

Parent Involvement: Keys to Success

A podcast series from the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center

Parent Involvement: Information and Strategies for Educators

Transcript

Narrator: While educators at all levels contribute to parent involvement and communication, the majority of information that parents receive about their child’s education comes directly from school staff. Authors Christiansen and Sheridan indicate that open, regular, two-way communication between the school and the home is essential in building partnerships. These partnerships ultimately contribute to increased student learning.

In this podcast, one of a series on parent involvement in the schools, we will consider information and strategies important to school staff as they reach out to all families and help them get involved in their children’s education.

Although SEAs do not often work directly with parents, they do provide key leadership as they work with school administrators and teachers throughout their state. Carolyn Foxx, Coordinator of Special Projects at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, reminds us how SEAs can work with school leaders to set the stage for parent involvement.

Carolyn: “One of the things that I heard across the state when we were having the forums is that principals really need to engage around this issue. Because we know in many cases, administrators set the tone in terms of how the school values certain things and their priorities. So, one of our collaborations is with the principals’ executive program, where we will be working directly with principals to provide them with essential information around the importance of parent involvement and why this is a compelling strategy for them to use.”

Narrator: As Carolyn Foxx mentions, SEAs can support schools and districts in their parent involvement efforts by keeping school and district administrators informed on state and federal requirements related to parent communication. By collaborating with existing administrator programs and groups, SEAs can assist them in improving or expanding their current parent involvement efforts. This guidance provided by the SEA can have a significant impact on the end result.

The local administrator’s support and leadership is key to ongoing parent involvement in the school. The principal’s passion and excitement for the school, the staff, the students, and their families can make the difference in the success of any parent involvement plan. Here are some specific ways that a school administrator can promote an environment that is conducive to parent involvement:

- First, administrators can provide information to stakeholders about district and school parent involvement goals. This will help everyone know what to expect, and keep both parents and school staff on the same page.
- Second, administrators can include parent involvement information in school communications, both those sent internally to school staff and externally to families and community members. This keeps the topic of parent involvement front and center, and communicates how important it really is.

- Third, administrators can communicate with local businesses and agencies about parent involvement efforts. If the local community is aware of what's happening in the school, they can contribute to the school's efforts.
- Finally, administrators have the ability to provide resources to support parent involvement efforts. These resources might include timely research on parent involvement, professional development on how to best involve parents, as well as arranging schedules to allow time for staff to meet with families. This support will help set the tone for the school and help every staff member be successful in their efforts to involve parents.

While school administrators can set the tone for parent involvement efforts in their buildings, parents still receive the majority of their information about their child and his education directly from the classroom teacher. In *Beyond the Bake Sale*, the authors suggest using a variety of strategies and instruments to collect valuable information about the families at a school. This information can be collected using surveys, in a face-to-face setting, or a combination of the two.

The authors suggest using family welcome questionnaires to learn more about a family's cultural heritage. This information can be especially important in building relationships with families and honoring their beliefs and backgrounds. Anne Henderson, author and consultant in the area of parent involvement has some ideas about cultural issues.

Anne: “We have to build on families’ cultural values. And that can be done by affirming their cultures, making sure that curriculum covers the backgrounds of the children from wherever they come; so that there are materials in the schools on Somalia or Iraq or Afghanistan, China, or Vietnam; and that somebody in the school knows those cultures and where those kids have come from. Many are refugees; they have been through traumatic experiences getting here. Someone needs to know that there is crisis in Darfur, for example, or that Hmong people have no written language but make beautiful tapestries that explain their family story. So let’s bring those in, and have those families share those stories with us. That is a wonderful way of affirming and honoring families’ backgrounds and cultures, and saying we want to build on that; we don’t want to destroy that.”

Narrator: Not only do staff members need to honor the family cultural values, they also need to learn strategies for working with families from all cultures. A review of research presented in *Reaching Out to Diverse Populations* by Chris Ferguson mentions that “many times a small action or reaction can have significant cultural implications and result in disengagement or lack of participation of family or community members. School staff are commonly unaware of the impact of their actions. When staff are provided professional development and encouraged to explore contextual factors unique to a school setting, they will become more adept at discovering potential problems in participation and solving problems that have already blocked participation.”

Teachers can gain valuable information about family schedules and support systems by using a homework survey. When are parents available and what do children do after school? What control and structure do parents exercise over homework? How aware of homework are parents on a daily basis? What is the parent’s attitude about homework and what supports do they need? This survey, done in a face-to-face setting, would allow the teacher to let the parent know her policies and expectations regarding homework and its value to the students.

School staff can use a needs assessment to gather information about how parents believe the school can best support them. The staff could find out what help parents would like and what parents feel they need to support their children’s learning. What advice or guidance from school staff do they need? What extra information could the school provide that would make a difference for them?

Asking parents about their child’s interests, talents, strengths, and fears will provide valuable information for teachers and other school staff. These questions can easily be asked face-to-face, so school staff will learn more about the child and build a strong relationship with the parent. These relationships are vital to building strong connections between schools and families—connections that will have an impact on student achievement.

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky has a program called Parents and Teachers Talking Together or PT3. This program brings parents and teachers together to discuss the parents’ hopes for their children and how to improve student achievement. They explore wishes and dreams for their children and discuss what needs to be done—the actions that are needed to accomplish the goals. This kind of session can promote greater understanding and appreciation for each other’s perspective, which can lead to improved communication and increased parent involvement.

While surveys can be sent home to be completed by parents, gathering the information in person will help strengthen the relationship between the school and the family. Dr. Elsie Leak, retired Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and School Reform in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, reminds us of some things to keep in mind when reaching out to parents.

Elsie: “The parents who typically aren’t involved may need some extra effort from us, and sometimes that effort may be making them feel comfortable when they enter our environment. It could be looking at, ‘When do we invite parents in? Are these parents working? Do they have transportation? So can the schools reach out in other ways?’ But schools can also go into their communities. We often invite parents into our havens, so to speak, and sometimes they are not comfortable. So we can reach out to them by going into their communities, into their churches, and community centers to have meetings with them and to share information with them.”

Narrator: SEA staff can provide valuable leadership and resources to districts and schools with respect to parent involvement. SEAs can provide professional development to school and district staff to give them the skills they need to address their unique communities. SEAs can also provide sample questionnaires and surveys to schools to use as a template in developing their own tools. SEAs can also provide resources and research to administrators at all levels to assist them in creating an environment conducive to strong school-parent partnerships. Giving school staff more tools and support to build relationships and get the parents involved results in increased student achievement—our ultimate goal!

Join us for the next podcast in the series, which will present information and strategies helpful to parents as they seek ways to encourage and support their children.

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