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Communication: Think Courtship!

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Imagine you meet someone new—a new neighbor, a client, a romantic interest—and want to form a relationship. You know what to do. Take the initiative. Talk with the person, and listen. Present yourself in the best light, communicating in as many ways as you can. Think courtship!

Today, schools cannot take public support for granted. It has become crucial that schools find ways to build and strengthen connections with their communities in order to support student achievement. The foundation for strengthening connections and building relationships is proactive communications. Communication is always the foundation of mutual respect, trust and cooperation in relationships, and school-family-community relationships are no exception.

Being proactive requires planning an overall communications approach. Check your school's current strategic plan; surprisingly few acknowledge communications at all. If this is true of your plan, remedy the oversight. You probably do have a crisis management plan. That's good, but

1. Coordinate communications with your school calendar.

An easy first step: Add meeting announcements, newsletters, news releases, report card dates, lunch menus, school holidays, athletic events, performances, bus schedules, etc.

2. Subdivide internal and external audiences.

Students, staff, families, business partners, opinion leaders, policymakers, retirees, etc. Note differing information needs, and fine-tune your efforts. Parents need bus routes; policymakers do not. Keep media representatives in a separate category. They are your access to the public. Take time to build relationships, providing timely responses and a steady stream of good-news releases. Ditto internal audiences, key to creating and maintaining an image of excellence. Plan effective, positive internal communications, and address staff morale. The grapevine serves as counterpoint to formal communications, and must reflect well on your school.

3. List the means for getting your messages out and their messages in.

Simply jot down available vehicles beside each audience category. You may need to find additional means for reaching important audiences.

4. Assess the skills and resources at your disposal.

How skilled are you at on-camera interviews? Can staff members compose effective news releases? Who can explain state standards to civic clubs? How do you collect parental and faculty suggestions for

not good enough. Crisis management is necessary, but it's reactive, not proactive.

The concept of courtship is an apt metaphor for the upbeat attitude required to effectively reach out for the support of the people in our schools and communities. Educators are seldom trained in outreach, and often feel shy about taking the initiative. But reaching out to explain schools is not self-promotion – it is another kind of teaching. Teachers know how to shape curriculum to reach the levels and learning styles of their students. Communicating outside class is only an expansion of this role. The subject is the school itself. Expand the teaching audience to include the entire community. Educators can feel comfortable taking the initiative in communicating. To reach out to the community and teach about what is going on at school promises great benefits toward ensuring optimum learning opportunities for students. Think courtship!

Anne Meek is author of *Communicating with the Public: A Guide for School Leaders* (ASCD, 1999. Available for loan at the SERC library; see back panel). She has served as teacher, principal, central office supervisor, assistant superintendent, and directed communications for a district of 75,000 students. She edited *Educational Leadership* for ASCD, and is now Book Development

Effective Communication Checklist

Is your school's communication ...

<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Friendly? Start early in the year with a friendly, welcoming note, phone call or informal gathering. Problems that come up later will be easier to discuss. Don't forget to say thank you. A usually unsentimental parent at a recent workshop confessed to keeping a kind thank you note from one of her daughter's teachers 15 years earlier.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Two-way? Two-way communication is most effective. Schools serious about encouraging parent communication make it easy for parents. Solicit feedback, ideas and questions at every opportunity. Include tear-offs in newsletters and flyers.</p>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inclusive? How do you reach families who don't speak English well, or don't read well? What about grandparents, noncustodial parents, families without phones or those who work nontraditional hours? Know your audience and make sure you aren't leaving anyone out of the loop.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Noticeable and expected? Make your printed communications eye-catching. Consistently use a distinctive, bright color paper. Use short, bold headlines, and graphics if possible. When notices, newsletters and student work go home on a regular schedule, parents learn to watch for them.</p>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Timely? Families need dates and times for events and meetings well in advance and more than once. In order for parents to be effective partners, they must know quickly if their child is falling behind or having problems.</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Error-free? Confidence in schools is eroded when communications have a misspelling or incorrect grammar. Proofread several times and ask someone else to proofread printed communications when possible.</p>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Personal? Face-to-face communication can establish trust, break down barriers, increase understanding and encourage lasting, supportive relationships. Take advantage of opportunities to talk with parents—in the school or in the community. Consider extending conference times. One teacher sets aside just 10 minutes a day to phone, email or send postcards to parents. She contacts each family twice a month</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Clear and skim-able? Keep writing simple. Use bullet points, bold key phrases and pull out quotes to draw in busy readers and make documents easy to skim. Avoid jargon and acronyms. One school put PCN on the calendar without explaining it stood for Parent Communication Network. Make written materials attractive and readable, with lots of white space. The less you write, the more likely it will be read. Just be sure to include how to get more information. For more on reader-friendly writing - http://media.socialchange.net.au/reader-friendly.</p>

How? Use Variety

Many studies show that while schools feel they are communicating important information, parents often feel they are not given enough. Why the different perceptions? Messages schools send often do not get through.

How we communicate has become more and more important, as the amount of information busy families today must deal with increases. A lot of messages get lost in the din. No one communication method catches the attention of every family every time. That is why to truly communicate, you must use a variety of methods for each message. And don't forget really effective communication is two-way, so remember to invite responses and provide the means to respond whenever you can.

