habit of studying is established by both the home and the school. Learning time is extended beyond the regular school day.

Homework Policy and Practice

From research, we know that homework is a powerful means for increasing children's learning. We know that homework helps children form the habits of independent study. We know that homework is the school's primary extension into the home. We also know that homework is a source of conflict between many parents and children. Homework is also the topic of complaint many parents raise against schools. Parents who accept the responsibility for seeing that their children attend to their homework are often perplexed that homework practices vary so widely from teacher to teacher. Parents are confused that some educators tell them that homework is important but some teachers do not assign it. They find that some teachers grade homework, and some do not. In some classes, homework is counted toward the report card grade, and in some classes it is not. Parents are surprised to hear from their children that they have completed their homework at school. What is homework if it is done at school rather than at home?

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- Directly related to in-class work,
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- Returned to the student soon after it is collected, and marked, with comments particular to the student.

A great quantity of homework is not as important as the regular assignment of homework. A rule of thumb is that students should study at home a minimum of 10 minutes per grade level per day, five days per week. Of course, this time expands when students prepare for tests or write major reports.

How can a school community enhance the benefits of homework? The process begins with a clear policy that states the roles of teachers, parents, and students. But policies are no better than the paper they are written on unless:

The people to which they apply are given assistance in carrying them out, and

Actual practices are monitored to detect and correct problems.

What is included in an effective homework policy?

Elements of a Homework Policy

- **Importance.** Explain why homework is important.
- **Roles.** Clearly state the roles of teachers, parents, and students in the assignment and completion of homework.
- **Frequency.** Provide guidelines for frequency of homework.
- **Quantity.** Provide guidelines for amount of time students might be expected to spend with homework (this will vary by grade level).
- **Weight.** Establish the weight of homework in determining report card grades.
- **Correction/Return.** Establish guidelines for prompt return of graded homework to students.

Monitoring Homework

A homework policy will benefit children only to the extent that it is carried out. To know how well the policy is working, to identify problems, to make necessary adjustments, and to provide training for teachers and parents, you need to know what is really happening with homework. Is homework being consistently assigned? Are students completing homework? Are parents encouraging students to complete homework? Which students are having difficulty with homework? How can they be helped?

A simple way to monitor homework is to ask each teacher to submit to the principal a weekly summary of homework assignments made the previous week. This may be done for a month each year, so that results can be compared from year to year. The summary would include:

Assignments made each day

Number of students who completed assignments to the satisfaction of the teacher each day

Number of students who did not complete assignments to the satisfaction of the teacher each day (other than for reasons of excusable absence)

Gathering this information enables monitoring of the effectiveness of the homework policy and taking steps to improve it.

Monitoring homework helps draw attention to its importance, for teachers, students, and parents.

A form for teachers to report information about homework could look like the one on the following page. Tabulate the results of the teacher reports for the month and prepare a summary report for the school to show parents and teachers.

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Building Block: Communication
Parent Teacher Communication—Email

School Websites and E-mail

School websites can provide easy access to electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school's main webpage. Even when a school doesn't have an electronic student progress reporting system, school websites can be a valuable source of information for parents and offer a convenient and efficient way of keeping communication flowing between parents and the school.

School websites often house useful information such as:

- Department and staff listings with links to teachers' and administrators' electronic mail boxes
- School and sports calendars
- Lunch menu
- Clubs and organizational information
- Activity announcements and schedules
- Alumni information
- Homework assignments

All of these areas hold a great deal of interest for parents. However, in developing a website for your school, don't overlook Parent Resources. A Parent Resources webpage on the school site is an excellent way to keep important information readily available to parents.

A parent resource section could be used to:

- Post your school's parent involvement policy, Compact, homework policy, and classroom visit policy
- Post tips for parents on such topics as homework help, reading at home, building respect and responsibility, and knowing your child's friends
- Request volunteer helpers
- Provide links to parent resource websites such as www.families-schools.org
- Provide links to state and local educational agencies websites
- View and download student handbooks
- Review and download school discipline policies and procedures
- Download school forms such as:
- Volunteer survey forms
- School physical forms
- Authorization to administer medication form
- Permission to participate forms
- Pre-arranged or excused absence forms
- Free or reduced lunch forms

As children progress into and through the upper grades, communication with parents seems to become more challenging. Information technology in education can be helpful in bridging that communication gap.

Parents can initiate and maintain contact with the school outside of normal school hours. No longer do parents need to rely on their children as the main source of information regarding school functions and activities.

