

Using the Right Communication Tool

Running an effective parent involvement program with everything from open house programs and parent-teacher conferences to curriculum fairs, newsletters, memos and fliers—not to mention your school Web site—can be complicated. So I'm focusing this column on communication, the lifeblood of your school's relationship with parents.

With e-mail, automated calling systems, and Internet sites, we have more communication tools available than ever before. But, just as we employ the best research-based practices to improve student achievement, so we need to know what research tells us about the best communication tools.

Below is a handy chart summarizing the two basic kinds of communication—and the strengths and weaknesses you need to know about each of them.

Which Communication Type Is Best?

Mass media is the workhorse when there is information to communicate to parents throughout the school year. Mass media also can be used to reinforce existing attitudes. But when we must develop supportive attitudes among parents about our school, our goals, and the importance of working




together, interpersonal communication is the only game in town.

For example, let's say a group of parents is concerned that your school lunch program is not serving healthy meals. You know the concerns are unfounded. What can you do about it?

Since research tells us that opinions are created by interpersonal, usually face-to-face, communication, it is likely that the rumor started when someone

they trust told the parents there is a problem—perhaps their own child or a neighbor whose child says the food is no good.

While a memo (mass media) declaring that "Our Lunch Program Provides Healthy Meals" will reassure those who already believe the school lunches are healthy, a better use of mass media would be to send a memo, mass e-mail, or newsletter to parents announcing a meeting (interpersonal communication) to address concerns that have been raised about the school lunch program. At the meeting, you and your food service manager can personally discuss the issues with concerned parents, tour the food preparation areas, and perhaps even serve lunch to let parents see that all is well.

Those who attend will quickly tell others (interpersonal communication) what they saw, heard, and tasted. In no time, the problem will be resolved. 

John H. Wherry is president of The Parent Institute in Fairfax, Virginia. His e-mail address is jhw@parent-institute.com.

Communication Type	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Mass Media: <i>Designed to reach many people at once impersonally.</i> Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Newsletters, fliers, memos, meeting handouts, and form letters; ■ Group e-mail; ■ Bulletin boards; and ■ Radio/TV. </p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Excellent for providing information. ■ Helps reinforce existing attitudes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poor for creating attitudes where none already exist. ■ Nearly worthless for changing attitudes.
<p>Interpersonal: <i>Designed to personally reach one person or a group of people.</i> Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meetings; ■ Parent conferences; ■ Personal conversations and telephone calls; ■ Handwritten notes; ■ Individual e-mail; and ■ Home visits. </p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Excellent for creating attitudes where none already exist. ■ Excellent for changing attitudes people already have. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poor for providing information.