

## Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

*A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center*

### Parent Involvement—Get the conversation started and keep it going Transcript

#### Part One

**Narrator:** A key to active parent involvement is building a strong relationship between parents and teachers, and the best way to do that is in person, through live communications. We will address relationship building in another podcast, but today we will focus on live communications with parents—how to start and keep the conversation going. Live communications typically include phone calls; conferences; home visits; and interactions at drop-off/pick-up time, open houses, and other all-school meetings or events. Relationships are strengthened by good communications, and communications improve as relationships grow.

This is the fourth in a series of podcasts about parent involvement intended for education leaders. In prior podcasts, we spoke about the school and home climate. Communication is the second 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 short podcasts about live communications, and follow suggestions to help schools examine and improve communications with parents. Helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center’s Web site, [www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org), where other podcasts can also be accessed.

The bottom line is this: Improved communications keep parents well-informed, can impact parent attendance at school events, and can build a partnership that promotes children’s educational success.

**Narrator:** How can we bring parents and teachers together in ways that help children? How can we get them talking? Here are examples of successful strategies used by schools in several Appalachian states. First is Cardinal Valley Elementary School in Lexington, Kentucky. Principal Matt Perkins tells of the power of making that personal contact.

**Matt:** “On the first professional development day with my teachers, I told them I had just one activity for them to do, which was to simply call home and welcome every child with every parent at the house. It was amazing, the same teachers who were so worried about making that phone call came back to me the next day or the next week and said, ‘I want to be honest with you; I was wrong, I didn’t think it was going to work and I called home and I couldn’t get anybody who spoke English; but I did get in touch with one of my students I had 4 years ago, who is the brother of my student I have this year whose now at the high school. We had a great talk, we got caught up on what we their doing, and they relayed the message to the household that I was happy to have their child in my classroom.’”

**Narrator:** Another strategy used in more and more schools is having a staff member designated to work and communicate with parents. At Sterling Middle School in Loudon County, Virginia, Principal

Michael Williams describes how his school has successfully used a parent liaison to improve parent communications.

**Michael:** “One of the things that’s made a tremendous difference in communication patterns in our schools has been the use of parent liaisons. Parent liaisons come into the school on a daily basis with the attitude of finding out information that they can take back to the community and use effectively. Their role is so dynamic in that they may be on the phone with parents, they may be making home visits, they may represent the school at various meetings and in some cases, the parent liaisons teach in programs, such as our Parents as Educational Partners Program. Our parent liaison also serves as one of our principle translators. It’s not only the literal translation of language, but a parent who realizes and recognizes the nuances of the community that we serve.”

**Narrator:** Principal Michael Williams shared information about a project they called “a success plan” for students who are not succeeding academically. He said that students who are on a success plan sign a contract with parents, teachers, counselors, and sometimes administrators. Team members acknowledge their commitment to the success of that particular student. The school also has what is known as a “success line” where parents of struggling students are called twice monthly with an update on their student’s progress toward success.

Live communication is extremely time-consuming, and when thinking about personally contacting each family, the task can be overwhelming. For instance, a middle school teacher might have 4 or 5 classes of 25 to 30 students—100 plus students.

Contacting each family by phone involves an enormous time investment, even assuming all families have phones, that the phone numbers the school has are current, and that someone answers the call. It’s a daunting task with many unknowns. Will an adult answer? Will I have to call back from home in the evening? Will the family assume the call is a complaint or request for something and not pick up the call or call back? Does the parent speak English? Also, what has occurred prior to this communication with parents—does my message trigger a prior negative experience? Is this parent going to be apathetic or hostile?

Education leaders can help by providing a phone call protocol for all teachers to follow that includes consistent elements of courtesy that are likely to be well received. Examples of some of these are available at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site, [www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org).

Although it’s not always practical, the best way to communicate with anyone is face-to-face. It’s easier to gauge what people are thinking and feeling when communicating live, so there’s an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings or points of confusion. It’s easier to judge if both parties understand and it’s certainly easier to come to an agreement when planning or discussing possible solutions to problems.

Think about school-parent communication, either from a professional standpoint as an educator or from a personal standpoint as a parent. What is the purpose for the communication? What are the goals? What are the benefits? What are the problems? What are the results? In your experience, what works and doesn’t work?

