Improving student academic success relies on better communication between the home and the school. Uncovering the differences in what parents want and what teachers are giving them is essential to the success of students, parents, teachers, and the instructional leaders of the schoolhouse—the principals.

Principals bear a profound responsibility in home-school communication. They set the tone for the teacher’s role and define the communication expectations for their campus (Seifert & Vornberg, 2002). If principals expect teachers to return parent emails and phone calls within 24 hours, they must articulate this expectation; it cannot be “understood” or left to chance. In schools where public relations and home-school communication are part of the school culture, leaders have conveyed its importance in no uncertain terms (Epstein, 2001). These administrators have trained their staff to be simplifiers, communicators, and connectors.

Instructional leaders must care about communication between school and home because research shows that:
- Home-school communication is a vitally important link to student achievement and effective schools (Lezotte, 1991).
- Parent involvement is the single determining factor in schools that outperformed other schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).
- Unsuccessful home-school communication is directly linked to higher levels of student failure (Strom & Strom, 2003).
- Higher rates of classroom misbehaviors and student failure are a direct result of lack of cooperation between the school and the home (Srinivasan, 1991).
- More than 50 studies support the link between good parent-teacher communication and student learning (NSPRA, 2006).

A recent study (Garrett, 2009) provides valuable information regarding what parents want and what teachers provide with regard to communication. Eleven school districts purposefully chosen to represent the diversity in the state of Texas were surveyed to determine if parents’ preferred modes of communication were being utilized by teachers, if parents were receiving the information they desired, and whether or not teachers had the training, resources, and time necessary to communicate effectively with parents. By and large, elementary teachers came out the big winners with regard to parent satisfaction with home-school communication:
- Elementary teachers host activities to encourage parents to visit the classroom more often than middle school and high school teachers.
- Elementary teachers make personal contact with parents at the beginning of the school year at a higher frequency than middle school and high school teachers.
- Elementary teachers contact parents with good news about their children on a more regular basis than middle school and high school teachers.
- Elementary teachers give parents information about how to help their children be successful at school more regularly than middle school and high school teachers.
- Elementary teachers make personal phone calls home and send notes home more frequently than middle school and high school teachers.

Although this sounds like very good news for elementary principals, other findings showed that teachers’ and
parents’ perceptions varied greatly. For example, 84 percent of teachers surveyed said they “always return emails and phone calls within 24 hours,” while only 39 percent of the parents agreed. And while 76 percent of parents surveyed said they “always take responsibility for monitoring their children’s academics,” only 44 percent of teachers agreed. There were also complaints that teachers do not update grading and web pages, while parents do not update phone numbers and contact information. There is definitely room for improvement for both teachers and parents.

Regardless of having students at elementary, middle, or high school levels, parents basically want the same information about their children—the good, the bad, and the ugly—the differences are in how they want to receive the information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Elementary School Parents</th>
<th>Middle School Parents</th>
<th>High School Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Progress reports</td>
<td>Progress reports</td>
<td>Progress reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Notes home</td>
<td>Online grading</td>
<td>Emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Conferences at school</td>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>Online grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>Conferences at school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the conclusions of this study, principals would be wise to conduct a little action research on their own campuses in order to uncover communication gaps and barriers between the home and the school. Surveys could be conducted with parents to ascertain their desired methods of communication and types of information they want to receive. When areas of weakness are uncovered, “online grading not updated by teachers,” the problem can immediately be addressed. This type of candid self-discovery on the part of the school will serve to bolster relationships between parents and teachers and greatly improve student success.

To improve home-school communication, principals could provide:

- Staff development for all teachers
  - Induction to set expectations for new teachers or first-year teachers, including templates for newsletters, sample PowerPoint open house
  - Ongoing for veteran teachers, including use of new technology
- Clear expectations and high priority
  - Answer calls and emails within 24 hours
  - Update online grading and teacher web pages weekly
  - Include personalized messages on progress reports

By identifying differences in parent and teacher expectations, instructional leaders can begin to bridge the communication gap and engage in more productive, frequent, and meaningful discourse with parents—thereby increasing student success. Principals
can move their schools from uncoordinated communication efforts to holistic, comprehensive plans for building relationships and communication with parents.

Authors

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**Principal’s Checklist for Improving Teacher-Parent Communications**

- At an early opportunity in the school year (or as schools are preparing for end-of-year), collect data from both parents and teachers at suitable times using a one-page easily answered checklist of specific questions on their personal perceptions of the communications results from the past school year. These include things such as:
  - accessibility to parents or teachers in their communications.
  - use of telephone for contacting each other.
  - use of Internet communications in sharing information.
  - feedback on grades or other instructional questions.
  - conferences between teacher and parent.
  - written messages sent home.
  - what additional needs these groups have in terms of improving communications.

- Set mutual goals for communications between parents and teachers for the coming school year, involve both teachers and parents in the process.

- Develop specific ideas to help communicate with hard-to-reach parents appropriate for school or district.

- Train teachers in use of Internet tools for making grades and other information easily accessible for parents. This should include any specialized tools available to teachers such as websites, grading sites, etc.

- Offer training to parents to assist them in understanding how they may support their child’s learning in today’s world.

- Set clear expectations for teachers in responding to parents’ requests for conferences both by phone or face-to-face.

- Acquire necessary software for teachers and parents to communicate by electronic means.

- Collect and update parent phone numbers and email addresses so they are available for teachers when needed.

- Make telephones and computer access easily available for teachers to communicate with parents during their planning time.
References

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