

March 2020

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## inside

### **Case study: Strategic planning for social and emotional needs**

Schools are facing greater challenges to meet the social and emotional needs of students. White Pass School District in Washington is a small district that built a comprehensive system of supports for students' social and emotional well-being. This case study outlines the components of the strategic plan to help students in elementary school through high school.

### **How strategic plan campaigns launch organizational change**

Does your district plan the work and work the plan? Launching a strategic planning process and implementing the resulting plan is a time-consuming and often exhausting process, but it is worthwhile. It's a chance to gather a team and envision an organizational goal that results in a guide for achieving it. Read about one district's experiences and get inspired to start your own planning process.

### **Training for school board members**

School board members make important decisions as volunteers. After they are elected, most dive into their decision-making role without fully understanding education policy and requirements. Even for the most avid supporters, there is plenty to learn, but sometimes they don't know what they don't know. This tip sheet offers reminders about the value of professional development for these important public officials.

### **What do your parents want to know?**

When families are active in their child's school, student achievement goes up. Schools can help parents feel welcome by sharing information. Not only do they have the right to be informed, but they can support their kids better if they know what's happening in the classroom. Here are some tips to ensure that they are getting the information they need.

### **Writing for an eighth grader — some things never change**

When you make an effort to share information, do you think about what you want to say and also how you want to say it? Maximize readability of your messages by keeping the writing short and the text big enough for your oldest audiences to view easily. A leading writing coach shares the basics for the most accessible writing.

### **INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Parent tips for teacher conferences**

Parent involvement is an important factor in student success, and parent-teacher conferences are a great way to get parents involved and get to know their child's teacher. These tips for parents will help them maximize the effectiveness of school conferences.

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## Case study: Strategic planning for social and emotional needs

Today's schools are very different from what they have been in the past. Students need to learn much more, much earlier to compete and succeed. Today's schools need to address the increasing social and emotional needs of their students in an ever-changing society that is rich with information, communication and interaction.

White Pass is a remote small district of 350 students, nestled in a valley named after a mountain pass of the Cascade Mountains, which is at the east end of the district. The district consists of three communities, Packwood, Randle and Glenoma. The schools are located in Randle, and the distance from one end of the district to the other is over 40 miles. The mission of the White Pass School District, in conjunction with our greater rural community, is to provide a quality education for all in a safe and challenging environment.

Demographically, 18% of the students in the district are considered homeless, 71% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch — of that number, more than 90% of students access free lunch. The district has numerous single-parent, grandparent or guardian-led households. White Pass has continually provided a strong comprehensive educational program to its students.

### Developing systems to support students

I arrived in 2017 and was the fifth superintendent in nine years. The district wanted to address the social and emotional needs of the students while having systems in place to continue to move forward regardless of who was the superintendent, building principal or other personnel. By working with the staff and all three communities, we started building a strategic plan.

We adopted our strategic plan in 2018 after a series of town hall meetings to gain input from each of the communities, and meetings with all staff and the school board. A key component of the plan was to address the social and emotional needs of the students. This would happen by strategically implementing professional development as well as engaging staff and the community with several different programs.

As a result, the following new programs have been put in place over the last two years.

*The Chill Space* — A designated classroom space at the elementary school where students can go to deescalate, have a quiet place or just to refocus on their school work.

*The Den* — A designated separate space outside of the classroom where students can go that is staffed by a trained, caring, para professional. Often, this individual will check in with

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many of the students in the morning to assess their well-being and connect with them again at the end of the day.

*Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)* — A behavior and academic program that combines Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS). The district contracted with Dr. Bella Bikowsky ([www.bellabikowskyphd.com](http://www.bellabikowskyphd.com)) to provide intensive training for staff at the elementary and secondary schools in developing and implementing MTSS.

MTSS utilizes research-based principles and methods that provide building-wide student support. Although implementation is a process that grows over time, the district has experienced success in working with students who had very difficult behaviors. Dr. Bikowsky states, “When you look at the research, academics are only 30-50% of what students need to be successful. The highest indicator of success is not GPA, SAT scores or IQ; rather, it is cognitive control. In simple terms, we are talking about grit. What we are attempting to accomplish with this work is getting kids into the mental gym, day after day and year after year, in an effort to truly learn strategies to help strengthen their executive functioning skills. These are the foundation skills that will help determine success far beyond the K-12 school years.”

