

## Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

*A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center*

### School Climate—Is your school warm and inviting, or are you freezing them out?

Transcript

Part One

**Parent voice 1:** Getting to the school is really hard for me—conference times are during my work hours and I can't get off. I don't have a car, and the bus lines don't run near the school.

**Parent voice 2:** I don't feel comfortable asking questions, and I'm not very good at writing a note, and I'm not sure what to say if I call. And what are these forms that they keep sending home? Half the time I don't see them until my child comes home upset because the teacher is complaining that things aren't signed and returned.

**Parent voice 3:** I thought they were responsible for my child's education. They keep asking me to do things. If my child wants to participate in extracurricular activities, I have to pay more money. I can barely make ends meet as it is, and I pay taxes. I don't have extra time or money to give.

**Parent voice 4:** I wasn't a good student, and I don't like going to the school. I feel like they think I'm stupid.

**Narrator:** Schools can be a cold, unwelcoming place for many parents. That includes parents like these—parents who speak another language, parents who feel overburdened, and parents who feel excluded or not respected.

Many children who could benefit most from having involved parents are the very children whose parents are the most difficult to involve.

Parents can be involved in important ways without entering the school, but pairing at-home support with in-school participation can have a positive effect on student and school performance.

**Key idea: All staff contribute to school climate, which impacts parent involvement.**

**Narrator:** This is one in a series of podcasts from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center at Edvantia about parent involvement developed for education leaders. A positive school climate is one of six areas identified through research as critical for successful parent involvement.

Educators at the state level may seem far removed from the parents in communities across your state, but you can still provide guidance to district and school leaders who, in turn, work with those parents. Listen to this pair of podcasts about school climate, and follow the suggestions to assist schools in critically examining their climate. Additional helpful tools are available online from the podcast launch page at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's Web site. ([www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org)).

A positive school climate can impact parent attendance at school events and result in parents feeling welcome at school and valued as partners in their children's educational success. It's important to remember that all staff, regardless of their job description, contribute to school climate.

One school where parents, children, and staff all share responsibility for school learning and have roles in decision making is A.B. Combs Leadership Magnet Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina. This school has a challenging population, with students from 64 different countries speaking 28 first languages. About 30% of the students qualify for free and reduced price meals, and about 15% qualify for Title 1 funds. Everyone at this award-winning school works hard to create a culture where parents, children, and staff are partners. Listen to what the Leadership Coordinator, Michael Armstrong, has to say.

**Michael:** “Some of the things we have done to create a culture where parents feel excited, and want to be in the building and want to help, is focusing on the student. That is everything from a student conference is lead by a student. The design of this building was part of input from the students. The way that the grounds are landscaped is input from the students. The way graduation or any special event is coordinated is all ran by students. So if a parent sees and knows that their fourth-grade child is empowered to give input and actually see it unfold here in the building, then it creates an environment where the parent feels that their contributions will really be honored when they are in the building also.”

**Narrator:** This school has learned that parent involvement is often tied to high levels of student interest and involvement. Parents are often interested in what their children are interested in, and they can take pride in their children's accomplishments.

Listen to these parents and think about how you would feel in the following situations.

**Parent Voice 1:** I found the parking lot, but couldn't find the entrance to the building. No one was around to help me when I asked. When I finally saw a security guard, he asked questions as if I looked suspicious.

**Parent Voice 2:** The person in the office acted like I wasn't even there. I waited, but started to wonder if she was just going to ignore me. Finally she looked up and asked me to follow the “check-in procedures.” I don't know what the check-in procedures is. She talked to me like I'm either stupid or I can't hear.

**Narrator:** Have you ever been there? Do you want to go back? When parents finally speak with a principal, counselor, or teacher after one or more of these things have happened, they are often frustrated, angry, or ready to just go home.

All too often, parents have experiences that discourage them from being involved at their children's school.

Regardless of why these situations occur, each obstacle that discourages parents from feeling welcome at school can and must be addressed. Every person on staff could be the first, and possibly the only, person that a parent sees. It is everyone's job to be helpful and responsive.

Educators at all levels can incorporate proven strategies to assist schools in establishing a positive climate. Listen to the next in this series of podcasts where we'll look at some ways schools have addressed these and other climate issues, and offer some suggestions on how schools can take steps toward a positive school climate.

Links for these and other tools—to help states and districts as they guide and support school actions for improving parent involvement—are available at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site ([www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org)).

