

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Parent Involvement—E-Communications with Parents

Transcript

Part One

Parent Voice 1: We're moving to a new city, and I wanted to find a great neighborhood and school for our family. I looked at the school Web sites and chose a school for my daughter based on the information I found online.

Parent Voice 2: I communicate every day with my son's teacher by e-mail. He's had some trouble in school in the past, and this helps me to keep tabs on his progress.

Student Voice 1: My mom checks my grades online. If I do bad on a quiz or test, she knows before I do!

Narrator: As these examples illustrate, technology has the potential to increase the frequency and effectiveness of communication between the home and school, and thereby increase parent involvement and improve student learning.

Welcome to this podcast, one of a series about parent involvement in the schools. This episode explores ways educators can use technology to communicate with parents.

Schools are using various forms of technology to increase school-home communication, including voice mail, e-mail, school and classroom Web sites, and Web access to individual student information such as attendance, grades, and student portfolios.

State-level educators can provide leadership and guidance for district and school leaders with respect to electronic communication. Carolyn Foxx, coordinator of special projects at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, offers a suggestion that is used on the North Carolina Web site.

Carolyn: "One of the things that we did in terms of trying to make our information more user friendly for our parents was to create a parent involvement resource page on our North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Web site, and it serves as a model of information. They go to that one page and from there, they can access, in a more concrete and user-friendly way, all the other information that parents typically are interested in or have questions about."

Narrator: Consider the schools in your state. What is the current capacity for using Internet technology applications to enhance parental involvement? What types of technology are currently being used to promote communication between parents and schools? How can some of these successful examples be shared with other schools and districts in your state? How can state-level staff help districts choose electronic communication methods that are appropriate for their population?

Jerry Jalill with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction tells about a program he has seen used in schools.

Jerry: “In terms of measuring parent involvement and parent activity in North Carolina, what we are seeing more and more in Title 1 schools and comprehensive school reform schools, is the use of a program called Connect Ed, in which the school can send several messages to parents reminding them of parent involvement activities at school, and report cards, and any kind of things relating to what parents need to know. It is a very good system because it tracks a lot of data—how many calls have been received and sent successfully, and schools can compile all kinds of data in terms of parent contacts.”

Narrator: More and more schools use an automated telephone service such as the one just described. The automated system delivers school messages by phone to a live person, an answering machine, or voice mail system. If there is no answer to a call, the system is designed to re-try that number every 10 minutes for up to an hour and a half. The phone service can be programmed so that families having more than one student at the school should receive only one message. This type of system can be especially effective in areas where many families don’t have Internet access.

A project for the Illinois Century Network, conducted by the Center for the Study of Education Policy, asked parents which information-sharing and communication applications could best be served by technology.

For arranging meetings and attendance reporting, parents thought voicemail was useful. They also cited voice mail as a means to contact school counselors regarding class schedules, school events, and course selection. The school Web site was cited as a means for finding out about homework assignments. Parents felt that e-mail was a way to leave more elaborate messages about difficulty with a course, problems with homework, or multi-faceted questions. A noncustodial divorced parent also noted that e-mail provided a way to feel in contact with the school and with his child’s education when day-to-day progress reports were no longer routinely available. Others used e-mail to thank teachers and let them know they were doing a good job, and encouraged their children to e-mail teachers if they were having trouble. This was viewed as promoting assertiveness, which would become important in college when parents have even less opportunity to get involved.

Educators at all levels can incorporate proven strategies to assist school and district staff in improving their electronic communications with parents. Listen to the next in this pair of podcasts where we’ll offer some suggestions on how schools can take steps toward creating effective, positive electronic communications.

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.

Part Two

Narrator: This podcast, the second in a pair on electronic communication, offers strategies for improving communications with parents via technology. Additional helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's Web site. (www.arcc.edvantia.org).

The Northeast and the Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (NEIRTEC) offers suggestions for utilizing technology to get input from parents and community members. Technology tools can engage a larger audience in school efforts through the use of online surveys, listservs, and e-mail. Technology can also be used to conduct a parent-community needs assessment, which can be used to obtain in-depth information from school stakeholders. A school-based family technology event could be beneficial for those parents who either have limited access to or lack the ability to use technology for communication. NEIRTEC also suggests sponsoring programs that highlight students-parents-teachers-administrators as partners in learning with technology.

