

Engaging Parents Through Better Communication Systems

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Engaging Parents Through Better Communication Systems

New research shows that frequent, personalized outreach to parents works. How can schools support the practice?

When I was teacher, I quickly came to appreciate how profoundly my students' experiences outside of school influenced their performance in the classroom. My daily work to support their learning was certainly important, but sometimes my best efforts in the classroom were not enough. On occasion, I would reach out to parents for help and to better understand what students were experiencing outside of school. Through these conversations, I was also able to give parents detailed information about how their child was doing in my class and suggestions about how to further support my efforts in the classroom. In turn, parents also gave me new insights into the specific circumstances and learning needs of their children. But because of the daily demands on my time and the lack of schoolwide infrastructure and expectations to support communication, I contacted parents less frequently than would have benefitted me or my students.

As a researcher, I've come to appreciate even more strongly the potential of schools' efforts to engage parents as partners in students' learning. A large body of literature dating back over a half century to the famous Coleman Report in 1966 illustrates how factors outside of school are the dominant influence on students' academic achievement (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Altonji & Mansfield, 2011). Simply put, while effective teachers and solid curricula are crucial, the role that parents play in shaping students' educational experiences and supporting their in-school success cannot be overstated. When parents foster positive learning environments at home and are engaged in their students' schooling, kids have much better academic outcomes (Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Todd & Wolpin, 2007).

In light of this, it is critical for school leaders and teachers to better understand how they can engage parents and enlist their support. Recent field experiments offers some promising insights. For example, a small randomized-control trial that I conducted with Shaun Dougherty during a charter school summer session found that frequent, personalized phone calls home immediately increased students' engagement in school, as measured by homework completion, in-class behavior, and in-class participation (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). For this experiment, we trained the teachers to use a conversation protocol that began with them updating parents about a student's academic progress and classroom behavior, and alerting them about upcoming homework assignments and tests. We asked the teachers to end each call affirming that the student could be successful and suggesting one specific way the student could maintain or improve their effort.

In a follow-up experiment, Todd Rogers and I asked teachers who were part of a high school summer credit-recovery program to write one-sentence individualized messages to each of their students' families every week, again including one specific thing students were doing well or could improve. We found that these brief weekly messages reduced the percentage of students who failed to earn course credit by 41 percent (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). Other recent studies have documented similarly positive results from extended parent meetings with school leaders and panel discussions featuring experienced parents (Avvisati et al., 2014; Destin & Svoboda, 2017).

Together, these randomized control trials illustrate that providing parents with even brief but specific and actionable recommendations and advice can enable them to better support their children's learning.

Communication Breakdown

Of course, most educators already know that targeted outreach to parents can make a difference for students. The problem is that in many schools, as I discovered when I was a teacher, teacher-parent communication is infrequent, unsystematic, and not adequately supported.

Nationally representative data on the frequency and quality of school-initiated communication with public school parents show that communication in any form between schools, teachers, and parents is surprisingly rare (Noel et al., 2012). For example, in 2012, 59 percent of public school parents reported *never* having received a phone call home from their school during the previous year. The data also suggest there is considerable room for improvement in the quality of communication. About half of all parents were not “very satisfied” with their interactions they had with school staff.

Finally, overall trends across the previous decade suggest schools have not made much progress in improving the frequency and quality of communication with parents. Although the use of e-mail as a form of school-to-home communication had risen moderately, this increase did not benefit all families equally. The percentage of parents that received an individual email communication from their school among higher-income families increased from 56 to 59 percent between 2007 and 2012 but remained flat at 48 percent for families living at or below the poverty line. These email communication gaps are unlikely to have closed in more recent years given the large socio-economic gap in access to broadband internet that persist today (Pew Research Center, 2016).

What Schools and Teachers Can Do

Why is school-to-home communication so limited when we know it can help students, in some cases dramatically? Based on my own experience and research, three primary factors contribute to the low rate of teacher-parent communication: implementation barriers (including outdated or difficult-to-access contact information), the absence of schoolwide communication policies, and teachers' lack of non-instructional time. All of these factors point to a general lack of coordinated attention to the issue.

