

## Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

*A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center*

### Helping Parents Understand the Data: How Is My Child Doing? What Do the Scores Mean?

Transcript

**Narrator:** Achievement tests, norm-referenced tests, underachieving schools, restructuring, assessments aligned with the curriculum—what is meant by all these terms? As educators, we rattle off these terms and a variety of acronyms fluently in our everyday speech. Because of this, we may not realize that this vocabulary is not easily understood by people outside of education. In this podcast, one of a series of podcasts about parent involvement in the schools from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center at Edvantia, we will explore ways to help parents understand the terminology and testing data they receive. Parents hear so much information about their child’s test scores and school performance, but do they really understand what it all means? Anne Henderson, noted author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, provides some insight into all the assessment information available today as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

**Anne:** “Like it or not, No Child Left Behind has given us a gold mine of data on how students are doing. You can really drill down to your school and see how third graders are doing versus fourth graders, how low-income kids are doing versus higher-income kids, how African American kids are doing versus Latino, Asian, and White kids, how the special education kids are doing, how girls are doing versus boys, and in all the subjects. Looking at that data will tell you where you can fine-tune your parent program and see that we don’t have any kids at proficient in science. We need to do a whole-school science push. Or maybe girls are way ahead of boys in reading in third grade and we need to get that up. Whatever it is, focusing in on that in your school community, talking about that—because people will come forward. They’ll want to help if they know what to do, and they’re given the space to discuss it and talk about it.”

**Narrator:** The U.S. Department of Education, in its publication *Engaging Parents in Education: Lessons from Five Parental Information and Resource Centers*, highlights the importance of providing parents and guardians with meaningful NCLB information, and stresses the importance of using simplified language to communicate as clearly as possible. Although the literacy level of the parents must be considered, all parents will appreciate having the information presented in a simple, easy-to-understand format. In addition, getting the information to parents whose native language is not English is an important consideration.

Sherryl Loya, principal of Farmwell Station Middle School in Loudon County, Virginia, talks about how her school has dealt with this issue.

**Sherryl:** “At Farmwell Station we have been growing in populations that are very diverse, and one of the populations is the Hispanic population. We did notice that there was a huge gap between the parent involvement we had with that population of parents, and so we decided to try to bridge that gap. So we started something called Padres Latinos and we started inviting them, with special invitations for these parents to come in and really engage them with their children and find out what was going on at the school. We had Spanish-speaking people at these meetings to really explain the school program and go

over all the things that all the other parents are getting the information about very easily through Internet, through the Web site, through our newsletters. Sometimes it was true that the Hispanic population was not always receiving that information and not really understanding what programs were available for their children. That is why they didn't really feel comfortable coming to the school. And so we started inviting them in and having these evening meetings. It was terrific. We had a great participation rate by parents, and we were able to sit down and really explain all the programs at the school and give them the information that they need. Also, involve them in their child's academic progress by just really reaching out and really teaching them the language and trying to break that language gap."

**Narrator:** Latonia Meeks, parent from A.B. Combs Elementary School in North Carolina, tells about a way they found to deal with the language issue in their school.

**Latonia:** "Our interpreter program is also great. When we have our PTA meetings, we have an interpreter who speaks into an interpreting device, where the parent wears earplugs so that they can have the meeting translated into a language they can understand."

**Narrator:** One consideration in planning for dissemination of information is assessing the communication needs and diverse language needs of the target audience. What information needs to be conveyed to parents? The No Child Left Behind Act requires that parents receive district or school-level report cards. These report cards must state how students in the district or school have performed on mandated tests. Student performance must be reported by subcategories, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and limited English proficient students. More information on these reporting requirements can be found in the *Engaging Parents in Education* publication from the U.S. Department of Education. A link to this document is provided on the podcast page.

If the school or district has not made adequate yearly progress, the parents must be notified and be informed of their options. While parents are going to be most interested in their child's progress, it is necessary to provide more than that. Anne Henderson confirms the need for providing professional development for both parents and school staff.

**Anne:** "We need to invest in professional development for parents as well as educators to develop their skills, their efficacy. It can be done at the state level, and it can be done at the district level."

**Narrator:** Some parents are taking an active role in school data analysis. At the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky, parents can receive training on how to help improve achievement in their schools. A parent in Jefferson County, Kentucky, who had attended the Commonwealth Institute, helped her child's school analyze the school's test results. She created graphs and charts to give teachers an easier way to study the scores. At Hendron Lone Oak Elementary School in Paducah, Kentucky, a Commonwealth Institute Fellow sponsored a Parents and Teachers Talking Together session to identify the school's key concerns. Parents and staff then reviewed achievement data with the principal to determine the school's strengths and weaknesses. The principal, Sally Sugg, reflects in the February 2000 issue of *Parent Leader* that "the more parents know about instruction and assessment, the better they can help their children succeed in school."

What can be done to reach those parents who cannot attend meetings designed to help them understand what the test scores mean and to hear their questions? Carolyn Foxx, Coordinator of Special Projects at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, tells of one way North Carolina has tried to address this issue.

**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. 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:** The October 2002 Leadership Development Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, provided a summary of ideas for conveying information to parents who cannot attend school functions in person. For example, a school could have meetings with groups of families, by grade level or neighborhood, to make the meeting more accessible and relevant to individual parents. Videotaping or audiotaping meetings for families unable to attend would be a way to reach some parents. Information being sent home could include a reply postcard or tear-off card to provide parents with an avenue for asking questions. A follow-up phone call could be made to answer questions received or to verify receipt of the information if the reply card is not returned. This encourages the two-way interaction that is vital to effective communication between parents and schools.

We need to find ways to help parents understand how their children are performing as well as how the school is performing! When parents receive their children’s report cards and the school performance data, we want to be sure they can understand the information. Creative, multifaceted communication strategies can promote better parent involvement in schools. This is our challenge!

Links for parent involvement resources 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.

Join us for our next podcast, where we'll discuss strategies for supporting children's literacy development.

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This publication was developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, its contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.