

Teacher to Parent Communication

By Deb Landry

Students perform better in school when teachers openly communicate with parents, when parents become actively involved in their children's education and when a healthy school climate is maintained. Close communications with parents and strong leadership skills from the teacher can significantly improve the school climate, educational experience, and follow the students throughout their lives.

There are a number of ways that teachers can communicate with parents rather than relying on the scheduled parent-teacher conferences or waiting until a bullying or harassment situation occurs. Creating clear boundaries, ground rules and strong respectable relationships will foster positive and committed strategies when problems arise. Teachers and parents must create positive behaviors and clear expectations students can obtain and comprehend. The teacher-parent relationship must set a good example by following the same expectations used for the students and with the same values outlined in the school's rules. The following guidelines will assist and facilitate positive, clear expectations for all involved while contributing to a safe school climate. These tips for communication and organization are the first steps in the prevention of behavioral issues, school climate control, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, bias-based harassment, discrimination, age, gender and cultural sensitivities.

Key points to effective teacher to parent communication

- Open the lines of communication: Teachers should welcome meeting their students' parents early in the school year. Making an effort to do this will help the teacher better understand the student and parent. Understanding the families' dynamics positively supports the education of the student. Inform parents how you teach and manage your classroom. Clearly and kindly set your classroom boundaries. Be tactful, flexible, clear and honest. Being respectful, honest and direct will help set the atmosphere and expectations of your parents.
- Outline communication expectations: Begin the year with both an open house and welcome letter. Sponsor a school wide open house where everyone can meet and hear from all the departments in the school. Principal, teacher, unified arts teachers, school organizations, bus and lunch programs. Communicate both verbally and also in a hand out that parents can refer to at a later date. Include contact information such as email address, school telephone number, address, website, key personnel, the best time for contacting and who they should contact for specific issues. Discuss and outline appropriate times and desired ways of contact. Inform parents when guest speakers like bully prevention programs are going on, encourage parents to talk to the student about the program at home. Make classroom expected behavior ongoing conversation with students and parents.
- Consistent and organized communication: Supply consistent, scheduled and organized communication such as written, newsletters, teacher's website or email on a weekly basis. Clearly outline to parents and students the school and classroom expectations. Inform parents what organizations and policies are available and make them accessible. Along with frequent classroom newsletters include: Principal's newsletter, PTO/PTA newsletters, school websites, email addresses, year at a glance, changes in the schedule, how the grading system works and school homework hotlines/websites. Parents and students need to understand how and where to get their questions answered. Lines of communication must always be practiced so when parents and students have a concern, they do not become frustrated searching for an answer or trying to understand how to communicate with the teacher. Defuse defensive behavior by clearly stating your intentions, rules and process.
- Initial and ongoing face to face meetings and encounters: Parent-teacher conferences are often scheduled at the time of the first report card in the school year. For parents and teachers, this is a chance to talk one-on-one about the student. The parent-

teacher conference is a good opportunity to review the partnership between student, parent and teacher but should not be the first and only face to face encounter especially if there are problems or issues that will take more than the fifteen minutes allotted. Beyond the open house, teachers and staff should be visible, available, and welcoming to parents and students during school visits, drop off and pick up times. For the students; teachers, staff and administration should make themselves visible in hallways, during the changing of classes, recesses, lunch and dismissal. Staff should be identifiable immediately with nametags or employee identification badges.

- **Documentation:** Beyond grades, keep accurate records of handouts, parent letters and on individual student communication, such as difficult, unusual or disruptive behavior, grades, missing assignments, outstanding behaviors, telephone and written communications with parents. Address your concerns early. Listen to what your parent and students have to say about respective bullying and harassment. Partner with your principal, assistant principal, school counselor, or a respected past teacher for advice or their experience and understanding if problems arise. Let parents know of potential concerns and always balance this with the positive attributes you are observing. Parents should get more positive information than negative about their children.
- **School and Student Organizations:** Participate and encourage parents to join parent-teacher organizations such as PTO, PTA and the Booster Clubs. Teachers can enhance parent communication by participating in these organizations. As all parents do not get actively involved, not all teachers need to attend. Assigning consistent school representation is vital. In larger schools teacher representative from each class or department can be responsible for communication between the organizations members and rotate on an annual basis. Attend school sponsored events or host a classroom project designed to get parents involved. Encourage students to be involved in school activities such as Civil Rights groups and peer leadership groups. Be consistent in attendance and visible.
- **Volunteers and Teamwork:** Depending upon parent's availability, interests, and the needs of the school, the opportunities are endless. Some suggestions include: chaperones, fundraising, hall and lunchroom monitoring, tutoring, copying, library aides, classroom speaker on a specific topic of interest, organizing paper to go home, typing, and concession worker at school events. Teachers should take stock of their parents' skills and interests to volunteer and ask the parent how they can volunteer. Spend time organizing your classroom and find task or projects that parents can do weekly. Build a team with you at the helm. The tasks are endless, teachers can focus on the students and parents feel engaged. Increase adult supervision assist in decreasing bullying and harassment.
- **Understanding diversity:** Understand and address cultural issues in your community, school and classroom. Acknowledged and respected behavior should be consistently demonstrated to parents and students. Respectfully leave personal opinions out of the school climate. This behavior will positively affect parents and students.
- **Media Impact:** Encourage and educate parents on media impact. Media need not be violent or disruptive to affect the learning process for students and also their communication skills. Work with parents to encourage decreasing the time spent on video games and television with more time allocated to reading and participation in projects, whether school or community.

Resources:

Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN.

Urban Resource Network, University of Illinois;

PTO Today Association