

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Developing Strong Relationships with Parents: Three Things Schools Can Do to Increase Performance

Transcript

Part One

Narrator: What can school staff do to help build relationships with parents? This is the seventh in a series of podcasts about parent involvement intended for education leaders. In prior podcasts, we spoke about the school and home climate, as well as communication with parents. In this pair of podcasts, the focus is on building the relationships between home and school that are essential to meaningful parent involvement.

Despite not working with parents directly, educators at the state level can still provide guidance to district and school leaders who work closely with parents. Listen to this pair of podcasts about building relationships with parents, and follow the suggestions to help schools implement strategies to improve these relationships. Helpful tools are available online at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's Web site, www.arcc.edvantia.org, where other podcasts can also be accessed.

Let's listen as Anne Henderson, noted author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, presents research findings that help us consider how to engage parents in ways that will positively impact student achievement. These are the types of research findings that SEAs can share with schools and districts.

Anne: "I want to talk about a particular study that I think is one of the better studies that illustrates this point really well. It was done by Westat and Policy Study Associates in 2002, and it looked at 81 Title 1 schools; these are schools in low-income neighborhoods with high concentrations of poor kids. They found, looking at a whole variety of practices, that there was one that really made a difference in student achievement, and it was teacher outreach to parents. They looked at three different things that teachers did, and when teachers did all three of them, students' reading and math scores improved at a 40-50% faster rate. This is quite a finding. The three outreach practices were-- number one, just meeting every family in their classroom face-to-face, establishing that personal relationship, 'I am your child's teacher, I am so glad to know you, I want to work with you this year, and really make sure that he/she does well, let's be in touch and so on; that sort of start to the year.' Second, the teachers sent home learning materials and homework assignments that parents could work on with their kids every week. Third, they stayed in touch with the families at least once a month, not just when things were going bad. Not that phone call everybody dreads--'eek, the teacher's on the phone, run'--but describing generally, 'I just wanted to get in touch and tell you that your child had a breakthrough today, and this happened and that happened, but the spelling is still a little slow. Do you think if I sent home some things on spelling you could work with him?'" That kind of thing back and forth. How hard is that to do those three things?"

Narrator: Let's consider these three practices that Anne Henderson mentions—one at a time. We'll talk about the three practices in this podcast, then discuss some specific strategies to implement these practices in part two.

The first practice that Anne mentions is meeting every family face-to-face. Let's listen as Anne expands on this idea.

Anne: “Then another important thing of course, is developing those relationships, the personal relationships. That means investing some time in calling families—in being out there everyday before and after school to greet parents as they are coming to pick up or drop off their kids. How much time does that take? Just being out there saying hello, shaking hands, getting in a word here or there, building those relationships. When I was in Columbus yesterday, at a mini-conference of teachers and parents, to talk about parent involvement, a high school teacher raised his hand. He said, ‘Every time I call home, they see who it is on the caller ID, and they don’t answer the phone, so what am I supposed to do about that?’ I said you need some credit in the bank. You need to have a nice, pleasant relationship with them in the first place, so they will want to pick up the phone. If they think it is nothing but trouble, they are not going to talk to you. So that is why you have to have that relationship, that bonding that I was talking about that makes the kid able to make that transition between home and school more easily. Many kids’ home environment is very different from school; the rules are different; the language may be different. They have to navigate that terrain—that space between home and school—so the more that they can understand and navigate the difference, the better they are going to do. That happens when the school builds a bridge and then parents can walk across it.”

Narrator: In the book *Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools*, we are reminded that research indicates involving parents as educators at home with their children is one of the most effective ways to improve students’ attitudes toward school and improve their achievement. This form of parent involvement does not require that parents come to the school, which makes it more accessible for many parents. While research indicates that homework supervision and home learning activities are closely related to higher achievement for children, many parents want help to do these things better. The combined efforts of the school system and individual teachers are needed to make this happen. (Moles, 1996)

Now, let's hear more about Anne Henderson's second practice—teachers sending home learning materials for parents to use with children.

Anne : “I think that there are several things following the research findings that schools can do, and I don't think it is going to be all that hard. First of all, remember that link to learning finding. Just make sure that all the activities and programs for parents have some kind of link to what students are learning. That means, as you look at the things you are already doing, you don't have to get rid of them, but you can tweak them and you can ask, for each thing that you do, ‘How is this program going to help parents understand what their kids are learning in class and how is it going to promote high standards for student work? Is it going to show student work? Are we going to explain scoring guides? Are we going to explain what the standards say?’ Because parents can look at their kids’ work and say gee, it's neat, it's clean, it's really good, and it got an A. But it might be second-grade level work and their kid's in fifth grade. Parents need to know and kids' need to know what good work looks like for their kid's age and grade level. The best way to do that is to display student work that is proficient and that meets the standards, or display student work that is ‘getting there,’ with notes about how it could be improved, and then have kids go back and improve it and take it up to standard. How is it going to help parents assist their children at home? Are you going to have some things that parents can take home and work on with their kids? How well linked are those to what the kids are actually doing in class right then? If they are

studying American History, send home stuff that has to do with American History. If they are learning some new math concept, send home math games that are geared to that, rather than more general things.”