*LOU Crew* — Mentoring, tutoring and activities provided by a group of approximately 25 community volunteers. Formed in 2018 by a former school board member, activities have included tutoring, community construction and clean-up projects, cooking classes, hiking with students and ultimate Frisbee, in addition to volunteering in the classrooms and hallways.

*Cispus Learning Center* — The Cispus Learning Center, located 19 miles away from the district, is one of two sites supported by the Association of Washington Schools Principals (AWSP), which provides environmental and leadership education to K -12 students. This resource, essentially in the district’s backyard, is now being accessed extensively. In the fall of 2018, the district, in partnership with the center, started taking students to the center for leadership development. In addition, learning center staff come to the district to work with middle school students on various aspects of social and emotional wellbeing. The center also engages elementary students on-site in providing recreational learning opportunities focusing on positive social and emotional behaviors.

*Mental Health* — The district spent a year trying to find a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) to provide services and even considered accessing services via Skype in order to secure support. In fall 2019, the district was able to successfully hire an LMHC for three days a month to provide services to students who had been identified by staff as potentially needing the most support. Even before obtaining an LMHC, the district hired a staff member as a counselor who was pursuing training to become an LMHC. Next year, she will be far enough in her program to provide additional mental health counseling services to the district.

The work will continue to provide positive supports for behaviors of students and their social/emotional needs as well as providing support to their families. Recently, the district applied for a grant to have one of the district’s free preschool programs become part of the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). The ECEAP program focuses on helping three- and four-year-old children from low income families experience success early in school and life.

At the onset of arriving at White Pass in 2017, district staff wanted to focus on improving the culture and climate while ensuring that all students have access to a strong academic program.

The district addressed this issue strategically by providing a comprehensive approach to the social and emotional needs of the students while maintaining or increasing the academic standard. The expectation and growing reality is that students will be able to focus better on their academic work and be socially and emotionally better prepared for life.

Today's schools are very different from what they have been in the past, and the White Pass School District and community are staying true to the district's mission "*to provide a quality education for all in a safe and challenging environment.*"

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*Contributed by Paul Farris, Ph.D., Superintendent, White Pass School District*

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## How strategic plan campaigns launch organizational change

How strategic plan campaigns launch organizational change

Standing ovation. Hands reaching for Kleenex.

Not an unusual response for a back-to-school event. But unexpectedly, this was a sincere response to the launch of our strategic plan. Seriously.

Our process to develop a strategic vision and plan lasted almost a year, included a diverse team and a variety of input, and resulted in a boost to morale and a roadmap for achieving both short- and long-term goals.

### How did we do it?

Partly, this was circumstantial. The district had just gone through some turbulent times. People needed a way to reconstruct the image and narrative of the agency. The strategic planning process created the opportunity to do so. It was a useful exercise for defining the organizational vision, plotting the next steps and boosting morale.

A process like this requires a group effort. We built a team of creatives: graphic designer, web designer, multimedia expert, copywriter, videographer. We identified the heart elements of the planning process and the plan. We sought out and found thoughtful moments and people that were passionate about the plan. We asked the people that everyone knows and the people who were lesser known. We asked them to tell us — and everyone — why this mattered to them and why it mattered to kids. In their words. In their way. In their time. We built our materials in and of their collective voice. And it resonated. It wasn't a plan off the shelf. It was of them and for them and it resonated with them.

### Informational materials

We developed a variety of materials for the process and for the plan as a result of the process. Table 1 lists the materials prepared for each phase. Here is the link to all of the 2017-19 and 2019-21 campaign materials: [multnomahesd.org/mission.html](http://multnomahesd.org/mission.html).

