

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Parent Liaisons: The School-Community Link

Transcript

Narrator: As schools seek ways to improve student achievement, parent liaisons (also called school liaisons) can provide ongoing communication and link the school’s partners in the areas of school support, family/parent support, and community support. Liaisons work with teachers, administrators, and parents to coordinate and advocate for family involvement to help students achieve. They may be hired on a full- or part-time basis to provide continuity for the school’s parent involvement initiatives. Liaisons respond to the needs and concerns of parents and families. While job responsibilities vary from school to school, parent liaisons form personal relationships with students and parents and have the reputation of looking out for the children and families in their school. Parent liaisons are often viewed by families as being less threatening than other school personnel.

In this podcast, one of a series about parent involvement in the schools, we will consider the job of the parent liaison—that person who helps to bring family, school, and community groups together for the benefit of the students.

SEA staff, in their leadership role, can provide guidance and resources to district and school staff with respect to the role of parent liaisons in schools. Additional helpful information can be accessed at the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center Web site at www.arcc.edvantia.org, and from the podcast launch page.

Liaisons serve as the primary contact for the parents and families at their school. The government publication, *Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools*, suggests several ways that a parent liaison can work with families to bridge the gap between the school and the community. For example, parent liaisons can focus their efforts on reaching out to “hard-to-reach” parents. They can conduct interest surveys to aid in matching parents with teachers and with volunteer opportunities that best suit the parent’s skills. They can conduct workshops with parents to help them understand how to support their children’s learning. The ultimate goal for the parent liaison is to improve student achievement. The liaison does this by involving families in their child’s school activities.

Research has shown the importance of schools bridging the class and cultural differences of its families. The term “cultural broker” often comes up in this research. Let’s listen as Anne Henderson, author and consultant in the field of parent involvement, explains this term and how it applies to the school setting.

Anne: “We were talking about bridging class and cultural differences, and I had talked about a cultural broker as somebody who understands the school, but also understands the families the school’s trying to relate to, and can interpret them each to the other so that they can form that bridge that I was talking about. A parent coordinator that I work with in Alexandria, Virginia, does a wonderful job of this. She’s Latina, but she’s highly educated. She came from Mexico, so she understands the teachers, and can talk to them and knows the education lingo. But when she goes out in the community, she speaks fluent Spanish, and she knows what it’s like to wash dishes. She can really relate to those families. So she, when there is a problem at school, the parents come to her first because they know her and trust her and

can pour out their story in Spanish. Then she can go to the teacher and explain, and then she'll set up a meeting between the teacher and the parent and interpret—so that the parent does get to talk with the teacher, but with that intermediary. And I was thinking that this kind of cultural competence I'm talking about is going to be a key job skill in the 21st century, as our world gets more and more global, and we're having to work with people that are different from us and come from all different kinds of backgrounds. We're going to have to know how to relate to people who are different from us in a respectful and empathetic way. These are the people we need working in our schools. That is a key skill for the next century and on.”

Narrator: The cultural broker knows the school and understands the cultures of the families they work with. The parent liaison is in the perfect position to serve as the cultural broker at the school. A recent *Washington Post* article highlighted the value of the school liaisons in Prince George's County, Maryland, schools. Each of the district's more than 200 schools has a full-time parent liaison. In Prince George's County, as in many school districts, the role of the parent liaison varies greatly from school to school, depending on the specific needs of each school and its community. Parent liaisons conduct workshops to help parents understand what students are learning. They help parents navigate the Internet to get information. Sometimes they arrange for medical services for families. They are often called on to translate school announcements and letters into Spanish. The goal of the program is to help families understand how to help their children succeed; and the school administrator and liaison decide how the liaison can best accomplish that goal.

Let's listen as Anne Henderson describes the parent liaison's role.

Anne: “What we are seeing in schools that are high achieving in low-income areas, that one of the big secrets to their success is the way that they work with parents. And the first thing they do is focus on relationships—building that personal connection to parents. So while schools on the one hand are installing these phone answering systems—you can call and get your kids' homework assignment so that you don't have to talk to a human being to get it—we need to be looking at ways where parents can connect more one-to-one with teachers and people who work in the school. Parent liaisons are a wonderful investment because they can help to build these relationships when teachers are too busy.”

Narrator: In the book *Beyond the Bake Sale*, the authors report that San Diego Unified School District employs certified teachers as parent liaisons. The Parent Academic Liaison (PAL) program places experienced teachers at high-need elementary schools on special assignment. The district sees the hiring of experienced teachers as an advantage since the teachers have knowledge about how the system works and how to advocate for students. These liaisons can explain the academic program to parents and offer specific ways for parents to support teaching and learning at home and at school. All their major areas of responsibility—collaborating with school leadership, providing information and activities to school staff and parents, and parent empowerment—are aimed at improving student achievement.

While the parent liaison job may look different from school to school, Anne Henderson stresses that the district needs to set a parent involvement standard for its schools.

Anne: “It's extremely important at the district level to set a standard that all schools are supposed to meet in terms of engaging families. I've been in many, many school districts, and I will go from a school that is a fortress school that's completely closed to parents; and right in the next neighborhood will be a

wide-open partnership school where people are in there, and you can't tell who is a teacher and who's a parent because everybody is working together, and all the adults are pulling for the kids. How can this be tolerated? Why would a district allow this to happen? Districts will say, "Well, you know, it's up to the school to decide how it's going to involve families," and I say, "No." We need to have an effective district policy that No Child Left Behind says you gotta have. It has to be developed with and approved by parents. That is in the law. That policy should set a standard, plus offer assistance and resources to schools to put that standard into practice. So schools need to have a standard, they need to have help reaching the standard, and they need to have resources to help them do this—professional development, schools need staffing patterns that will allow them to hire some kind of a school-family liaison—because these are the cultural brokers I was talking about before. And they're the ones that can do the leg work for the teachers and make that school family friendly and do the connections that build the relationships that I was talking about."

Narrator: Parent liaisons can provide leadership and resource coordination to help bridge the relationships between schools, families, and communities. Liaisons respond to the needs and concerns of families and school staff. They provide a link not only within the school but to the community and its resources as well. This can be invaluable.

SEA staff can provide resources to schools, such as the articles mentioned in this podcast, that describe the role of parent liaisons in schools and offer specific models that are effective in other schools and districts. SEAs can help school and district staff understand the relationship between the parent liaison position and student academic achievement. In addition, school and district staff may need suggestions for funding structures for these types of positions. Providing opportunities to network with other educators who are utilizing parent liaisons in their schools may also be beneficial. The SEA can facilitate these experiences.

We hope this podcast has given you some ideas to consider as you work toward increased parent involvement and improved student achievement in your state. Join us for the next podcast in this series on parent involvement in schools, where we'll discuss Parents as Mentors: Helping Parents Support Student Success.

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