

5 Future-Focused Tactics for Parent Communication

As a principal, you know the critical role that engaged, well-informed families play in creating a thriving school community. The tricky part? Figuring out how to achieve the open communication with families that facilitates this level of collaboration. Students forget to share information. Teachers are busy. Many parents aren't sure when to get involved or how.

As a mom, I've experienced this firsthand. I can't count the number of times I've pulled from the bottom of my child's backpack a crumpled sheet of paper carrying a time-sensitive request, update, or alert that I've inevitably missed. What comes next? A mad scramble or an apologetic note for my delayed response. I know I'm not the only parent trying to find the right balance for how best to communicate with my sons' teachers and schools.

This became particularly clear to me recently through my work with Learning Heroes, the organization I lead. This spring, we teamed up with Hart Research to field a national survey of K-8 public school parents on their hopes, fears, and greatest concerns about raising their children. The results revealed a significant need for and tremendous opportunity to accurately inform parents about students' academic performance, and what it means to be prepared for success in college and life after high school.

In the survey's findings, parents' belief in the importance of a college degree came through loud and clear—regardless of respondents' race, geography, or economic background. Three out of four parents believe attaining a two- or four-year college degree is essential or very important for their child. This is even more pronounced among parents of color, with 90 percent

of Hispanic parents, 97 percent of Spanish-dominant parents, and 83 percent of African-American parents taking this view. These high college aspirations are critical—but to come to fruition, they must be linked to an accurate picture of whether students

parents surveyed believe their child performs at or above grade level in both reading and math. Of course, as the national data show, the reality of student performance is much different. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 40 percent of fourth graders perform at or above their grade level in math, and just 36 percent meet this bar for reading. The results for Hispanic and African-American children are even bleaker.

This disconnect between perception and performance highlights both the barriers to and advantages of meaningfully engaging parents and families. While the path to strong parent communication will look a bit different for every school, here are five guidelines on how teachers and families can effectively work together toward great outcomes for students.



are on track academically, and what it will take to prepare them. Therein lies the challenge for schools.

The magnitude of this challenge came into focus when we learned that a staggering 90 percent of

1. Talk early and often. Use the start of school as a chance to reach out to families. Forging strong parent-teacher relationships early paves the way for a great school year. Some schools facilitate home

visits, while some rely on texting and emailing, and others send paper surveys home—all of which can help establish and build strong parent/teacher relationships focused on the whole student, with a special emphasis on learning progress. Teachers can share their own backgrounds and personal history with parents, then ask parents about their child's interests, habits, academic and personal goals for the year, as well as where he or she struggles and is likely to need a little extra support.

2. Share expectations. In our survey, when we asked parents what academic resources would be most helpful, most agreed that they would benefit from clear expectations on what their child should be learning in his or her grade level. Ensure teachers have the tools and materials needed to help parents understand their child's learning goals, and that this information is provided in parent-accessible language (for instance, "Third graders will learn to understand fractions" or "Fifth graders will learn to multiply fractions"). For parents who want additional information, teachers can suggest a visit to our site, **BeALearningHero.org**, which offers grade-by-grade breakdowns of expectations, along with videos of what mastery looks like at every stage.


3. Create continuity. Parents get frustrated when they're not clear on what their child is learning and why—we hear this all the time from parents. To help give parents a sense of the rationale behind what's happening in your classrooms, encourage teachers to ask parents to bring the previous year's state assessment results to their first teacher conference. These results are just one part of a broader picture of academic wellness, but they can help get parents grounded in their children's goals, expectations, and how skills mastered one year are essential to set students up for success in the next.

4. Go beyond academics. According to our study, because parents feel confident about their child's academic progress, parents are

more likely to worry about social-emotional health and happiness. Teachers can help alleviate that concern by centering conversations with parents around students' overall well-being, not just their academic wellness. Provide teachers with the materials they need to address parent concerns about social and emotional development. Provide specific language teachers can use with parents to ask about how their children are doing socially and what parents see at home. It is important for parents to pass on wellness signs or warnings to look for at home, and offer updates about students' strengths and struggles beyond schoolwork. This is a great way to help parents connect the dots between student success and overall learning goals.

5. Be partners in planning. Along with revealing parents' high hopes for college, the study showed that 40 percent of parents worry about their children being prepared when the

big day arrives. (Even more worry about how they'll foot the bill!) Helping parents address this anxiety offers a major relationship-building opportunity for teachers—even those who teach students who are years away from graduation. Our research suggests that many parents aren't sure what it takes to get to and be successful in college. Teachers can help by explaining that the very best thing parents can do is make sure that their children are on track for their current grade level, get a sense of what to expect in the grades to follow, and make sure their child is building successful habits.

When school leaders, teachers and parents collaborate, students have the greatest opportunity for achievement and long-term success. 

Bibb Hubbard is the president and founder of Learning Heroes, an organization that connects parents with high-quality information and resources.



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