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Building Block: Communication
Parent Teacher Communication—Teacher Telephone Calls to Parents

Phone calls are a personal form of communication and may be difficult for teachers who do not have phones in their classroom or within communities where families do not have access to phones. However, this type of communication ensures direct contact with families and allows the teacher to be certain that families are indeed receiving important information. It is helpful to utilize a brief agenda when making phone calls to highlight the issues to address with the parents. This can serve as an informal script and provide a record of your communication with the parents.

Teachers can also use phone calls to share special accomplishments. Parents may expect only negative information about their child from the teacher, but this perception can be altered. A positive phone call acknowledging a student's improved work or continued effort, thanking a parent for helping out on a class project, or personally inviting a parent to a special event will increase parent's comfort with teachers. These phone calls can be brief; essentially, the intention is to make sure the parent is aware of what a great job the child is doing.

Telephone calls can be a useful way for parents and teachers to share information about children's progress. Utilize phone calls to provide parents with positive information about their children, updates about classroom activities, and to express support and/or concern for students. Developing guidelines for conducting phone calls may also help make this form of communication effective. It helps to outline the major topics to address with parents during a phone call. It is important that the teacher introduces himself/herself, explains the purpose of the call, provides the parent with pertinent information, and encourages parent feedback. Taking time to listen is imperative.

Providing specific descriptions of the student's behavior and conveying support and enthusiasm for the student's accomplishments are likely to enhance the effectiveness of the phone communication. To maximize the success of telephone communication, practices need to be developed to ensure that teachers have access to phones and promptly receive messages. Principals and school staff need to make accommodations to ensure that teachers have the time and resources to make phone calls to parents.

Communicating through phone calls may be difficult for parents who do not have access to a telephone or are not fluent in English. Thus, alternative arrangements need to be made for these families. A translator may be very helpful for written or in-person communication with parents who have difficulty in conversing in English, and teachers can request to meet personally with parents who do not have access to a phone. Phone calls are a good alternative for working parents to communicate with teachers directly during the school day.

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Building Block: Communication
Parent Teacher Communication—Teacher Notes to Parents and Parent Notes to Teachers

Teacher Notes to Parents

Many teachers prefer to use written notes and find them to be an extremely convenient way to communicate with families. You may choose to send a postcard, brief letter, or note that welcomes families to your classroom. Since families are often overwhelmed with written materials early in the school year, it may help to print notes on colored paper or utilize graphic designs to capture parents' attention. In addition, using larger print and minimizing the amount of written material on the page may also make it more likely that families will read written communication. Families are often more receptive to personalized communication; you can address the note to the family, or include a handwritten note at the bottom of a printed page.

There are several ways to deliver written communication to families; prior to the start of school these letters can be sent to families through the mail. After school begins, many teachers choose to send home written communication with students. A great way to ensure that written communication is received by families is by hand delivering it at orientations, registrations, or when parents come to pick up or drop off children.

Notes to the home can be used to keep parents informed of children's progress. Through the use of these notes, you can make specific, individualized comments about children's skill development and achievement. It is important to recognize at least one positive accomplishment of children when creating progress notes. In addition, you can provide additional ways for parents to facilitate children's learning and achievement. In order to foster two-way communication, you can request that the parent send a note back to you. You can also encourage parents' responses by allocating space for comments or including a few brief questions for return. This practice also keeps you informed of parents' ideas and concerns. However it is important to promptly respond to parents' remarks and/or questions.

A flyer at the beginning of the school year can highlight important information for students and parents about the first day of school, but does not overwhelm them with a lot of writing and information. Information to be included in this communication is the date and time of the first day of school, your name, location of the classroom, and classroom number.

A welcome letter can provide basic information about classroom practices. Within this letter, it is helpful to highlight key information related to classroom routines, homework, and communication practices. As always, it is best to continually encourage parent involvement and remind parents that you are available to discuss questions or concerns.

Welcoming communication efforts can also come from the principal. Many schools utilize a school-wide welcome letter that provides families with orientation information about school policies, but letters from the child's teacher are always especially appreciated by parents.

Parent Notes to Teachers

Happy-Grams

Print pads of Happy-Grams for teachers to send notes to parents complimenting students for specific achievements and behaviors. Because teachers also appreciate notes of kindness, distribute pads of Happy-Grams to parents. Print blank Happy-Grams forms in the newsletter. Parents can clip the forms from the newsletter and send notes to teachers.