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**Table 1. Strategic Plan Campaign Materials**

Strategic Planning

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Creating	Launch	Ongoing Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress videos (4)</li> <li>• Talking points</li> <li>• Online forum “Ask Laura” (Q&amp;A with the communications director)</li> <li>• Timeline posters</li> <li>• Roadshows to sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video</li> <li>• Common area posters</li> <li>• Workstation posters</li> <li>• Buttons</li> <li>• Back-2-School</li> <li>• Video</li> <li>• Pens</li> <li>• Lanyards</li> <li>• Supt. Address</li> <li>• E-news features</li> <li>• Website and social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid-year and annual update materials to the Board</li> <li>• Monthly presentation to Board by goal teams</li> <li>• Monthly Stock-Takes to Cabinet</li> <li>• E-News updates to the agency</li> <li>• Annual review with Advisory Committee</li> </ul>

**Tips for your strategic planning process**

**Do use a team. Don’t do it alone.**

A lengthy planning process requires stamina. A team of creatives helps keep a campaign approachable and combats topic fatigue. After a six- to nine-month process, even the most stalwart among us will jump at an invitation to watch paint dry rather than continue to create content on the same topic — certainly paint drying is more approachable to most readers than strategic planning. After all, who doesn’t have a story of a paint job gone horribly wrong?

**Make it approachable.**

Making the process manageable means not including everything. A strategic plan doesn’t include every program, school, department and service that a district provides. It does name strategic aims.

A good campaign will help individuals across the agency understand and track the progress in a clear and approachable way even if they aren’t directly involved with the work. Getting this right can be a bit of a challenge in the world of edu-speak. Creating campaign materials with a team can go a long way to making the campaign materials approachable.

**Prepare for topic fatigue.**

After working through a six- to nine-month planning process, topic fatigue takes hold right when energy is needed most for the campaign launch that will result in inspiring headlines like, “Board adopts strategic plan” that may be met with an overwhelming absence of hearts, thumbs-ups and shares.

Even after the launch, it is so easy and tempting to hit the snooze button and delay, sometimes forever, reporting on implementation efforts and results. To combat this, seek out non-typical teammates to help build and maintain energy through the final stage. Consider inviting your best in-house event planner to plan and host a launch event complete with cake, ribbons, t-shirts, pens, wristbands and the high school jazz ensemble. Ask a neighboring district colleague to plan out digital and social media posts with you. Work with a contractor to create

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something fresh and edgy. Create co-responsibility for sharing out by scheduling cabinet and board update presentations two or three times a year — and be okay with it not always being perfect.

**Drumroll please...Prepare for the finale.**

The ad hoc team of creatives we assembled coincided with an agency culture shift away from silos and toward multi-disciplinary teams. We deliberately experimented with the discomfort of asking and inviting others to contribute who weren't formally trained or experienced in communications and creating campaigns. Working in this way wasn't always fast or smooth — but on balance, it resulted in a better campaign, a greater sense of community across the agency and a broader and deeper support for the plan.

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*Contributed by Laura Conroy, communications director, Multnomah Education Service District*

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## Training for school board members

School board members make decisions that have a significant and long-lasting effect on the students, staff and schools in their districts. That's why it's so important that they have the knowledge and tools to do their job.

More than 20 states require school board members to receive some type of training. Most mandatory-training states require training for all board members, but others only require it for newly elected officials. Typically the school districts pay for the training.

In Washington, all school board members are required under the state's Open Government Trainings Act (ESB 5964) to complete training on the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA), Public Records Act (PRA) and records retention. The training must be completed within 90 days of taking office following appointment or election of a new board member. Refresher trainings must be completed by each board member every four years that they remain in office.

Whether mandated or not, school board associations in most states recognize the need to offer a variety of training and development opportunities for board members. Public education has become much more complex over the past decade and continues to change. Many board members come into their role with little background in education. Often they find themselves in the middle of highly public, complicated and sometimes controversial decisions about issues that they don't fully understand. It's critical that board members receive the information, training and support they need to make good decisions and serve their communities well.

Many associations offer online training and customized in-district trainings. The goal is to provide practical strategies and resources to help your board and superintendent function as a high-performing team.

While the information gleaned from trainings is crucial, the opportunity to interact and share ideas and frustrations with other board members is also important. That's why the annual conferences and regional meetings that state school board associations sponsor are a great resource for board members. They allow board members, superintendents and other education professionals to interact, get up to date on issues and discuss ways to improve education in their districts.

