

REL PACIFIC ASK-A-REL RESPONSE

Leading Practices and Strategies for Positive Family-School Communications June 2012

INQUIRY

A Hawaii-based complex-level forum focusing on student achievement and school improvement requested the following information on leading practices and strategies for positive family-school communications:

- Current practices, strategies, and protocols for front-office personnel to use for positive interactions with families.
- Current practices and strategies for positive teacher-family interactions.
- Current strategies for school personnel to use to effectively handle complaints from families.
- Strategies for effective two-way communication between school personnel and families who are homeless and/or families of children with high absenteeism and tardiness.

The organization requested material on these topics for their review in order to create working protocols for use in their schools with the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year.

WEB-BASED SEARCH

As a first step in providing the requested information, REL Pacific at McREL conducted a web-based search for informational resources. Search terms and selection criteria for the resources are included at the close of the document. Publications, reports, guides, and reviews relevant to each topic are provided. This information response organizes selected resources into the following sections:

- **Section one:** Practices and strategies for front-office personnel to use for positive interactions with families.
- **Section two:** Practices and strategies for positive teacher-family interactions.
- **Section three:** Practices and strategies for school personnel to use to effectively handle complaints from families.
- **Section four:** Practices and strategies for effective two-way communication between school personnel and families who are homeless and/or families of children with high absenteeism and tardiness.

Section one: Practices and strategies for front-office personnel to use for positive interactions with families

This section includes publications, reports, guides, and reviews found through web-based searches. Resources in this section have a focus on practices and/or strategies that have been implemented to support positive interactions between front-office personnel and families.

Delisio, E.R. (2005). Schools offering service with a smile. [Electronic Version] *EducationWorld: The Educator's Best Friend*. Retrieved on June 5, 2013, from

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin430.shtml

Excerpt: Greetings, smiles, and eye contact may be standard customer-service training in the retail industry, but now it is moving into schools as well. Some districts are training all staff members, including administrators and bus drivers, to be more customer-friendly. Included: Tips for making your school customer-friendly.

EducationWorld: The Educator's Best Friend. (n.d.). *Does your school's atmosphere shout "welcome"?*

Retrieved on June 5, 2013, from

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin424.shtml

Excerpt: Does your school's atmosphere shout "Welcome!" to parents, students, and staff? Ed World's "Principal Files" team shares ways in which they have created welcoming atmospheres in their schools. Most of their ideas are quite easy to duplicate.

Gagnon, E.D. (2009). A mystery shopper in the public school market. *The School Administrator*, 66(1).

REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.

Excerpt: To gain further insight into the way its customers are treated, some school leaders are moving toward mystery shopping to provide answers. Mystery shopping has been used for years in the private sector. It employs teams of shoppers posing as customers to evaluate a business anonymously. In recent years, it has been used in the public sector by government agencies worldwide to raise service effectiveness.

Online customer satisfaction surveys, parent/teacher exit interviews and feedback cards in the front office and on desktops can be used to create ongoing customer service measures. The results can identify training needs and establish benchmarks for future improvements.

The information that school systems gain by identifying customer service issues is the first step toward changing a culture, overcoming negative perceptions and improving customer service.

Section two: Practices and strategies for positive teacher-family interactions

This section includes publications, reports, guides, and reviews found through web-based searches. Articles in this section have a focus on current practices and strategies for positive interactions between families, teachers, and schools.

Carter, Susanne. (2003). *Educating our children together: A sourcebook for effective family-school-community partnerships*.

Retrieved from Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education from

http://www.directionservice.org/CADRE/pdf/educating_our_children.pdf

Excerpt: The sourcebook includes guiding principles for family-school-community involvement, tips for getting started, a self-assessment tool to determine current practices, strategies, and program descriptions that have been organized according to the following interrelated eight "cluster strategies": 1. Creating a

REL Pacific Ask-a-REL Response: Leading Practices and Strategies for Positive Family-School Communications

family-friendly school environment; 2. Building a support infrastructure; 3. Encouraging family involvement; 4. Developing family-friendly communication; 5. Supporting family involvement on the home front; 6. Supporting educational opportunities for families; 7. Creating family-school-community partnerships; and 8. Preparing educators to work with families.

Epstein, J.L. (2007). Connections count: Improving family and community involvement in secondary schools. *Principal Leadership*, 8(2), 16-22. Retrieved from <http://www.nassp.org>

PDF link: <http://printest64.nassp.org/Portals/0/Content/56190.pdf>

Excerpt: Educators at all school levels know that successful students--at all ability levels--have families who stay informed and involved in their children's education. Yet many middle level and high school teachers report that the only time they contact families is when students are in trouble. This disconnect between knowledge and behavior can be corrected with new approaches that make it possible for every school to organize an excellent partnership program. Parents' wishes for more useful information and teachers' hopes for more successful students require effective partnership programs that are developed the same way that excellent academic programs are planned, evaluated, and improved over time. Research and field work with hundreds of elementary, middle level, and high schools across the country reveal four key components of effective and sustainable programs of family and community involvement: (1) Action teams for partnerships; (2) The six types of involvement framework--parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community; (3) Action plans that are linked to goals for student success; and (4) Evaluation and ongoing improvement. In the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University, more than 150 school districts and 1,000 schools--including more than 350 schools with middle level and high school grades--are implementing the four key components. Middle level and high schools in the network are using the six types of involvement to focus on goals for student success. The framework helps schools identify ways that families and community partners can be involved without always having to come to meetings at the school building. With these guidelines, schools can create programs that enable all parents to remain engaged with their teens and their schools.