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Building Block: Communication
Parent Teacher Communication—Web-based Reporting of Student Progress

Information Technology in Education

"E-Parenting"

"E-Parenting" is an especially convenient and effective way for parents and teachers to communicate about student progress. Web-based student information reporting, sometimes referred to as "E-parenting," offers a web host and portal system for monitoring student assignments, attendance, grades, school nurse activity, disciplinary, and even lunch information. Such systems are touted to increase parent involvement and raise student achievement. For parents whose work removes them from the home environment for days at a time, these systems allow frequent checking and monitoring of their child's academic activity simply by logging on to the school's secured information system.

These systems can also give parents insight into the subject matter in their child's classes at any given time and become alerted to areas of difficulty while there is still time to make improvement during the grading period. Often times a link directly to the teacher is offered on the report summary page providing an immediate avenue of communication to express concerns or ask questions about the information being viewed. The system also gives teachers the flexibility of responding to parent concerns as time allows during their busy day.

Having the ability to track student activity throughout each grading period and communicate conveniently as needed with school staff; many parents feel these systems could replace the old-fashioned, hard-copy report cards.

Information Technology Providers

A web search of Student Management Software will produce an extensive listing of software packages and providers for student management programs. Most software packages are available in modules with topics ranging from student registration to grade reporting, and from accounting to personnel management, making it easy to custom tailor a management service to the needs of the school or district. The provider websites offer a view of sample forms, reports, and virtual tours of sample schools.

For a quick sampling of products available visit:

www.blackbaud.com

www.edline.com

www.powerschool.com

www.SDS.com

www.skyward.com

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Building Block: Communication
School-Parent Communication—Website with Information for Parents

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School Websites and E-mail

School websites can provide easy access to electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school's main webpage. Even when a school doesn't have an electronic student progress reporting system, school websites can be a valuable source of information for parents and offer a convenient and efficient way of keeping communication flowing between parents and the school.

School websites often house useful information such as:

- Department and staff listings with links to teachers' and administrators' electronic mail boxes
- School and sports calendars
- Lunch menu

Ask parents to share ideas for family activities and outings

Feature community resources such as libraries, museums, zoos, and youth clubs

Provide information for enrolling in youth organizations and activities such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys & Girls Clubs, and 4-H

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Building Block: Communication
School-Parent Communication—Newsletter

Tips for Using Newsletters to Communicate with Parents

Many schools publish newsletters to establish school-home communication. A quality newsletter needs to be well planned and organized to reach parents effectively. Use this tip sheet as a tool for evaluating your newsletter or to help you develop a newsletter at your school.

What is the purpose of the newsletter?

- To inform parents about what is going on at the school
- To stimulate interest in school activities
- To communicate expectations
- To celebrate successes
- To share information from one parent to others
- To solicit feedback from parents

Questions to ask about your school's newsletter

- Who is it for?
- What do we want to communicate?
- How do we present the information?
- Who is responsible for developing the newsletter?
- Who is responsible for designing, formatting, and copying the newsletter?
- How will it be distributed?
- Who needs to approve the newsletter before it is sent out?

Content of a quality newsletter

- Feature specific items from the school community compact
- Feature specific items from the school's parent involvement policy
- Explain the school homework policy and parents' role with homework
- Suggest books for children to read, parents to read, and families to read together and discuss
- Share recent accomplishments of the students in all areas of activities
- Include upcoming changes in school policies or programs
- Announce service projects that the school is implementing
- Include a calendar of upcoming events: testing, workshops, conferences, etc.
- Include human interest items featuring students, class project, volunteers, etc.

Be sure that content is clear, simple, and direct

Make sure the letter maintains a positive and upbeat tone

Ask parents to write articles for the newsletter

Ask parents for tips for helping kids with homework

- Clubs and organizational information
- Activity announcements and schedules
- Alumni information
- Homework assignments

All of these areas hold a great deal of interest for parents. However, in developing a website for your school, don't overlook Parent Resources. A Parent Resources webpage on the school site is an excellent way to keep important information readily available to parents.

A parent resource section could be used to:

- Post your school's parent involvement policy, Compact, homework policy, and classroom visit policy
- Post tips for parents on such topics as homework help, reading at home, building respect and responsibility, and knowing your child's friends
- Request volunteer helpers
- Provide links to parent resource websites
- Provide links to state and local educational agencies websites
- View and download student handbooks
- Review and download school discipline policies and procedures
- Download school forms such as:
- Volunteer survey forms
- School physical forms
- Authorization to administer medication form
- Permission to participate forms
- Pre-arranged or excused absence forms
- Free or reduced lunch forms

As children progress into and through the upper grades, communication with parents seems to become more challenging. Information technology in education can be helpful in bridging that communication gap. Parents can initiate and maintain contact with the school outside of normal school hours. No longer do parents need to rely on their children as the main source of information regarding school functions and activities.