Schools can best address the problem by creating and prioritizing systemic plans to improve outreach to parents. Drawing on the research base on effective practices, schoolwide plans should aim to increase the frequency and quality of parent-teacher communication, send parents frequent individualized information about their students' performance, and provide parents with guidance about how to support their students in school and enhance learning opportunities for them at home.

For starters, schools should regularly collect updated parental preferences about the time, format, and language they prefer for communications and provide teachers with clear conversation, e-mail, and text protocols to build on. This can be facilitated through new technology and parent volunteers who serve as family engagement coordinators and translators.

Schools must also clarify expectations for teachers on how often they should reach out to parents, while finding ways to give them more time for this essential work. (Some options for the latter include relieving teachers of non-instructional responsibilities such as lunch-duty, increasing the amount of non-instructional time in teachers' contractually obligated workdays, and even providing a designated block of time each week for parent-engagement efforts.) Indeed, school leaders play a significant role in promoting teacher-parent communication by making active outreach to parents a schoolwide priority and by dedicating resources to these efforts

(Henderson et al., 2007). Teachers are busy and face a range of obstacles in attempting to communicate with parents. Without formal expectations combined with sufficient time and the necessary communication infrastructure, teachers may take a passive approach to communication as they shift their attention to other tasks. I often fell into this pattern when I was a teacher.

Digital technology should be an integral and purposeful part of schools' communication infrastructures. Unlike broadband internet access, nearly every adult in the U.S. has a mobile phone regardless of socio-economic status. Texting and mobile apps provide opportunities to connect with families of all backgrounds as well as to increase the efficiency of regular outreach. A growing number of mobile apps, such as Bloomz, ClassDojo, Class Messenger, Edmodo, Livingtree, Remind, SchoolCNXT, and SimplyCircle, provide secure, reliable, and efficient platforms for parents and teachers to communicate in flexible ways (often including translation features) via class announcements and individualized text messages. Teachers can use these platforms to provide specific and actionable advice, to update parents about students' performance in school and upcoming assignments, to schedule parent-teacher conferences, to create social networks among parents, and to share educational resources.

In addition, a growing number of student-information management systems and online gradebooks also have the ability to send automated messages to parents updating them about student's performance, attendance, and missing assignments. Such one-way, real-time informational texts and alerts sent by schools have been found to serve as an important complement to two-way communication between educators and families, with a growing number of studies documenting the efficacy of efforts to better inform parents about their students' attendance and performance (Rogers & Feller, 2017; Bergman, 2012; Bergman & Chan, 2017). Unfortunately, schools often inadvertently limit the efficacy of information-management systems

by maintaining inconsistent practices around updating assignments and information. Many districts also rely on an opt-in approach for these messages or require parents to log-in online to see updates. Such approaches generally result in very low levels of engagement and often fail to reach the parents of students who might most benefit from real-time information (Bergman & Rogers, 2017).

Finally, schools can partner with educational content providers or create their own academic skills- or child development-related content to send directly to parents. Such messaging has also proved to be effective in boosting parent engagement and student achievement (York & Loeb, 2014; Doss et al., 2016; Hurwitz et al., 2015). These communications can take a variety of forms, such as guidance for literacy development activities, suggestions for topics to discuss with students about their schoolwork, or even mini-lessons about what students are learning in school. In my own work, we found that a summer text-messaging program for parents focused on promoting literacy skills increased reading comprehension among upper elementary students and attendance at parent-teacher conferences (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017). Examples of organizations that specialize in this type of content include Raise the Bar, Great Schools/Great Kids, and Upraised Learning. Parents can use this specific information to move conversations past the one-line responses kids often give to general questions about their day at school. Remember, parents are busy people, too; a timely reminder to check in with their children about how things are going in school, along with some context and content-related tips, can help them engage in more frequent and enriching education-related conversations and activities at home.

Engaging Parents as Partners

The work of developing the hearts and minds of young people is too large and important of a task for schools to take on in isolation. New research has helped to illustrate how schools and teachers can expand their positive influence on students by engaging parents as partners in the education process. Now, it's up to schools to provide the infrastructure and expectations, and to teachers to advocate for the time and support necessary to do this work.

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