The National School Boards Association annual conference is another opportunity for board members to become informed and energized in their roles. More than 7,000 school board members, superintendents and education leaders from around the country attend every year.

Whether they receive online training or attend a conference or workshop, board members must be current in a wide range of issues. Topics should include:

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- **Roles and responsibilities** — Board members must be clear about the role of the board and its relationship with the superintendent; how board members interact with each other; and how the board can encourage system-wide change and improvement.
- **Assessments** — Board members should understand the array of data regarding student achievement and how they can help drive decisions that improve student success and close achievement gaps.
- **Ethics** — Board members should be knowledgeable about ethics laws and the consequences of failing to comply.
- **Budget** — Fiscal oversight is one of the key roles of the school board, and board members should be clear about the budget process and how the district's money is spent.
- **Community engagement** — Successful districts recognize the importance of parents and community engaging with schools through volunteering and participation on boards and committees. School board members play a key role in welcoming and encouraging citizen involvement in schools.
- **Policies** — Board members should be familiar with their district's policies and administrative regulations and have a system for regularly reviewing and updating them.
- **Effective meetings** — Conducting and participating in efficient and effective meetings requires more than knowledge of parliamentary procedure, so it's important for board members to have the tools and information they need.
- **Charter schools** — Many districts have one or more charter schools, so it's important that school board members understand the relationship between the district and the charters.
- **Communications** — School board members should understand the strategies their districts use in communicating with students, staff and community and be supportive of staff to continually improve communications efforts.
- **Media relations** — Reporters often contact school board members to comment on the education-related stories they write, so it's important that board members have an understanding of the media and how to respond appropriately to requests for comments.
- **Labor relations** — Collective bargaining and other labor-related topics are important for school board members to understand.
- **Public meetings** — Understanding open meeting laws and requirements regarding executive sessions are important for school board members.

Developing well-trained and effective school board members requires some effort, but it should be considered an investment that will positively impact your district and its public perception.

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*Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant*

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## What do your parents want to know?

What do your parents want to know?

Education reform frequently includes a focus on accountability, information sharing and new efforts to increase parent engagement. This helps families and student success rates. When families are active in their child's school, student achievement goes up.

School communication plans should include reaching out to parents at specific key events such as back-to-school, parent nights and conferences and general information that responds to questions parents should be asking.

### Parents have the right to know

Many parents are in frequent contact with school staff. If they have questions, they do not hesitate to reach out for answers. Other parents worry about bothering the staff, or they don't know who to contact or even what they should be asking.

Schools have a responsibility to provide information that parents need and anticipate the information that parents want. The school system can be confusing to parents who are unfamiliar with its operations and programs. They depend on schools to provide them all necessary information and guide them to ask the right questions to help support their children's educational experiences. They should be able to easily find educational updates and information about their schools.

### What do they want and need to know?

The task of helping parents determine what they need to know is one of the highest communication priorities. Determining messages and targeted audiences will be based on listening to parents and translating educational jargon and current program plans.

### These tips are useful reminders on what your parents want and need to know about their child's school:

**Provide basic information** about your school, district policies and state and federal laws that will have an effect on students and their families during the coming school year. Be sure it is in alternative formats and in multiple languages, as needed. Post it on your website and include it in printed materials.

**Ask parents to clarify questions** or to give examples if you don't understand what information they are seeking. Don't make assumptions and don't appear to be condescending when you respond.

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**Return phone calls and respond to emails** from parents the same day you receive them. If you are out of the office, make sure phone and computer messages state that you are unavailable.

**Tell parents that it may take a day or two to get information** about the topics they want. Specify when they can expect to hear from you or another staff member. If someone else will respond for you, explain why you are asking that person to answer their questions.

**Take time to talk with parents** who come to your office or school. Everyone is busy. Give parents your time and attention when they come to school.

**Tell parents if you already have a scheduled appointment or meeting** or an emergency to handle, but offer an alternative time to meet and answer their questions. However, if parents are angry, threatening or could cause a security problem, don't put them off.

