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What do your parents want to know?

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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.