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Set and share clear expectations for communicating with parents

The start of a new school year means the start of new relationships. When students enroll in school, the students, their parents or guardians, other parents, and school staff are all part of the school community. This relationship, like any relationship, can thrive if the communication is a priority, expectations are clear, there is mutual respect and.

Communication is key

Communication is an essential skill. Many employers consider it the most important workplace skill, and the skill that is most lacking in workers. In any organization, confusion could be largely eliminated with regular and effective communication.

Start the school year with a plan to keep your school community informed about your school activities, events and important dates. Your school likely has established methods and channels of communication. Which one is best? It depends on your audience. You could do a survey or start with the results from a survey by the National School Public Relations Association (www.nspr.org). of how parents prefer to receive school news. The top five responses were:

- E-mail from the district/school
- Online parent portal
- District/school e-newsletters
- District/school website
- Telephone/voice messaging system

The survey indicated that many parents would like information as timely as possible — when the decisions are made and on a regularly scheduled basis. Also, the survey noted that social media was not among the top preferences for communication tools, but it did not delve into why this was the case. To capture social media users, don't rely on social channels exclusively. Schools can post content on these channels that parents have indicated they prefer and then share to social media.

Setting expectations for parents

Parents have concerns and questions, and the start of a new school year opens a two-way floodgate of information. The goal is to have engaged parents without disrupting school and the ability of the teachers to work.

Start the year off right by setting good communications expectations with parents. Clarify how they will receive notices of student academic progress, when they can contact teachers and how they can get involved as volunteers.

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Auburn Elementary School in the Salem-Keizer School District in Oregon, posts its parent involvement policy on its website in both English and Spanish.

“Educating students at Auburn Elementary School is a collaborative effort involving the student, the teacher and the parents working together to achieve high student performance. Parents can participate in their child’s education and receive information in the following ways...”

The list includes the schedule for parent meetings and notifications of academic progress and assessment results; a description of grade-level expectations and curriculum standards, volunteer guidelines, and school newsletter information. In addition, it reiterates the partnership between school and parents: “By November 30, a School-Parent Compact will be signed for each Auburn Elementary School student. This compact specifies the means by which the school and the parent will build and sustain a partnership to help the student achieve high academic standards.” <http://bit.ly/2YqOJMI>

Responding to expectations from parents

What if parents have concerns? Is your policy about how they can communicate with you clear? Have you provided information to help them express concerns or ask questions?

In the absence of these guidelines, you cannot expect that parents will not catch the teacher “for just a minute” before class as students are entering or take their concerns directly to the school board.

This is another instance of the need for communication. State your commitment to parents and your expectations for parents in writing. Be clear and be kind, but be sure they know the processes so they do not unintentionally disrupt learning.

Concordia University in Portland, Ore., published the following recommendations to better understand parent expectations (<http://bit.ly/2J695VN>):

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Parents want to stay in the loop about their child at school. Communicating with parents add accountability to students.

Share expectations upfront. Start early and be clear about what you expect.

Don’t forget to care. Parents expect schools to care about their children. Classroom expectations can be rigorous, but staff should demonstrate kindness to students.

Practice empathy. We don’t know what others are thinking or feeling. Approach parent relationships as a mutual partnership. Often, parents respond well to a sympathetic ear and kind words, even if a solution is not immediately clear.

Don’t waste parents’ time. Families have many demands on their time. Make your communications to families clear and informative, and try to keep the expectations on them manageable.