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Building Block: Communication
School-Parent Communication—Parent Bulletin Board

Parent bulletin boards are not typically perceived to be a communication tool, but rather, an information source. Creative uses of bulletin boards can facilitate parent-to-parent communication, school-to-parent communication, and parent-to-school communication. It can create an avenue that encourages parental interaction with and at the school. Centrally located, where parents come and go, a parent bulletin board or message center can reach out to parents who rarely attend school functions or meetings.

In developing a parent bulletin board, think of it as communication central for ships that pass in the night. Your school's parent message center can certainly be a platform to post monthly school information such as announcements, calendars, lunch menus, board minutes, and honor roll rolls and other award announcements. But remember, the nature of communication is two–way, and the goal is to generate parental interaction. Posted information can and does inspire communication from parents to school, but in a school community, interaction between parents is just as desirable.

In addition to a school information section on the parent bulletin board, provide a section for parents to communicate with other parents. Individual parents possess individual expertise, talents, and interests in a variety of areas. Try to view parents as resources to the school and to other parents. Not only is parent expertise and talent beneficial to the school in a volunteer capacity, it can also be useful to other parents if there is an awareness. The parent section of your message center opens the doors to parents helping parents and strengthens parental interaction.

Content of the parent section may require some screening. For this reason, a parent volunteer might be designated to manage the bulletin board project. This parent volunteer would receive items to be posted from parents and prepare the items for presentation on the board. This method would also keep the message center looking uniform and organized.

Here are a few things to consider in planning your Parent Communication Center:

- Keep two-way communication as it's purpose
- Place it in a high parent traffic area
- Post clear instructions on how to submit items for posting
- Use a parent volunteer to coordinate the project
- Set a schedule for periodic changes in look and content
- Give it an attractive but orderly presentation
- Keep items simple and to the point
- Provide a Parent-to-Parent section
- Organize the bulletin board as a monthly calendar with a monthly theme

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Building Block: Education
Learning Standards

Learning standards are guideposts that tell us what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Schools base their curricula on learning standards. Teachers use learning standards to plan their lessons. Assessment tests show how students are doing relative to the learning standards for their grade level.

Most states post their learning standards on the state department of education's website. Parents can be directed to the appropriate site. The school might also link its own website to the standards. Districts might have their own adaptations of state standards.

It is important that parents understand learning standards. We don't necessarily expect parents to teach their children the concepts and skills included in learning standards—that is the job of teachers. But parents can certainly reinforce what children learn at school and provide enriching activities. Parents can also monitor their children's progress and know when extra help might be needed.

Most state departments of education and other organizations have developed parents' guides for learning standards. These are usually available at little or no cost and may also be found on websites. Some states and organizations have also developed early learning standards for children younger than school age. These are very helpful to parents of preschoolers.

Parent-teacher-student conferences and open houses are good opportunities to acquaint parents with learning standards.

States organize learning standards in different ways. In some states, learning standards are listed for each learning goal the state has established and grade-level benchmarks are provided. The benchmarks are most helpful for parents because they show what is expected of a student at a specific grade level. When discussing standards, it is important to talk with parents about the grade-level expectations.

Discuss learning standards (and benchmarks). Discuss how learning standards relate to learning objectives, the curriculum, teachers' instructional plans, and the way your school reports student progress to parents.

In what ways can the school acquaint parents with learning standards? List the ideas below and develop a plan with a timeline. Consider a plan to acquaint parents with the purpose of learning standards, in general, and their role regarding standards. Also consider focusing on a specific set of standards, such as those related to reading, each year or at each event. Look for ways to parallel the parent's role with the teacher's role in helping children meet standards.

Suggestions:

1. Include information about learning standards in Student Handbook.

2. Discuss learning standards at the Open House.

3. Put link to learning standards and explanation on school website.

4. Keep a set of learning standards in the Family Resource Library.

5. Provide parents with list of learning standards to be addressed each grading period.

6. Review standards at parent-teacher-student conferences.

7. Base a Family Night parent-student activity on a learning standard and discuss how it is related to the standard.

8. At a Family Night, set up "fair-like" activity centers in the gym, with a teacher at each activity and the activity based on a learning standard.