State-level educators are in the unique position that allows them to provide leadership and guidance to schools of all levels. SEA staff can assist schools and districts by providing the resources and information that they need in order to make informed decisions regarding parent communication.

Listen to the next in this pair of podcasts where we'll look at some strategies schools have used to foster positive communication 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 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. Communication is one of six areas identified through research as critical for successful parent involvement.

This is the second in this pair of podcasts about communication and offers some examples of strategies schools have used to foster positive communication with parents. Additional helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center’s Web site. ([www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org)).

In the first of this pair of podcasts, we provided some ideas for how education leaders can assist school in creating a climate that fosters positive school-parent communication. In this podcast, we’ll give some examples of different scenarios schools might use to provide opportunities for this communication.

Most schools offer many different opportunities for parents and school staff to communicate. In the best-case scenario, we recommend that each parent is contacted before the school year begins, or at least before the first scheduled school event. This is an opportunity for a school staff member to introduce himself, and personally invite parents to attend an upcoming event at the school. During this call, school staff should point out something significant that will take place at the event to encourage their participation.

Parents are more likely to respond to a personal invitation, especially if they know they will hear specifically about their child, and they can expect the focus to be positive. Parents are also likely to attend events where children are performing. A student performance can be a good opportunity to tack on a 5-minute explanation or demonstration of something important for parents to see and know.

An open house is a good opportunity for school staff to meet each parent face-to-face. Parents are most interested in their own child, so the focus of the event should be at an individual level. Educators might share examples of high-quality work, so parents know what their children should be doing now that they’re in a new grade. Samples of children’s early work, with comments on strengths and things needing improvement, can be provided. Parents could also participate in a demonstration on how to provide effective homework support.

Parent conferences are a good example of a scheduled opportunity for communicating face-to-face with parents. Conferences are time-intensive but the live interaction can be valuable in making sure everyone is “on the same page.” Schools generally set aside at least one full day for parent-teacher conferences. Student work and assessments can be shared, and both teachers and parents can collaborate on developing plans for next steps—celebrate the good news and plan ways to address areas of need.

Remember, school events pull parents out of hectic schedules and can be that “one activity too many” for some families. Not attending does not mean a parent isn’t interested, so the message should be provided both during the school events, as well as through alternative forms such as a note home.

In this quote from her article, *The Power of Parent-Teacher Relations*, author Danielle Mbadu stresses the benefits of a strong relationship between parents and teachers.

“I firmly believe that the types of relationships and encounters that are in place between teachers and parents can have a profound effect on student learning and growth. In my experiences, the parents I am in contact with the most frequently, whether through e-mail, open houses, or face-to-face communication, have the children who do the best in my class. One reason for this is that those students know that their mom or dad and I are in touch with each other. In those instances when parents and teachers are working together, the students know there is support. That means a lot to students, even if they do not freely admit it (Mbadu, 2008).”

**Narrator:** In conclusion: At the beginning of the school year, the door for regular communications with parents needs to be opened. Parents need to know that their child’s teacher wants to work with them and stay in touch with regularly.

Parents need to be informed regularly about their children’s school work. Their children’s learning is the connection between the teacher and the parents. Learning materials and homework assignments should be sent home for parents to work on with their children to keep parents informed about what’s going on in the classroom.

Finally, families should hear from school staff at least once a month. Teachers shouldn’t wait until things get bad or when they need parents’ help—those are the times when the parents need to already be on the team, working with the school to help their children.

The research is clear that meaningful parent-child relationships have a positive impact on children’s academic achievement, so engaging parents is an important part of each child’s education. Live communication is vital to developing a positive home-school relationship that will ultimately affect learning.

State departments of education can assist schools in accomplishing these tasks. For example, SEAs can provide information to schools and districts on best practices with regards to parent communication strategies. SEAs can provide sample protocols and verbal communications examples that schools can use as a starting point for their own communications protocols. Finally, schools and districts may benefit from sample schedules and examples of school events that other schools use effectively. SEA staff are in a unique position to be able to provide these resources to schools and districts.

Links for parent involvement resources, such as phone etiquette and conference tips, as well as other tools, are available at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site, [www.arcc.edvantia.org](http://www.arcc.edvantia.org). These tools provide examples of ways states and districts can guide and support school actions for improving parent involvement.

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