## Part Two

**Narrator:** This is one in a series of podcasts about parent involvement developed for education leaders. A positive school climate is one of six areas identified through research as critical for successful parent involvement.

This podcast, the second in a pair on school climate, offers suggestions about how to critically examine a school's climate. Additional helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's Web site. ([www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org)).

Where to begin in dealing with climate issues? Pull together a diverse team to take a close look around the school. Include parents, teachers, administrators, and support staff such as bus drivers or maintenance staff. Examine what each person does to establish a school's climate. Identify where changes are needed, and prioritize the issues that need to be addressed. Some things can be remedied easily. Other tasks take planning and an allocation of time and funds.

One of the first steps can be addressing a school's unique population. The increased diversity of school populations can significantly impact parent involvement. Anne Henderson, noted author on family involvement in education, shares ideas from research about the importance of being inclusive of all families.

**Anne:** "Another important way of bridging class and cultural differences is simply making sure that the school is an open and welcoming place—that the front office staff have some customer service training, and look right up and talk to somebody, answer the phone in a way that makes you glad that you called but that's a key thing because that is the main interface between people coming in off the street and the school. And as they say, you only have one chance to make a first impression. . . . People who work in schools tend not to see it anymore. They come into the building, they are used to the people in the office, they go right to their classroom because they know where it is, or their office. But somebody coming in for the first time or second time, they don't know where things are. They need help. They want someone to greet them and to make them feel welcome. That is an important way to bridging class and cultural differences and, again, how hard is that."

**Narrator:** Another key issue for a school to consider is customer service. Businesses know that quality customer service is tied to success. The Austin Independent School District uses customer service guidelines for all school staff. They look at customer service within the areas of Courtesy and Respect, Communication, Responsiveness, and Environment.

Another customer service model, the RATER Model, defines the following five dimensions that customers are believed to consider when they assess service quality.

First is Reliability: Do you deliver the service you promised and what your customers believed they were promised? Do you do this every time and under all conditions? Is your service timely, consistent, accurate, and dependable?

Second is Assurance: Do your staff have the right knowledge and skills to deliver the service you promised? Are they respectful of your customers? Do they convey trust and confidence?

Third is Tangibles: Do your physical facilities, equipment, employees, and communication materials look attractive and appropriate?

Fourth, Empathy: Do your staff provide caring, individualized attention to customers? Is it easy to access staff, services, and information? Is your communication with customers clear, appropriate, and timely? Do you provide services that are appropriate to the individual needs of the customer? Does staff demonstrate that they understand the customer's needs and situation?

And finally, Responsiveness: Are you willing to help the customer, provide prompt service, and resolve problems satisfactorily?

As an SEA, how is your customer service? As school leadership, your example is important. Providing customer service training for your staff is a great step for establishing a positive climate.

Here are five more examples of tasks that a school team can initiate in order to begin the process of improving a school's climate.

1. Gather data on a variety of school events. Within the school's demographics, look for specific subgroups of families. Who is and who is not participating in events? Do any patterns emerge? This is a starting point for taking action.
2. Revise the school's mission statement to reflect an inclusive philosophy, and decide how that mission will be applied in daily practice, including live interactions and written communications with parents.
3. Develop a protocol for live interactions that has simple steps for school staff to follow when speaking with parents by phone, during home visits, and at conferences.
4. Provide customer service training for the entire school staff. Parents may not really be "customers," yet there is much to be learned from these models.
5. Finally, review all written communications with parents. When a uniform and consistent style is used, parents know where to find information. Check for grammar and spelling, the readability level, and the language so that you are truly communicating with all parents.

State departments can assist schools in accomplishing these tasks. For example, SEAs can help build school leaders' capacity to gather data on school events. SEAs can provide sample protocols and written communications that schools can use as templates when creating their own documents. Finally, schools will need a resource for the professional development needed to train school staff in customer service techniques and communication strategies that are effective with parents.

Links for these and other tools—to help states and districts as they guide and support school actions for improving parent involvement—are available at the podcast launch page on the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site ([www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org)).

Climate can make or break a school's level of parent participation.

Form an inclusive team to assess practices to create a welcoming setting where parents, children, and staff collaborate to achieve success.

Join us for the next podcast in this series on parent involvement in schools, where we look at *The home climate—Where parents have the biggest impact on learning*.

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