**Use every conversation with parents to ask about their children who attend your school.** Inquire as to how they feel their children are progressing and why. By making such inquiries you will gain valuable information about your school. Their answers will give you insight into each parent's support base, areas of confusion about your school program and how parents represent your school in the community.

**Don't miss any opportunity to provide new information about academic requirements.** Use a quick reference sheet to remind yourself each day of facts that you want to share with those you encounter during the day. Provide printed flyers or fact sheets that parents can take home.

**Provide test scores.** Parents and prospective parents are interested. Don't just provide test scores as a list of numbers. Be clear about what the test is, when it is administered, to whom and why, and what subjects were covered. Describe the test. Explain how the results compare from one year to the next.

**Make sure copies of your school report card** or annual performance report are kept up to date. Don't keep copies hidden in the office. Display copies proudly so that all visitors can take one. Have copies of your district annual report available as well.

**Reach out to parents who don't call or come to school.** Set aside time each week to call five parents. Let them know you want to provide any help and information to make their children's educational experiences a good one. Don't assume that parents don't want to talk to you; they may not have the courage to initiate contact.

**Remember that school safety is an important concern of parents.** Make sure parents know school safety policies, emergency plans and the related communication plans. Make sure this information is available in alternate formats and also in the languages spoken in the homes of the students who attend your school.

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## Readability Tips

Writing for an eighth grader — some things never change

When it comes to reaching your audience, yes, writing at the eighth-grade level is still best practice. Small words, no jargon, sentences that vary in length but are still on the short side. Short paragraphs. Also use the right typestyles and size.

But your “influencers” are often well-educated, so you can still engage them with detailed finance or technical terms, right? Maybe, but do you really think your audience *wants* things to be harder to read?

The rule is to still make it simple for everyone. You can always link (or refer to) to a “deep dive” of technical details for people who love reports, especially in explaining bond proposals or new curriculum.

### The basic mechanics — font and size

- First, use the most readable type style and size. For online reading, the best font and size, in general, is Arial, 12-point minimum (the font size of this tip sheet!)
- For a formal look, use the font “Georgia.”
- For older readers, use at least a 14-point font, regardless of whether you’re writing for a brochure or online.
- On paper, serif fonts (like Garamond and Times New Roman) are easiest to read.
- Use sans serif type for online text.
- Use the extra-fancy fonts (you’ll find dozens in the drop-down menus) sparingly, for graphic effects.
- Never mix your fonts, other than to choose one style for headlines and another for body text. Oh, and headlines should be slightly larger than body text.

We realize this is very traditional, even boring ... but when you think of who most of your readers are (older adults who vote and actually read for longer than a nano-second), use what works for them.

### Advice from a leading coach

Writing coach Ann Wylie has been a leading dispenser of wisdom for school and other PR professionals for several decades, so we tracked down some recent advice from her. We found much of the same solid finger-wagging at writers... but something new: Go even lower! Learn why from her nuggets of wisdom:

### *Start with average*

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The average U.S. adult reading level is eighth-grade. Is your audience average? If yes, target a seventh- or eighth-grade reading level. Not so average? Consider going lower.

According to findings in the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, the world's huge global literacy test:

- **Education.** Education is the most reliable predictor of literacy. On average, literacy scores increase by 10 points for each year a person remains in school. The lower your readers' level of education, the easier your copy should be to read.
- **Industry.** People with poor reading proficiency tend to have more health problems, for instance. So if you're writing to an audience that may have health care concerns, consider aiming lower. The best reading level for health information is fifth grade.
- **Types of devices.** Also, reduce the grade level when you're writing for mobile devices. Mobile screens cut understanding in half, according to research by R.I. Singh and colleagues from the University of Alberta.

### *Consider going lower*

In general, the higher the literacy skills, the higher the job ranking. Managers and professionals, for instance, tend to (but don't always) have higher literacy skills than technicians, craft workers or machine operators. People with high literacy skills are less likely to be blue-collar workers than those with lower skills.

But consider this — even if your audience is more educated, chances are they're reading *more* and therefore have *less* time to read ... so it's still a good idea to write more simply, even for them.

