Core Function → **Family Engagement in a School Community**

Effective Practice → **Provide two-way, school-home communication linked to learning**

Indicator: The "ongoing conversation" between school personnel and parents is candid, supportive, and flows in both directions. (5181)

"Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing" (Hiatt-Michael, p. 26). Positive communication sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect, including home–school relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). "Every interaction between family members and school staff, therefore, is an opportunity to develop or erode trust" (Sheldon & Sanders, 2009, p. 34). Jeynes (2010) meta-analyses predict that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate effectively and frequently will be successful. Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Redding, 2006).

> Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades. Communication is a key in Epstein's six categories in developing stronger home–school relationships. Teachers can expand on this by phoning all their students' families. Should a high school teacher have over 150 students, this may seem daunting. However, it can be done by scheduling phone calls within the preparatory period and staying on the phone just long enough to introduce yourself and make one positive comment about the student, and both the parent and the student will become allies. As a high school teacher, I felt I would never be able to call all my parents. I soon realized that if I scheduled my phone calls during my prep period, I was able to contact all 160 of my student's families. Often I left messages on answering machines, and at times parents would call me back to ask questions, or to thank me for introducing myself. I found that by making positive contacts with parents, I was better able to communicate other issues later on during the school year should the need arise. (Ramirez, 2002, p. 56)

One study found that student performance in math and reading improved at a 40–50% high rate when teachers reached out to parents in these three ways:

- Met face-to-face with each family at the beginning of the school year
- Sent families materials each week on ways to help their children at home
- Telephoned routinely with news on how the children were doing, not just when they were having problems or acting up (Westat & Policy Studies Assoc., 2002, cited in Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007)

Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Parents (and their children) will benefit from receiving "practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors" (CII, 2011, p. 185). Families also need "honest and timely information about budgets, policies, and student achievement. Use test data to identify problem areas that need

improvement" (Henderson et al., 2007, pp. 190–191). Further, the school should provide "culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet with one another to encourage the sharing of norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes" and should provide "teachers and staff with professional development and consistent policies to build their capacity to work with all families and to reinforce the school's clear expectations of parents. This includes promoting a strengths-based (rather than deficit-based) view of families" (CII, 2011, pp. 185–186).

Symeou et al. (2012) reported on a professional development course that involved training teachers to use active listening and other communication skills (typically used by counselors) and provided opportunities for practice and reflection, which resulted in teachers reporting increased confidence and better communication with the parents of their students. Teacher training is even more essential when the teacher and the students' families have different home cultures. The Bridging Cultures Project used in-service training and action research to help a cadre of teachers learn about collectivistic cultures vs. individualistic cultures (Trumbull et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Though the project aimed to promote more effective instruction, the teachers found that it also greatly facilitated improved communication and partnerships with their students' families. Kugler (2012) notes that something as basic as eye contact can easily be misinterpreted by those from different cultures—school personnel born and raised in the U.S. expect to have eye contact during conversation as a basic sign of attention and respect from the listener. However, for many people from other cultures, the opposite is true—looking away or down shows respect and deference to the speaker. Similarly, wording can be easily misinterpreted: offering a workshop or tip sheet on "parenting" may insult families ("They think we're not doing a good job! I don't want someone telling my how to raise my kids;" Henderson et al., 2007, p. 83). Instead, offer suggestions for maximizing learning outside of school, and invite the families to suggest specific topics of interest.

Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers to school–home communication, such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S.

educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is "the philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do" (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families' strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & González, 2004). "When school staff have a better understanding of their students' home cultures, families' parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14).

Interactive homework, especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication, can be especially effective in bridging home and school with powerful, positive outcomes for students. In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families increased students' engagement. Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, an interactive homework tool developed by Epstein, Van Voorhis, and colleagues); Bennett-Conroy (2012) also used TIPS and teacher phone calls as the basis for a quasi-experimental comparison. In all cases, students' homework completion and parental involvement increased and grades improved.

Schools should use every opportunity for parents, teachers, and students to talk about their mutual roles in children's learning. The Compact, learning standards, and homework policy are good tools for discussion. The open house agenda and parent–teacher–student conference procedures ensure that parents, teachers and students have opportunities for focused conversation….This conversation begins when parents first register their child for pre-school or kindergarten and continues throughout the child's career at the school.…Most important of all is the conversation between the teacher, the parents, and the student. This conversation is an opportunity to consistently reinforce the school's goals for students, and its expectations of students, parents, and teachers. Frank

conversation, encouragement, and practical suggestions help engage parents from the early grades on up and also establish the relationship between parents and teachers. (ADI, 2011)

Examples:

Class meetings allow time for teachers and parents to learn from each other. They can be special events or part of open houses and back-to-school nights. Instead of discussing rules of behavior or filling out emergency forms, talk about your approach to teaching and ask families to brainstorm ways they can support their kids. Encourage discussions. Nuts-and-bolts information, such as class schedules and school supply lists, can be covered in handouts. Use the time to build relationships.

Class meetings that follow can cover specific subjects and raise expectations. Consider devoting one meeting each to showing how you teach reading, writing, and math. Explain an assignment and give parents their students' work. What standard did the assignment address? Show them the scoring guide you used and ask them to assess the work using the guide. Welcome hard questions: "What does this standard mean? How does this assignment reflect that standard? How do grades relate to standards?" Then talk about how parents can use scoring guides to discuss student work at home.

Around midyear, ask parents what you think is going well in terms of their children's learning. Ask if their children are having any problems or other concerns. Compare this to your experience in the classroom. Finally, ask parents what you could do to help them work with their children. (Henderson et al., 2007, pp. 87–89)

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