

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Parent Involvement—Written Communications with Parents

Transcript

Part One

Narrator: Effective communication sets the tone for the school-family relationship and turns around parent involvement in huge ways. It can impact parent participation at school, such as attendance at special events, and can result in parents becoming active partners in children’s learning at home.

Although face-to-face communications are great for sharing ideas and getting results, written communications reach a larger number of parents in less time.

Notes sent home in backpacks, newsletters mailed home, regular updates on the school Web site, messages on the school marquee, and individual e-mails can all be used to effectively communicate with parents.

Key idea: For effective written communication, know your audience, how to reach its members, and what message will motivate them most effectively.

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. Listen to this pair of short podcasts about written communication with parents and follow the suggestions for ways to assist schools to improve written messages to parents. Visit the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center’s Web site, www.arcc.edvantia.org, for additional resources.

Here are three keys to delivering an effective written message: (1) know the audience, (2) know how to reach them, and (3) know what message will motivate them most effectively. This podcast will provide strategies that can be used for helping districts and schools improve their written communications with parents.

The staff at Cardinal Valley Elementary School in Lexington, Kentucky, was concerned that their communications were not reaching many of their parents. Over the course of 4 years, the school’s Hispanic population had grown from 20% to 60%. This change in demographics meant a new communication approach was needed. Listen as their principal, Matt Perkins, describes how they reassessed their situation.

Matt Perkins: “The parent involvement piece was so important to our school because, as I have said, most of our communication was only in English. So parents would show up to parent nights, or parent events, or open houses and only get the information in English. So I immediately started translating all of our parent nights into Spanish and English and started inviting parents into our schools, giving all of our communications in Spanish and English, and then finding out who our families really were and then figuring out how to meet their needs, which is another big part of what we do.”

Narrator: Almost 60% of families were being excluded because notices from the school were written only in English. **Knowing the audience** is the first step for getting a message out. Realizing that their audience had changed motivated the staff at this school to make significant changes in their written communication.

The second consideration for effectively getting out the message is to **know how to reach your audience**. Knowing your audience well can provide you with valuable information about how to reach them.

Some schools address cultural challenges by having a parent liaison on staff. A parent liaison is usually someone from the community who speaks the language and understands the culture of the community. A good parent liaison will have ideas for effective ways to reach this audience.

The reading level of communications is an issue that is often overlooked. While low literacy levels are often associated with low socioeconomic status, literacy problems exist at all income levels. Regardless of the message, it is likely that some parents will be unable to read it. Parents may also miss online communications if they do not have Internet access or are not technologically literate. For these families, live contact works best, and written notes should be supplementary—short and simple.

Tina Morehead, a parent from Lexington, Kentucky, shares strategies used at her child’s school that were effective for reaching parents.

Tina: “We also have a monthly newsletter that the PTA sends out. They also have news from the associate principal, which is called a PSA at our school. They also invite you to meetings, every meeting is open, so you’re always invited to that. They pretty much give you any kind of notification there. We have a marquee that’s in front of the building that they post different events coming up and lets you know things coming up. Also this year at our school is the carpool lane, and that now has about 200 parents that are pulling up each day so anything big going on, they post news, fliers and signs out in the carpool laneso you know things that are coming up.”

Narrator: As Tina mentioned, monthly newsletters, news from administrators, open meetings, message boards at the school, and signs posted where parents congregate are all strategies for keeping the lines of communication open.

The final key to effective written communication is **knowing what message will motivate parents most effectively**.

Identify what is most important to parents. For most parents, it’s their own child. Written communications, therefore, should focus on how the message affects each individual child. For instance, how will standardized test results affect their child? If school funding is determined by test results, this should be explained in terms of what that will mean as far as materials or programs offered to their child. How does school choice impact parents? What are their options and what does this mean they should do for their child?

Written messages should be kept simple and logically organized, rather than leaving it up to the reader to interpret meaning. Provide clear information about any actions parents should take, and explain all available options if appropriate. The focus should be on the information parents will want to know and on the concerns they will most likely have.

Educators at all levels can incorporate proven strategies to assist school and district staff in improving their written 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 written communication.

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).

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

Narrator: Here are some basic guidelines to follow; these could easily apply to all written communications.

1. Be concise. Messages should be brief and to the point. Parents are more likely to see and read a short note with readable print size rather than a lengthy letter. For a longer message, the main points need to be clearly listed, with more information included. Parents may have several children in school, so providing concise information is important to getting the message across.

States are required to inform parents on many issues such as school choice, supplemental educational services, and teacher qualifications. It's important for parents to understand their rights in accessing the best education possible for their children. These issues are not necessarily what matter most to parents. Short, simple, and personally meaningful messages are most likely to be communicated successfully.

2. Keep the message focused. If possible, have only one main point for the message and highlight or boldface it for emphasis. If parents read nothing else, they may at least get the key point. Again, parents are most interested in their own child, so messages should be as personally relevant as possible.
3. Share information that is true and believable. A graph or chart can be a powerful way to bring data to life. Graphs and charts can help make complex information understandable. Use these to share improvements in learning. Schools can also give parents examples of high-quality work so they have a clear picture of what is expected of their child.
4. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Parents may be confused or feel left out if they don't understand the vocabulary used in the message. When writing, take off your educator's hat and think from the perspective of the audience you want to reach.
5. Have a non-educator review messages. This will help to ensure that the messages are clear, focused, believable, and clear for your intended audience.

How to get started? Here are a few strategies that state department staff can use for helping schools take a close look at their written communications.

- A first step might be for schools to gather the last few months of communications intended for families, including hard copy and online communications. Evaluate these messages based on the basic guidelines for written communications mentioned previously on this podcast. These guidelines

are also included in the Listener's Guide. In addition to assisting schools with this process, state-level educators should take a close look at their own communications to parents to ensure that they follow the basic guidelines.

- States can provide schools with assistance in identifying and finding the resources they need to help them communicate effectively. For example, a school may need to find someone in the community who can translate information into various languages or advise them on cultural issues that may be interfering with positive communications.
- Allow time to craft the message. Clear, positive, purposeful communications take time to develop. State departments may be able to provide school and district staff with sample documents so they can model their own communications after great examples.
- Consider reader diversity. When parents and caregivers represent different cultural, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, communications require more thought and sensitivity. What is fine for one group, may offend another. State-level educators can provide professional development to districts regarding these cultural issues, or offer expertise in cultural sensitivity.
- Reading level matters. Parents with low literacy levels, or whose native language is not English, may have trouble understanding written communications. Several user-friendly readability tools are available for checking the reading level of text. These tools are identified on the podcast launch page. Often, these are the very parents whose children would benefit most from their involvement, so it's well worth the extra effort. States may be able to provide sample texts at various reading levels for districts and schools to use as a starting point for their own communications.
- Academic achievement should be the focus of school communications. If educators don't communicate with parents about academic achievement, families may not think it is important.

Narrator: Effective written communications not only open the door to parent involvement but can be a practical way to sustain a partnership that supports student success. Many schools are having great success using electronic communications. Join us for the next podcast in this series, which looks at using electronic communications to inform and involve parents.

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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.