Narrator: Anne recommends sending home activities that are specifically related to classroom content and student learning, rather than more generic activities. We’ll discuss some specific ideas for these types of activities in part two of this podcast.

The third effective strategy that Anne mentioned was the idea that the teachers in the Westat study stayed in touch with families at least once a month. It is important to remember that one contact is not enough. Once that first contact is made, teachers need to continue to communicate with parents on a regular basis, including when good things happen as well as when things have gone wrong. A solid relationship is built over time.

Three successful practices were suggested in this podcast on developing strong relationships with parents. First, teachers meeting families face-to-face to establish a personal relationship; second, sending home learning materials and assignments for parents to do with their child; and third, staying in touch with parents at least once a month. Join us for part two of this pair of podcasts, where we’ll suggest some specific strategies for helping districts and schools implement Anne Henderson’s practices.

Part Two

Narrator: In Part 1 of this podcast, we heard Anne Henderson, author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, present three practices that research indicates help engage parents in ways that will positively impact student achievement. These practices are meeting every family face-to-face, sending home learning materials for parents to use with children, and staying in touch with parents at least once a month. In this part of the podcast, we'll present some specific strategies for implementing these practices with schools and districts.

How can teachers work to develop the kind of relationship where both parent and teacher feel respect and commitment toward providing what is best for children? Cindy Baumert, parent, mentor, and Educational Consultant in Louisville, Kentucky, has two practical ideas that teachers might consider in building this bridge between home and school. The first one is going into the neighborhoods where families live, and second, building positive relationships. Let's hear Cindy describe these strategies.

Cindy: "Go into homes and neighborhoods where your families live. In Jessamine County, Kentucky, a school bus takes middle school teachers into the neighborhoods each July to deliver schedules and supply lists, and meet students and parents. Teachers dress in shorts and school t-shirts and make the day a fun, casual community event. Families wait at their school bus stops and meet the teachers in their neighborhoods before the first day of school. Besides building relationships, this event takes some of the pressure off the first day of school.

In a Pennsylvania district, kindergarten teachers take red wagons loaded with lemonade into neighborhoods to meet every incoming student and their family during the summer. Families and children sip lemonade with their teachers and reduce any uncertainties the students may have.

Make a positive preemptive strike! It helps if the first interaction is positive rather than negative. Yet, many times the first time a teacher calls a parent is in response to a problem the child is having in class. For some families, this is the only time they get a call, when there is a problem. Many schools make it a practice for teachers to contact every parent personally at the beginning of school to deliver a friendly message before problems arise. That way, parents and teachers begin to build a relationship on a positive note and can be more receptive if problems arise later.

One first-grade teacher calls every family with an informal "good report" on each student sometime during the year. She tracks the calls in her grade book to ensure that she calls each student's family at least once. Build positive relationships up front."

Narrator: Providing home learning materials was another practice that Anne mentioned. Rather than sending home more generic activities, teachers can send home ideas for family games and other informal learning activities that are directly related to what students are currently doing in school, such as word games, puzzles, math challenges, and "kitchen sink" experiments for parents and children to enjoy together. Schools can hold parent workshops on topics such as how to help children with reading or math, making home learning materials, or how to create educational games with children. Some teachers provide packets of materials that parents can use with their children over the summer. Examples might include reading lists; suggested summer field trips or community activities; and math, science, or reading activities to do at home. (Moles, 1996)

Finally, teachers must remember that consistent contact with parents is important for maintaining the positive relationship. Teachers can give regular feedback to parents by making quick phone calls, writing notes, or meeting informally at school events or even when parents pick up their children from school. Regular newsletters also can be an effective communication tool.

State departments of education can assist schools in implementing these strategies. For example, SEAs can keep schools and districts informed of the most recent research, such as the Westat study mentioned by Anne Henderson, with respect to parent involvement. Schools cannot be expected to use research-based strategies if they are not aware of them. SEAs can provide examples of parent activities that are being used successfully in schools throughout the state. Individual schools may not be aware of programs that are being used with great results in other cities and communities, while the SEA often has this information. Finally, schools and districts may benefit from sample schedules and activities that they can use in developing their own templates for staff to use. SEAs, in their leadership role, can provide these valuable resources to schools and districts.

Links for parent involvement resources are available at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site, www.arcc.edvantia.org. These tools provide examples of ways states and districts can guide and support school actions for improving parent involvement. We hope these ideas will be helpful as you think about how schools and parents can have strong, positive relationships. Together, parents and educators make a great team for student learning!

Join us for the next podcast in this series on parent involvement in schools, where we look at strategies for engaging parents in student learning.

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