Sherryl Loya, principal of Farmwell Station Middle School in Loudon County, Virginia, explains how she helps parents at her school get acquainted with the school Web site.

Sherryl : “One of the things that I do is I have a PowerPoint presentation to the parents where I actually take them through our Web site and show them exactly what’s on the Web site, what they can find there, how to use it, how to make it useful for them in their daily lives. There is often a gap of communication from the time the students come from elementary to middle school, and it seems that middle school students don’t do as great of a job of carrying home that information with them. It is the Friday folder in elementary school and suddenly in middle school their parents feel like they are not getting information. So I spend a lot of time trying to show the parents where the information is and how to bridge that communication gap so that they don’t experience that. So we spend a lot of time going through the Web site and showing them all the resources that our teachers spend hours and hours putting on the Web site. The parents appreciate it; it’s a little bit of information that allows them to understand how our school works. And we continue that information all the way through their years of parent involvement. Every time they come to a schoolwide meeting, we give them more and more information about ‘what are the resources that are available on the Web site, where can you find this information, who can you call, who are the key people in the school that they can come to and find the information that they need.’”

Narrator: Michael Williams, principal at Sterling Middle School in Loudon County, Virginia, adds another idea used at his school.

Michael: “There are many different avenues for keeping parents informed about academic instruction and the needs of their students. Sherryl has pointed out the use of our Web sites; electronic means are very convenient and are very dynamic in terms of how quickly parents can gain access to information. In addition to our Web sites, most of our schools have homework hotlines where parents can be informed and because, developmentally, kids sometimes are very forgetful. Many of the parents will check the Web site or the homework hotline and end up coming to our school in the early evening to get books and homework assignments that students have forgotten. I think that simple things mean very much to many of our students and their families.”

Narrator: Here are some examples from the Illinois Century Network project of ways teachers from several different grade levels use technology to communicate with parents.

A fifth-grade teacher said she preferred e-mail to other forms of communicating with parents because it gave her more flexibility in when she could send communications. She could also send a message to a large number of parents at once. It also was more convenient for parents to send and receive messages on their own schedule. She found that when communicating by e-mail, she received more responses from parents about volunteer opportunities and upcoming events in the classroom.

A high-school teacher reported much success with his use of e-mail and a Web site for his classes. By using a computerized grading program that allowed him to enter an e-mail address for each student, he e-mailed student grade summaries every week. He also provided a Web site with an outline at the beginning of each unit, updated with due dates, expected test dates, and other information of interest to parents. It took less than 5 minutes each day to keep the unit description page current. Feedback from parents was very positive. This teacher still uses traditional methods of communication with parents who do not have Internet access.

A middle school science teacher conducted a survey of parents and students to determine what information to include on a class Web page. The top three parent needs were a science calendar of assignments and due dates, a current list of student grades and missing assignments, and Internet research links. Each Monday she used a distribution list to send an e-mail to parents. The e-mail included homework assignments for that week, from all of the teachers associated with their house. After initiating the Web page, the missing work rate in her classroom dropped from 17 to 11 percent.

The County Department of Education of Orange County, California, is designing a link between the county centralized computer system and the schools in all 28 school districts. Teachers can input student assignments and due dates, homework, test scores, grades, report cards, progress reports, teacher comments, attendance records, and class resources daily. Students and parents have access to their information online. For security, each student's personal identification number and access password are kept confidential. For those without a computer at home, the television connection to the Internet using local cable hook-up is available.

State-level educators can provide resources and professional development to help schools use technology to communicate with parents. For example, state department of education Web sites can provide resources for parents, districts, and schools on parent involvement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements. The state Web site should also include information written specifically for parents on state academic standards and assessments.

States can also provide Web page templates for schools and districts to use, as well as links to useful online resources for parent involvement.

The nature of the message will determine the type of communication you choose. Technology can enhance school-to-home communication and help achieve parent involvement goals such as keeping parents connected to the school, providing a vehicle for the exchange of information, and providing support to families!

Links for parent involvement resources are available at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site, www.arcc.edvantia.org.

Join us for the next podcast in this series on parent involvement in schools, where we look at Developing Strong Relationships with Parents.

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