Print	Personal Contact	Electronic	Community-Based	Get-togethers	More
Welcome letters Handbooks Newsletters Information packets Surveys Fact sheets Postcards Posters & signs	Conferences Home visits Phone calls Handwritten notes Assignment books Homework folders Student portfolios Parent phone-in hours	Telephone trees Voicemail & email Information & home work hotlines School info. played for callers on hold Classroom & event videos Websites	Flyers or posters at local businesses, agencies, churches & community centers Radio spots Public access TV Information distributed at school and community events	Open houses Parent forums Grade level breakfasts Principal chats Support groups Family workshops Donuts for dads Muffins for moms	Magnets Calendars Bookmarks Family picture boards & other bulletin boards Bright color notepads w/school logo for 2-way communication

Thanks to "Partners in Learning," Indiana Center for Family, School & Community Partnerships, for permission to adapt this information.

“If the information is important enough to send to parents, it is important enough to send in the most attractive and readable form.”

– *Reaching all Families*,
US Department of
Education



CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources designed to promote policies and programs at the local level and to increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning.

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Schools Share Partnership Practices

The Carrington School Community Stays Tuned

Television is probably the most commonly used medium of communication in most communities, and in Waterbury, the Carrington School Action Team decided right away to capitalize on this important vehicle with the help of the local educational public access channel.

For the use of all local schools, Waterbury's educational channel has studios in area high schools. Using a talk show format, the Action Team taped 2 thirty-minute programs. The first program provided parents and the community with information on many of the school's developing partnerships and projects, and featured students talking about the new student council. The second program featured parents and educators discussing easy ways to keep learning going over the summer. Both shows included a bilingual teacher who provided the same information to the school's Spanish-speaking population.

The shows were each broadcast twice a day for two weeks. Many pleased parents commented on how convenient it was to turn on the TV to get information about the school. The shows turned out to be such a successful means of communicating that more are planned for this spring. For more information, please contact Maryann Darling, Chairman of Carrington's SFC Committee at (203) 574-8184.

Friday Folders

To improve school-home communication, John F. Kennedy School in Windsor adopted a simple solution that was already working for some classes. They instituted Friday Folders school-wide. Every student gets a colorful plastic pocket folder and matching pencil at the beginning of the year. Each grade uses a different color to send student work samples home on Fridays. Parents are urged to talk with their child about the work. Sample questions are included, as is a comment log. Parents read the teacher's comments, sign the log and leave a message if they want.

“We wanted to let parents know that we value their input,” says vice-principal Tangular Irby, “to encourage them to provide their children's teachers with comments, as well as to make it easier for them to monitor what is happening in the classroom.”

Teachers have flexibility in how they use the folders. Some use a rating system that allows parents to indicate how they feel about their child's work. Others have an open format. Despite some initial reservations, teachers have come to appreciate the system as a valuable, time-efficient way to keep parents informed on classroom progress. Students say they like the positive comments.

Parents now look for the bright Friday folders, and no longer have to wonder what has gotten lost in pockets and book bags. Carol Sama, the parent of a 4th-grader, notes that seeing the progress of lessons allows parents an overview of the week that gives more information than simply looking at each paper one at a time. The folders “increase the ability of parents to be involved (fewer times to review work, more information with each review) and makes more efficient use of everyone's time.” For more information, contact Tangular Irby, (860) 687-2060, tirby@windsorct.org.

Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships Available For Loan

Powerful Parent Letters for K-3. Duggan, M. A. (1997). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc. This is a collection of ready-to-use letters to educate parents on the practices that work with young children. The book teaches the "10 steps to effective written communication" and how to organize a personal parent-communication system. The letters also serve as a guide to more effective face-to-face and phone conversations with parents.

How to Talk So Kids Can Learn at Home and in School. Faber, A. & Mazlish, E. (1995). New York: Rawson Associates. This practical book uses wisdom and humor to describe innovative communication techniques. It bridges the gap between parents and teachers and gives them both new skills to help children succeed in school.

Communication Skills That Work: A Functional Approach to Life and Work. Stein, W. & Romanek, E. (1991). Chicago: Contemporary Books. This two volume set is designed to help readers learn strategies for communicating more effectively in everyday life and at work. Reinforces listening, speaking and writing skills both through individual practice and interactive pair activities. Topics include following oral directions, taking phone messages, filling out forms, composing memos and notes, and participating in meetings.

Be sure to visit the SERC Library to explore the extensive collection of resources related to family involvement, available for loan free of charge. Located in Middletown, the library is open to the public Monday through Saturday. Call (860) 632-1485 for directions or hours. You may also request annotated bibliographies on a variety of topics including school-family-community part-

Web Resource: Communicating Academic Progress



Excellent teaching cases can be found on the Family Involvement Network of Educators website (www.finenetwork.org – part of the Harvard Family Research Project). They provide a great basis for discussions about improving communication between families, teachers, administration, and the community. For example, how can schools best communicate academic progress to parents? The teaching case, "Defining 'Fine': Communicating Academic Progress to Parents," explores the perspectives of a principal, parent and teacher in one school's effort to cope with new standards, progress reporting and school-site management. www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/progress.html.

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