



**Indicator:** All teachers maintain a file of communication with parents. (5177)

**Explanation:** The evidence review confirms that because the “curriculum of the home” has significant impact on school success, it is imperative that teachers engage and interact with student caregivers to help them maximize learning opportunities at home. Teachers should employ consistent and documented communication strategies that assist in strengthening caregiver academic skill sets. Communication strategies may include face-to-face as well as remote interactions. The likelihood of instructional advantage increases, despite the home’s socioeconomic status, when teachers assist in bolstering caregiver knowledge about factors that contribute to student success in school.

**Questions:** How will the Leadership Team ascertain that teachers engage in frequent school-to-home communications? How have principals defined for teachers the standard or expectations for school-to-home interactions? How do teachers target school-to-home communications with intention to strengthen caregivers’ academic skill sets? How do teachers clearly communicate to caregivers how they can support student school success? How do teachers document school-to-home interactions?

In their first 18 years of life, youngsters are in school only eight percent of their total number of hours. The years outside school, particularly the early years, have profound, pervasive, and lasting effects on their learning. It is difficult to overcome cognitive deprivation and the loss of academic stimulation at home before and during the school years. Children from low-income families particularly benefit from early childhood language enrichment. Poor children tend to have reduced depth and breadth in their vocabulary. In addition to encouraging and supervising homework and reducing television viewing, parents can improve academic conditions in the home. Sizable proportions of young children, especially those in poverty, are behind in language and other skills before they begin school. These children often end up in bilingual and special education programs for the “developmentally challenged” in which they are segregated from other children, and they make poor progress. The origins of their achievement problems can partially be attributed to ineffective programs; however, there are specific parental behaviors observed even before the child begins school that substantially affect a child’s reading and other language skills in later school-age years.

Children first develop vocabulary and comprehension skills by listening, particularly to their parents before they begin school. As they gain experience with written language between the first and seventh grades, their reading ability gradually rises to the level of their listening ability. Highly skilled listeners in kindergarten make faster reading progress in the later grades, which leads to a growing ability gap between initially skilled and unskilled readers.

This growing gap in reading skill levels reflects inequalities in socioeconomic status and child-rearing practices. These differences stem from early childhood experience, especially with respect to parent behaviors that motivate children. Studies show that middle-class parents are more likely to hold high expectations for their children’s achievement and to be more often engaged with them in promoting it. Home observations and interviews with parents reveal further differences associated with higher achievement in reading correlated with parental socioeconomic status, such as

the parent responsiveness and involvement with the child, kinds of discipline employed, household organization, and appropriate play materials being provided. Parent behaviors such as these cause huge and growing gaps in preparation for school and learning to read between children in poverty and those in middle-class homes. One study reported findings from recordings of preschool children's vocabulary growth during free play. Though vocabulary differences were tiny at 12 to 14 months of age, by age 3, sharp differences emerged, correlated with parents' socioeconomic status. Welfare children had vocabularies of about 500 words, middle/lower SES children about 700, and higher SES children had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, more than twice that of welfare children.

Parents of higher socioeconomic status spent more minutes per hour interacting with their children and spoke to them more frequently. On average, higher SES parents spoke about 2,000 words per hour to their children; welfare parents, only about 500. By age 4, "an average child in a professional family would have accumulated experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family would have accumulated experience with 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family with 13 million words" (Hart & Risley, p. 198). Parents of higher socioeconomic status, moreover, used "more different words, more multi-clause sentences, more past and future verb tenses, more declaratives, and more questions of all kinds. The professional parents also gave their children more affirmative feedback and responded to them more often each hour they were together" (Hart & Risley, 1995, pp. 123–124). By age 4, children of professionally employed parents are encouraged with positive feedback 750,000 times, about 6 times as often as children of welfare parents. The welfare parents, on the other hand, had discouraged their children with negative feedback about 275,000 times, about 2.2 times the amount employed by higher income parents. Such parenting behaviors predicted about 60 percent of the variation in vocabulary growth and use by 3-year-olds.

Entwisle and Alexander (1993) concluded that differences in exposure to vocabulary and elaborate use of language compound at ages 5 and 6, when children from low-income families enter school. Not only do children from lower income families lack vocabulary and other skills, but they must accommodate to educational insti-

tutions with "middle-class" norms and values. In their words:

Many minority and disadvantaged children cross the first-grade threshold lacking competencies and habits of conduct that are required by the school...The conventions of the school, with its achievement orientation, its expectation that children will stay on task and work independently without close monitoring, its tight schedule of moving from lesson to lesson, its use of "network" English, its insistence on punctuality, and its evaluation of children in terms of what they can do instead of who they are, all can be daunting. (p. 405)

Lower SES children are more often identified by their kindergarten teachers as being at-risk for serious academic or adjustment problems; they are absent more in the first grade; and they receive lower teacher ratings on behaviors related to school adjustment such as interest/participation and attention span/restlessness (the latter two strongly predict later academic progress; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993, p. 407).

Students who are behind at the beginning of schooling or slow to start usually learn at a slower rate; those who start ahead gain at a faster rate, which results in what has been called cumulative advantage or the "Matthew effect" of the academically rich getting richer (Walberg & Tsai, 1984), after the passage in chapter 25 of Matthew in the Bible. These effects are pervasive in school learning, including the development of reading comprehension and verbal literacy. Ironically, although improved instructional programs may benefit all students, they may confer greater advantages on those who are initially advantaged. For this reason, the first six years of life and the "curriculum of the home" are decisive influences on academic learning.