9. Post example standards and related student work on a Parents' Bulletin Board.

10. In the school newsletter, include parent-child activities that are related to standards.

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Building Block: Education
Parent-Child Interactions

Nothing we do is more important than encouraging interactions between parents and their children that focus on studying, reading, and responsibility. Compacts, policies, and activities do not improve children's lives unless they result in changed behaviors. When parents interact with their children at home in ways that support their children's learning at school, this is the most important of all *parental involvement*.

1. Teachers give homework assignments that require students to interview their parents.

2. Schools include parents in their shared reading projects: Parents read and discuss with their children the books that the students are reading at school.

3. Students maintain assignment notebooks that parents review and sign.

4. At the end of a school day, the teachers ask students to write a sentence or two about what they learned that day and take it home to discuss with their parents.

5. Every student in the class writes on a strip of paper a brief statement describing something good about one student. The teacher reviews the statements (just in case) and then puts the strip in a paper bag. That night, the student opens the bag with his/her parents and reads the statements. Through the school year, each student gets a turn at being the "spotlight student."

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Building Block: Education
Family Resource Library

A Family Resource Library is a section of the school's library, a shelf of materials in the parents' room, or even a cart in the hallway that includes books and other materials that parents may check out. The materials include:

- books on parenting,
- materials for parents to help children establish good study habits,
- copies of learning standards and related guides for parents,
- storybooks for reading to children,
- family educational activities and educational games, and
- materials for parents to use with preschool age children.

Materials for the library may be purchased or made. Interactive Reading Workshops provide one way to make materials for the library. Publishers and bookstores may donate materials to the library. Perhaps the parent organization will include purchases for the library in its fund-raising plan.

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Building Block: Education
Training for Parents and Other Classroom and Office Volunteers

Studies have shown that parents who volunteer convey confidence in the schools they serve and at the same time send a message to the students that parents care about the school and the students. If parents were viewed by the school as they are viewed by their community, the school would see a pool of potential volunteers from clerical support to technology specialists; gardeners to craftsmen; musicians, artist, environmentalists, business professionals, and humanitarians. Putting the expertise of parents to use in the school provides support to educators and administrators and offers a meaningful and productive use of parental talent. Having knowledge of the specific talents and interests of the parent resource pool can serve to benefit the school and strengthen parental involvement.

School volunteers need not be restricted to serving the school only during school hours. Good planning can create task lists that can be completed at home, before school, after school, or during evening school activities.

Using the Parent Resource Pool

Make a Wish List – Every organization, business, and industry has that nagging task list that, if accomplished with regularity, would inject relief and optimism into an overwhelmed staff and allow regular staff to focus on their primary functions. Perhaps you would like an office volunteer to greet visitors, answer the phone, and make photo copies. Maybe your wish list includes a volunteer gardener to relieve the custodial staff of seasonal grounds keeping – or snow removal. Maybe you need a carpenter to head up the set building crew for your school play or a seamstress to help with costumes. Maybe your teachers just need an extra set of hands in the classrooms. Maybe you need a volunteer to organize and manage your volunteer program. Make a note of these tasks and list them by category.

Conduct a Survey - Before you can dip into the parent resource pool, you need to know what resources you have and when they are available. The best way to reveal this information is to ask. Take time to develop a brief survey for parents. Items to include in the survey might be:

- Parent's contact information
- Best times to call
- Areas of expertise (Offer categories as possible choices)
- Hobbies and other interests (Offer categories as possible choices)
- Areas in which they are willing to volunteer (Offer categories as possible choices)
- Hours available to volunteer
- Allow space for comments
- Offer "Other" as a category choice

Create a Volunteer File or Database

Information is of no use if it can't be easily accessed. Convert this volunteer information into a resource by storing it in a database. If you don't know how to build a database, check your parent volunteer surveys. Chances are that your surveys may reveal the name of an individual who has experience in office software applications. Not only might this person assist in building a database, they could also show your staff how to use it. Your parent resource pool data base could also prove to be useful in planning a "Career Day."