### *Okay, go even lower*

Even if you're writing to rocket scientists, keep your grade level average low. That's because:

- **People don't read at their grade level.** On average, high school graduates read at the ninth-grade level, according to William H. Dubay, readability consultant at Plain Language Services. College graduates read at the 12th-grade level.
- **Over time, reading skills decline.** On average, Dubay says, adults read at five grade levels lower than the last grade they completed.
- **People don't want to read at their grade level.** "People prefer to read and get information at a level below their capacity," says Douglas Mueller, president of the Gunning-Mueller Clear Writing Institute. "Even a Harvard University professor prefers to get information without strain."

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*Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former communications director for Oregon School Boards Association; health writer for Salem Health.*



### Parent tips for teacher conferences



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Student success in school is the result of so many factors: excellent curricula, class size, funding, school climate, and more. These things are important, but research shows that the most influential factor is the teacher. When combined with active parent involvement in schools, the odds of success for students go way up.

#### **Parent involvement: Getting to know your child's teacher**

Parents are important partners in student achievement. Parents should know their child's teacher. They should know how to contact them and feel comfortable reaching out to them. They should be a source of support — with their own child and, if they can, in the classroom.

Studies have repeatedly found that involved parents make a difference at school:

“Parents will have a significant impact on their child's learning and educational experience when they take an active role in monitoring the student's progress, assignments, attendance, activities, and events. Parent involvement helps keep students on track — from better attendance and fewer missed assignments to improved test scores and increased grade point averages.”

*<http://bit.ly/2S82xct>*

#### **Connect with teachers at parent conferences**

Teachers are busy, so casual conversations and interactions with parents are difficult. Fortunately, there are several scheduled opportunities to meet your child's teacher and keep tabs on your child's progress.

Parent-teacher conferences, generally scheduled in the fall and spring, are important. Teachers can introduce themselves and their instructional strategies to parents, and parents can learn about their child's specific academic strengths and weaknesses. It's a great time for both parties to put names to faces and build a partnership to help students succeed.

Here are some tips for effective conferences with teachers:

#### **Before the conference**

- Write down questions you want to discuss.
- Talk with your child about the fact that you have a meeting with his or her teacher. Ask the child if he or she has any concerns.
- Discuss what the child feels are his or her successes, likes and

dislikes about school. Ask if there are any problems you should discuss with the teacher.

- Be prepared to talk and listen during the conference. What goes on at home affects how well a child does in school. Be sure to let the teacher know about such key events as a separation or divorce, family illness, new baby, death in the family, loss of a beloved pet, etc. It is not necessary to share all your personal business, but it will help your child's teacher to know about important events that may affect your child's performance.

### **At the conference**

- Arrive on time and stay only for the amount of time scheduled for your appointment. If important questions have not been discussed, ask for a future appointment. Overstaying your allotted time can put the teacher in an awkward position with other parents.
- Try to relax.
- Talk about your child's interests and any special information that he or she wanted discussed.
- Make notes during the conference to review with your child.
- Ask the teacher for his or her views on needed improvements.
- If your child needs additional help, ask if the school or district provides a list of tutors or after-school classes. Also ask the teacher to suggest specific ways you can help your child.
- Ask the teacher to explain anything you do not understand.
- Summarize your understanding of your child's progress and your child's teacher's comments to make sure you and the teacher are in agreement.
- Make sure that you know how to contact the teacher, perhaps by phone or email, and that the teacher knows the best way to get in touch with you.
- Ask the teacher about anything you have heard or read about the school or district that is of concern to you. The teacher should be able to explain any gossip or rumors about the school or refer you to someone who can.
- Follow up on any plan of action agreed to by you and your child's teacher. Stay in touch with the teacher. If you think of additional questions later, send a note or leave a message at the school for the teacher to call you.

### **After the conference**

- Discuss what was said during the conference with your child. Be sure to emphasize any positive comments the teacher made.
- Talk with your child about strategies for improvement in academic areas and about other topics such as discipline issues, school activities that might interest your child, work habits, getting along with classmates — whatever topics were discussed during the conference.
- Use this as a chance to praise your child (for a project, an activity or just for helping you prepare for the conference) and to demonstrate interest in your child's life.