



~~Communicating~~ Connecting with parents

Maintaining positive connections with parents requires more than contact at back-to-school nights, class parties and carnivals. Personal engagement throughout the year builds positive relationships that may last a lifetime.

Parent engagement at the school site has been a hot topic for the past several years, and rightfully so. In addition to recent accountability measures requiring parent engagement, including the Local Control and Accountability Plan, as educational leaders, we are aware of the many benefits that occur as a result of positive home/school relationships.

While those benefits may be obvious, there is another component related to communication that needs to be addressed: making intentional connections with parents and families.

As a former elementary school teacher, I noticed my parents were more actively engaged in the classroom when I made them feel welcome, invited their input and encouraged their participation. In fact, several parents throughout the years have left comments and notes thanking me for a successful year with their child. To this day, I am in contact with a few students and their parents as they have become adults with their own families and careers.

However, I didn't always get it right. For example, I can remember a time when I ne-

glected to inform a parent of an upcoming field trip. As the date of the trip drew near, I realized I had not received a permission slip from the parent. When it was discovered that the student had been absent the day the slips were distributed, I immediately contacted the parent. The parent realized it was a mistake on my part when I was honest and took responsibility. Although there had been a disconnection, she was appreciative that extra steps were taken to resolve the problem.

Everyone communicates

Connecting requires communicating, but communicating doesn't necessarily result in connecting. While communicating is a transferring of information, connecting is a joining together, establishing a relationship.

For example, have you ever been in a situation where you assumed you had communicated a particular message to someone, but their perception of the message was received as offensive? This can occur with social media networks like Facebook or mobile media, in-

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cluding texting, where important cues such as tone of voice, physical posture and expressions are all missing from the dialogue. Therefore, the intended connection was not made.

We all communicate a message, real or perceived, verbally as well as non-verbally. In “Learning by Doing,” authors Rebecca and Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker and Thomas Many state: “Leaders must realize that the most important element in communicating is congruency between their actions and their words.”

One important lesson I learned in an undergrad sign language class is that you cannot sign one thing (e.g., “happy”) with an opposite facial expression (e.g., “sadness”). It causes confusion, which in turn produces poor communication.

In John C. Maxwell’s book, “Everyone Communicates, Few Connect,” he proposes there are three questions people want to know about you:

- Do you care for me?
- Can you help me?
- Can I trust you?

Notice that all three of these questions are personal and require a positive connection to be effective. When you are perceived as someone who truly cares and desires to help, people are more willing to trust and connect with you. Our humanity longs for those who care and take an interest in us.

When we are unaware of the needs of others, it can be corrected by obtaining knowledge about them. It’s when we don’t express an interest or take the time to find out that we can create distrust. An African proverb says it best: “Not to know is bad, not to want to know is worse; not to try is unthinkable, but not to care is unforgivable.”

Making connections

Within John C. Maxwell’s body of work, he cites “truths about people” and actions that can help maintain positive connections:

- “People are insecure ... give them confidence.”
- “People want to feel special ... sincerely compliment them.”
- “People desire a better tomorrow ... show them hope.”
- “People need to be understood ... listen to them.”



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- “People are selfish ... speak to their needs first.”
- “People get emotionally low ... encourage them.”
- “People want to be associated with success ... help them win.”

In my school district, parents are provided the opportunity to participate in a yearly parent survey that highlights and rates targeted areas to ensure a positive home/school connection, including statements related to school climate, safety and a sense of belonging. Survey choices include such responses as “I feel respected and welcomed at my child’s school” and “When I have a concern I know whom to contact.”

In addition, classified staff, including home/school liaisons and community relations personnel, are provided professional development to support parent engagement at the site. They are prepared and encouraged to provide information as it relates to building positive connections with families and the community, including customer service standards. In addition, the trainings are utilized to support staff with tools empowering them to engage parents in the process.

In my current administrative role in our parent involvement department, our mission

is to “empower, engage and connect families to support student achievement.” That connection includes a curriculum that focuses on providing knowledge, direction and resources to increase parent engagement.

Collaboration with school site administration, other departments throughout the district and community-based organizations reinforces one of our core beliefs and commitments: Collaborative adult relationships are essential, and parents, students and the community as a whole are vital partners.

Home/school investment

In my experiences as a parent, I was aware of the need to connect early in the year with the school and teachers of both my daughters. I was very involved in their schooling, including through the PTA and as a noon-time assistant, and was able to identify those teachers who truly believed in and cared for my children.

Those connections made a positive difference during their school years, and even contributed to their career decisions. To this day, several of those connections have continued throughout the years into their adult lives.

Maintaining positive connections with parents also requires an initial investment of

personal time. It's not enough to contact or communicate with parents a few times during the year, at back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, carnivals, class parties, open house, etc. While those activities are important, individual personal contact throughout the year builds positive relationships that may last a lifetime.

In Randy Sprick's book "CHAMPS," he promotes taking proactive measures, including initiating ongoing contact with families. He maintains that when there's an effort to keep families informed and connected to their school, "they are more likely to work with you, should their student have a behavioral or academic problem."

Of course, there's always the possibility that for various reasons parents may not always be receptive to communicating with the school, much less making connections. However, while it may be a more difficult task, as caring educators who want the best for kids, this should not be a reason to throw in the towel.

First, there should be an investigation, without judgment, of the reason. Many

families deal with life circumstances that we could not imagine. For example, my district has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty in the nation. That in and of itself carries a multitude of possible reasons for poor communication in parent engagement. Nevertheless, a willingness to understand and provide possible alternatives to connect goes a long way and demonstrates to families a commitment to our core beliefs that they are vital partners.

Our ultimate goal is to create an open, trustworthy atmosphere where parents and families have the opportunity, tools and resources to participate in the journey of their child's education. While that journey requires a personal investment, it is well worth the time to make those connections with our parents. As Benjamin Franklin once said: "Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember. Involve me, and I learn."

Resources

• DuFour, Rebecca; DuFour, Richard; Eaker, Robert; Many, Thomas (2013). "Learning By Doing: A Handbook for Pro-

fessional Learning Communities at Work." Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

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• Saphier, Jon; Haley-Speca, Mary Ann; Gower, Robert (2008). "The Skillful Teacher: Building Your Teaching Skills." Acton, MA: Research for Better Teaching Inc.

• Sprick, Randy (2009). "CHAMPS: A Proactive and Positive Approach to Classroom Management." Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest Publishing Inc.

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