Develop Volunteer Orientation

Time training volunteers is time well spent. Present the volunteer with a clear job description and a packet of printed information for future reference. Items that might be included in the packet are listed:

- Volunteer agreement
- Job description
- Volunteer schedule
- Volunteer welcome letter
- Parking information
- Building map
- Operating instructions on applicable equipment
- Emergency evacuation plan
- School handbook and calendar

Use orientation time to familiarize your volunteers with the school's mission, programs, policies, and procedures and to tour the building. Emphasize the importance of a welcoming environment at the school and express how the volunteer is expected to contribute to that friendly environment. Other things to discuss in the orientation might include:

- A place to sign in and record hours
- A safe place to keep personal belongings
- Location of supplies
- Familiarize them with equipment related to the volunteer position
- Introduction to regular staff members with whom they will work.
- Review school policies and procedures
- Thank them for their willingness to volunteer at the school

While parent volunteers can fill many needs in the school, community organizations and businesses should not be overlooked as potential resources and partners. A community resource pool can nicely compliment existing elements in your parent resource pool. Service organizations are often looking for projects in which to invest manpower and money, and businesses are often willing to share with the community in productive ways. School administrators should capitalize on the purpose of service organizations and entice the interest of local businesses in their communities by simply expressing (in a personal format) what the school could use in the way of manpower and amenities.

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Building Block: Education
Courses and Workshops for Parents

Programs to teach parents to enhance the home environment in ways that benefit their children's learning take a variety of forms and may produce substantial outcomes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Parent education includes group sessions led by previously trained parents, and workshops and courses taught by experts. Parent group sessions enable parents to learn in a small-group setting, carry out activities with their children between sessions, and discuss their experience with other parents. When led by other parents rather than teachers or experts, these parent groups are collegial and non-threatening. Workshops and courses conducted by experts—educators, psychologists, or pediatricians, for example—have the advantage of research-based content and access to professional knowledge. Research shows that programs that teach parents to improve the quality of cognitive stimulation and verbal interaction produce immediate effects on the child's intellectual development. When parents learn systems for monitoring and guiding their children's out-of-school time, the children do better in school. Schools that teach parents ways to reinforce school learning at home find that students are more motivated to learn and attend school more regularly. Parent education programs enhance teacher-parent communication and the attitude of parents toward the school. Efforts to encourage family reading activities result in the children's improved reading skills and interest in reading. Programs that include both parents and children are more effective than programs that deal with only the parents.

APPLICATION

The obstacles to school-sponsored parent education can be daunting. Some parents are not receptive to the good intentions of parent education providers, and recruiting participants for parent education programs can be a frustrating process. Teachers usually have quite enough to do caring for their students; working with parents can be seen as an added burden. So the twin problems of parent education are: (a) providing personnel to organize and deliver the parent education programs; and (b) attracting parents to the programs.

Small-group sessions led by previously trained parents are inexpensive, encourage parental attachment to the school, and allow parents to share experiences and assist one another. On the other hand, attracting parents to sessions offered outside the home requires substantial attention to recruitment.

Strategies for schools and teachers:

- Make a specific list of what the school wants from parents according to the age group of the child, then organize parent education around this list.
- Publish, inform, monitor, support, and assist with homework policies.
- Use parents to organize, recruit, and lead other parents.
- Consider field-tested, proven models and curricula.
- Focus on the curriculum of the home.

REFERENCES

Clarke-Stewart & Apfel (1978); Becher (1984); Epstein (1987); Gray & Wandersman (1980); Rich (1985); Walberg & Wallace (1992); Wallace & Walberg (1991).

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Building Block: Connection
Open House

An open house is an opportunity to convey to parents the fact that their children's success in school depends a lot on what goes on at home. By discussing the Compact and the homework policy, parents will learn what they can do to help their children succeed.

This is a perfect time to explain programs for parents and families.

For the key events above, develop a plan for:

- Discussing the Compact.
- Discussing the homework policy.
- Discussing learning standards.

List the times in a school year that all parents are invited to the school for programs such as open houses, Back-To-School Nights, and other all-school activities.

Each of these events is an opportunity to convey to parents the fact that their children's success in school depends a lot on what goes on at home. By discussing the Compact and the homework policy, parents will learn what they can do to help their children succeed.

These events are also a perfect time to explain programs for parents and families.

For one of the key events above, develop a plan for:

- Discussing the Compact.
- Discussing the homework policy.
- Discussing learning standards.
- Explaining parent and family programs

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Building Block: Connection
Parent-Teacher-Student Conferences

Parent-teacher-student conferences can be a very effective means of communication if a few simple principles are followed:

- Principles for Effective Conferences
- The conferences are held at least twice a year;
- The conference follows a standard agenda that all teachers and parents know about in advance;
- The conference includes a discussion of the School Community Compact, homework policy, and learning standards;
- Each conference concludes with agreed upon Next Steps for the parent(s), teacher, and student;
- A file of “Next Steps” is kept that passes from conference to conference, teacher to teacher.