The "curriculum of the home" can be much more predictive of academic learning than the family's socioeconomic status (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Redding, 2000, 2006). A productive and stimulating home environment includes (1) informed parent-child conversations about school and everyday events; (2) encouragement and discussion of leisure reading; (3) monitoring, discussion, and guidance of television viewing and peer activities; (4) deferral of immediate gratification to accomplish long term goals; (5) expressions of affection and interest

in the child's academic and other progress as a person; and perhaps, among such efforts, (6) laughter and spontaneity.

Case studies of poor inner-city Chicago families, for example, showed the children who succeeded in school had parents who emphasized and supported their children's academic efforts, encouraged them to read, and interceded on their behalf at school. Many statistical studies show that indexes of such parent behaviors predict children's academic achievement much better than socioeconomic status and poverty. Such cooperative efforts by parents and educators to modify alterable academically stimulating conditions in the home have had beneficial effects on learning for both older and younger students.

Therefore, educators can help parents, including those in poor families, to help their children, at home and in their communities. Several works referenced in the introduction to this module describe educator-induced techniques that help parents to academically stimulate their children. These have been offered by educators in summers and before, during, and after regular school hours during the academic year. Thus, teachers can help parents to learn and practice the various aspects of the curriculum of the home discussed above.

**Source:** Herb Walberg (2007), *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*.

#### **Evidence Review:**

Research has long established the strong influence of a student's home environment on that student's success in school. Less clear has been what schools can do to engage parents in their children's learning. We now have significant, new research that shows that schools can improve their students' learning by engaging parents in ways that directly relate to their children's academic progress, maintaining a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, & Rubenstein, 1999; Redding, 2000). Homework is a primary point of interface between the school and the home, and parents are best able to support the school's purposes for homework when they understand what is expected of students and their role in monitoring their children's homework. Consistency from teacher to teacher and

across grade levels and subjects contributes to teachers', parents', and students' understanding of the school's purposes for homework and also reinforces students' formation of independent study habits.

**Source:** Sam Redding (2006), *The Mega System. Deciding. Learning. Connecting. A Handbook for Continuous Improvement Within a Community of the School*.

Graham-Clay (2005) states, "Teachers strive to establish partnerships with parents to support student learning. Strong communication is fundamental to this partnership and to building a sense of community between home and school. In these changing times, teachers must continue to develop and expand their skills in order to maximize effective communication with parents" (p. 117). Epstein (1995) describes communicating with parents as one of the six major types of parent involvement practices critical to establishing strong working relationships between teachers and parents, and Schussler (2003) holds that the teacher-parent relationship is considered vital to the development of schools as learning communities. Williams and Cartledge (1997) state, "Written communication is probably the most efficient and effective way we can provide valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home" (p.30), though Graham-Clay (2005) cautions that written communication is a permanent product requiring careful consideration regarding format and content, with the goal being to organize concise, accurate information so parent will read and comprehend it.

Forms of one-way communication include newsletters (used to share information with a parent community), school-to-home notebooks (many teachers using communication books to share information with parents, particularly for children with special learning needs), and report cards (the traditional mode of conveying permanent, written evaluative information regarding student progress). Giannetti and Sagarese (1998) suggest that teachers can prevent confrontations with parents by making sure that a report card is not the first communication when concerns exist; rather, frequent progress reports, phone calls, or email messages should support and improve student performance prior to the traditional report card. Forms of two-way communications include phone calls home (for which time and extensive notes should be kept in the student's file) and parent-teacher conferences (which should have a clear purpose, and should include discussion of positive aspects of the

child's performance). In recent years, teachers have experimented with new technologies, to communicate with parents in innovative and time-efficient ways. Examples include voice mail, video conferencing (such as Skype), videotaping, and a school website.

In a section on using verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate affection for students, Magaña and Marzano (2014) encourage teachers to “send encouraging emails or texts to students and families in which you provide positive comments about students. Use emoticons, images, or statements that reflect your affection for students, including your genuine belief that all students can achieve their personal and academic goals. For example, use your smartphone to photograph a student engaged in positive classroom behavior. Send the image to the student's parents via text or email, and include a positive caption that shows your appreciation” (p. 135).

In their discussion of applying consequences for lack of adherence to rules and procedures, Magaña and Marzano (2014) discuss three strategies: time-out, interdependent group contingency, and home contingency. As to home contingency, they say, “In this strategy, the teacher maintains regular communication with the families of individual students regarding their academic, personal, and behavioral success in school. Home-teacher communication takes many forms, including phone conversations, in-person conferences, and written communication. If students perceive a unity between adults at home and adults at school, all parties benefit: the student senses an expansion in his or her support network, the parent feels a sense of ownership regarding the child's education, and the teacher has an ally to provide support and implement consequences for students outside of school. Behavior management websites can enhance home contingency in the classroom. ClassDojo, for example, allows you to set up a group for each of your classes. Students create accounts within the online community and generate digital avatars that represent their interests and backgrounds. Generate individual student behavior reports to send to parents while students set behavioral goals and track their progress. Digital communication tools can also make home contingency easier on teachers and parents. Communicate via text or emails to inform parents of student contracts and behavior updates throughout the year” (p. 127). They also mention “online videoconferencing tools such as Skype for parents who are unable to visit the school for a conference” (p. 181).

## References and Resources

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