Parent Communication- The First Step in Involvement

By Cathy McAlister, NBCT

**Parent involvement is all about the children and making sure they receive the kind of education they deserve and must have. \***

Transitioning back into the classroom this year, in my Title 1 school, provided some unexpected challenges. I have struggled to connect with many of my parents to keep them informed about upcoming events, the current content we are studying, as well as information about their child’s daily school life. Research and my own experience have shown that parent involvement is a critical part of a child’s success in school.

Being accepted into the CTEPS (Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions) program this year was an honor and a challenge. I was given the opportunity to create my own project with the support of many wise mentors and peers. After much consideration, I decided to focus on improving my communication with parents. The Westat study(2001) found that in Title 1 schools where teachers reported high levels of “outreach” to the parents of low achieving students, reading and math test scores grew at a rate 40 percent higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach. \*

Once I began this project, I did a parent survey about communication preferences. The majority of parents reported that they preferred to stay informed by asking their child. A few were interested in the newsletter. This provided a bigger challenge for me than I expected because I assumed they were reading the grade level newsletter. Second graders are not that reliable as a source of information.

My first step was to ensure that my second graders were informed about upcoming events, the current content, etc. We end our day with a discussion of things that we have already written in our agenda. We also make sure that we celebrate successes and end our day positively so that emotion is carried through when the student speaks to their grownups about their day.

Next, I began an email distribution list. I now send electronic copies of our weekly, grade level newsletter to any family member interested. This helps with students who have two households. All students receive a printed copy of the newsletter, which contains an overview of our weekly content, homework, and upcoming events. The printed newsletters are important because 20% of my class does not have access to the internet.

After more research, I discovered an application for my phone, REMIND. I liked the confidentiality of the app because it allows me to send messages and announcements to all subscribers but does not reveal phone numbers. This has proved to be my most successful method of outreach as 80% of my parents participate. I send home reminders about fieldtrips and special events, clarifications about homework, etc. This app also allows parents to message me and for me to contact them individually. Half of my parents have used this to ask me questions. Since it is on my phone, I am able to respond quickly without much interruption to my family time. Happily, 50% of my parents reported it as the best way to communicate and indicated that it was very helpful. www.remind.com

One of my teaching goals this year is to address fluency. Many parents don’t understand what fluent reading should sound like. I created an online newsletter through [www.smore.com](http://www.smore.com) to add another dimension to my communication. I created an audio file example of fluent reading for the newsletter. I just knew that hearing it would be a life changing moment for every family with a struggling reader. According to the website, five out of the six that visited the sight were on it for 5 seconds or less, So, I am going to try to make this newsletter more successful next year by using the children’s pictures and video throughout the newsletter. I think that will make a difference in the number of parents who view it and use it to help their child. I will take time to become more comfortable with the technology and begin the year with it.

As I reflect on this experience, I see a difference in student learning because parents are more informed. There is a significant difference in student preparedness for events. I was also happy to note that there was a large drop in the number of parents reporting that they used their child as their main source of information. One parent commented, “There has been very good communication between teacher and parent in my opinion.”

1. *This Parent Involvement: Nine Truths You Must Know Now Special Report was prepared by John H. Wherry, Ed.D., President, The Parent Institute®, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039.*
2. *The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP) in Title I Schools. http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/lescp\_highlights.html*

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