Some schools use “student-led” conferences, at which the student leads the discussion, showing a portfolio of work and asking questions of the teacher and parents. This is especially effective in upper grades, and requires preparation for the students beforehand.

Even when the conference is not “student led,” it is always healthy for the student to be in attendance and able to participate.

Parent-teacher-student conferences are always a good time to encourage parents to participate in courses offered for them by the school and in other key parent activities.

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Building Block: Connection
Welcoming Place

First of all, the school must be a safe place for students and teachers. It must also be an orderly place where learning can take place. So policies are in place to direct visitors to the main office and require them to sign in. Security procedures to deal with visitors who act suspiciously or in a threatening manner are in place.

Thankfully, it is very seldom the school must deal with unpleasant visitors. For the most part, visitors are parents of students in the school or friendly members of the community. What are your policies and procedures for dealing with friendly visitors, especially parents?

Discuss each of the points below, determining if this is an area that could use some attention. Then develop a plan to address areas of concern.

1. The school telephones are answered by staff who are pleasant, cheerful, and helpful.

2. All staff—including teachers, teachers' aides, clerks, custodians, cooks, and others—greet visitors in the hallway in a pleasant and helpful manner, to solicit their needs, and to direct them to the office.

3. Office staff greet visitors promptly, cheerfully, and helpfully.

4. There is a written policy regarding visits by parents to their children's classrooms. The policy includes:

- a provision that advance permission is requested, ..
- procedures to notify the teacher,
- a friendly hand-out for visiting parents to explain their role in the classroom—where they should sit and what the teacher will expect them to do, and
- guidelines for teachers to greet parents warmly and explain to them what is going on in the classroom.

5. The signs that greet visitors outside the doors and in the hallways are friendly while also being clear about the expectation that visitors register in the office. Helpful signs pointing to the office are placed on hallway walls.

6. The school provides special attention to welcome families that are new to the school.

7. The school has clear expectations of all school staff that they address students and parents respectfully.

8. The school makes every effort to minimize interruptions in the classrooms, including the frequency of announcements.

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Building Block: Connection
Family Nights

A school community is strengthened when its members associate with one another and share common experiences. Activities that bring everyone together while also reinforcing one or more of the school community's goals are especially valuable. A family night devoted to reading fits the bill. If we chose to plan a Family Night on a theme other than reading, these ideas will still give us suggestions for making our Family Night interactive, whatever its topic.

Family Night

Most schools are familiar with Family Reading Nights at which parents, students, and teachers gather at school to read together, listen to stories, present skits related to a theme from literature, host guest readers from the community, and celebrate the joys of reading. Ideas are given here for a Family Reading Night that includes interactive reading.

Focus on interactive reading.

Plan a Family Reading Night that will include an emphasis on reading interactively with small children and continued discussion of reading with children of all ages. The Family Reading Night will include activities that encourage parents and children to read together and to talk about reading.

Family Night Ideas

Theme Based– Select a theme and plan the evening events on that one idea.

Classroom host the event –Select different grade levels or classrooms to host the Family Night.

Storyteller Drama –Invite a local drama group (either high school or college) to act out a plot of a children's book.

Author Night – Invite a local children's book writer to the program or focus the event on the work of one author.

Host Readers –Invite local community leaders to read a story. Have several community leaders, and each one can read to a classroom.

Sponsorships –Invite corporate or local businesses to sponsor the event. Have door prizes available for children and adults who attend.

Book Fairs/Book Clubs –Tie the event to book fairs and/or book clubs that are visiting your school.

Make and Take a Book –Have the children create their own books by creating the illustrations and story plot.

Kick Off Reading Challenge –Use the Family Reading Night to launch a reading challenge between students or grade levels. Another challenge could be to have the students read a set number of books and a faculty member will do something funny such as get a pie in the face.

Book Character Visits –Take characters from a popular book; have them visit your reading night.

Puppet Show –Provide a puppet show based on a book.

Be sure to plan activities for preschoolers and consider inviting neighborhood families with children of preschool age.

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Building Block: Connection
Home Visits

A home visit is when a representative of the school visits a single home. Home visits enable a school to reach parents, especially those who might not come to school, with a welcoming message, materials, and helpful advice.

Home visits require training for the home visitors, an agreed-upon group of students whose homes will be visited, and a system for tracking the results. For example, a school might decide to visit all second graders in the late spring and summer to boost summer reading. The children would be given books, and the parents would be given information to help them encourage their children's reading habits. The materials for the parents would also include a letter of greeting from the principal and information about parent activities at the school. Information about summer reading programs at the public library or recreation center might be included.

A middle school might decide to visit the homes of incoming sixth graders the summer before they begin attending the school. The emphasis for these visits might be on study skills and homework habits. Again, a welcoming letter from the principal and information about the school and its activities for parents would be included.

Home visits might be made by school employees (teachers, parent liaisons, teacher aides) or community members employed especially for this purpose.

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Building Block: Connection
Home Gatherings

Why Gatherings in Parents' Homes?

Home gatherings are a powerful tool in creating stronger alliances among parents and between parents and teachers. The net effects are:

Parents view teachers as approachable and credible. They see parents as allies in childrearing. Parents also learn first-hand of the school community's expectations of them in supporting their children's learning.

Teachers gain a fuller understanding of their students, enjoy the parents' personal expressions of appreciation, and acquire stronger parental support for their work.

Children recognize by concrete example the cooperative relationships between their parents, other children's parents, and their teachers.

The dynamics of relationships change as teachers are no longer on their own "turf," but come into the lives of their students. The teacher is now a guest. Communication is less formal and becomes more trusting than is often possible when parents and teachers meet at school. Positive relationships form and strengthen, and partnerships are created.

Purposes of the Home Gatherings

Research on home visits typically depicts such efforts as extensions of the school into the community, thus perpetuating the perception that the school and the community are separate entities. With home gatherings, however:

1) parents and teachers are viewed as members of the same school community,

2) the invitation for the visit comes from the home rather than the school, and

3) a group of parents meets. The discussion centers not on specific children, but on the reciprocal roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers, and students in helping children reach goals established by the school community.

The purpose for the gathering consequently shapes the preparations.

Home gatherings are planned for the purposes of:

- Strengthening triangular alliances (student, parents, teachers) focused on children's learning;
- Drawing parents and school personnel into productive relationships with one another; and
- Drawing parents into a supportive relationship with each other.

With home gatherings, members of a school community attain more intimate understandings of each other, calling each other by name.

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Building Block: Connection
Parent Room

A parent resource center can provide a place that offers opportunities for parents to expand their parenting skills. It can be a place to engage in discussions or participate in workshops about common parenting concerns. It can be used to connect with community resources and house a parent resource library. It could also be used as a meeting place for parent groups and blended parent/school teams.

Providing a parent resource center:

- Communicates to parents that they are needed, welcome, and wanted.
- Strengthens the child's support network through increasing parental knowledge.
- Demonstrates positive support to parents by helping them to build skills that strengthen and reinforce parenting practices.

In planning the content of your resource center it is helpful to survey parents to determine what types of support they feel is needed to become better partners in the education of their child. Build the content of your resource center around the expressed needs of the parents. Suggested items for your resource center are listed:

- books on parenting
- materials for parents to establish good study habits
- parent friendly version of state learning standards
- storybooks for reading to children
- educational family activities and games
- materials and activities for parents with preschool children

Other items for consideration might include:

- Magazine racks with parenting periodicals
- Education area rug
- Stereo system
- Microphone
- CDs and/or videos (e.g., educational, relaxation, classical)
- Puppets
- Book baskets
- Resources to help parents cope (Stressbusters, etc.)
- Cookbooks and meal plans
- Children's recipes/ Holiday recipes
- Desk, chairs, tables
- Coat rack
- Storage for personal belongings
- Games

- Computer(s)
- Projection unit
- Conference table(s)
- Chalk board/dry erase/chart paper and marking instruments
- Bright pictures and posters

Parent resource materials can be donated, purchased, or made. Seek contributions for your center from businesses, publishers, book stores, and libraries. In selecting materials for your resource center, be sensitive to the religious and cultural make up of your school. Provide materials in more than one language if needed. Consider selecting materials that discuss the specific cultures and religions that make up your school community. Such materials will offer an opportunity for families outside of these groups to gain information about these cultural diversities.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in establishing a parent resource center is generating parental interest and inspiring parents to use it. Spotlighting the center during open house, at conferences, in newsletters, on bulletin boards, and the school website would do much to elevate awareness. To motivate parents to use the center, your school might offer movie rental coupons or free admission to a family fun park for each family that checks out materials, uses the internet, or physically visits during a given month.

If your space allows for trainings and workshops, take the following into consideration in planning your events:

- Offer your trainings at different times and days to accommodate most work schedules
- Provide child care
- Coordinate transportation

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