Graham-Clay, S. (2005). Communicating with parents: Strategies for teachers. [Electronic Version] *The School Community Journal*, 15(1), 117-130. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/Default.aspx>

PDF link: <http://www.adi.org/journal/ss05/Graham-Clay.pdf>

Abstract: 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. This article presents a range of communication opportunities available to teachers, including the emerging use of technology. Some of these practical suggestions may seem very basic to those already actively promoting parental involvement, but unfortunately, many teachers have not been trained in nor are they practicing proactive communication with parents. Barriers to effective communication are considered in conjunction with potential solutions.

Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Annual synthesis, 2002*. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED474521.pdf>

Abstract: Noting that the evidence of families influence on their children's school achievement is consistent, positive, and convincing, this report examines research on parent and community involvement and its impact on student achievement. Following an introduction, the first section of the report describes the methods used for selecting the studies; describes what the studies cover; provides a table showing the studies by topic area, by age and grade level, and by design type; and discusses limitations of the studies. The second section of the report synthesizes the studies' findings. This section also provides some pertinent definitions; lists recommendations to help educators put findings to practical use; and presents research findings related to three areas: (1) impact of parent and community involvement on student achievement; (2) effective strategies to connect schools, families, and community; and (3) parent and community organizing efforts to improve schools. The third section provides summaries of the 51 studies, conducted between 1993 and 2002, described in this report. The report finds that there is strong and steadily growing evidence that families can improve their children's academic performance in school and have a major impact on attendance and behavior. Children at risk of failure or poor performance can profit from the extra support that engaged families and communities provide. All students, but especially those in middle and high school, would benefit if schools supported parents in helping children at home and in guiding their educational career. The report's appendix provides a short history of the research in this field over the past 30 years.

Lewis, L.L., Kim, Y.A., Bey, J.A. (2011). Teaching practices and strategies to involve inner-city parents at home and in the school. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(1), 221-234.

REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.

Abstract: Few studies have observed what teachers actually do in the classroom to encourage parental involvement in their children's education. Over the school year, the various teaching practices and strategies of two teachers in an inner-city elementary school that has had public recognition in its efforts to involve parents were gathered through interviews and observations. The five main teaching practices and strategies to engage parents are practicing parent outreach, establishing relationships with the parents, creating a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and making the community-school connection. This study offers insights into teachers' classroom practices that are connected to various specific strategies to involve parents.

McNaughton, D. & Vostal, B.R. (2010). Using active listening to improve collaboration with parents: The LAFF Don't CRY Strategy. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 45(4), 251-256.

REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.

Excerpt: The use of active listening skills may be an important first step to establishing effective two-way communication and successful collaboration. Active listening allows the listener to simultaneously gather information while conveying his or her interest in the other party (Friend & Cook, 2007). The process typically includes making empathetic comments, asking appropriate questions, and paraphrasing the speaker's comments as a means of demonstrating attention and confirming understanding (Cramer, 1998; Gordon, 2003). Although the value of the individual components is well recognized, it can be challenging to remember and make coordinated use of these skills in stressful situations. To support teachers' effective use of active listening skills when working with parents, the following specific steps may be beneficial.

One strategy for making effective, coordinated use of active listening skills is the LAFF don't CRY strategy (McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2008). This strategy provides a flexible framework through which teachers can demonstrate the listening behaviors that clearly communicate respect and empathy.

L: Listen, empathize and communicate respect, A: Ask questions and ask permission to take notes, F: Focus on the issues, F: Find a first step, Don't C: Criticize people who aren't present, R: React hastily and promise something you can't deliver, Y: Yakety-yak-yak. The LAFF Don't CRY mnemonic reminds teachers to use positive active listening steps.

Public Education Network and National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education. (2004, April 23). NCLB Action Briefs: Parental involvement. Retrieved from http://www.ncpie.org/nclbaction/parent_involvement.html

Excerpt: While parents are mentioned over 300 times in various parts of the No Child Left Behind act, this Action Brief will concentrate on Section 1118, Title I of the Act. It is the only section in the Act devoted solely to parental involvement, and if implemented effectively, provides the core elements that incorporate many of the other parental involvement provisions of NCLB. As you become familiar with NCLB through the various other PEN/NCPIE Action Briefs, throughout. These are important for you to know as well, but Section 1118 provisions are the core around which all of the other parental involvement provisions revolved.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of innovation and Improvement. (2007). *Engaging parents In education: Lessons from five parental information and resource centers*. Washington, D.C.
<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/parents/parentinvolve/engagingparents.pdf>

Excerpt: Children benefit academically when parents and educators work together. For this reason, parents' involvement in their children's education is a priority of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. But a strong connection between parents and educators does not come about automatically. Both parties may need to learn new roles and skills and develop the confidence to use them, especially as parents move beyond traditional activities, like helping children with homework, and toward shared responsibility for school improvement. Intermediary organizations, like federally funded Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs), can help. Drawing on lessons learned from five PIRCs across the country that have been meeting

REL Pacific Ask-a-REL Response: Leading Practices and Strategies for Positive Family-School Communications

this challenge, this guide shares promising strategies for increasing effective parent involvement.

Section three: Practices and strategies for school personnel to use to effectively handle complaints from families

This section includes research, guides, and reported strategies available for effectively handling complaints that occur at the school level.

Fischer, M.W. (2005). Handling parent complaints – The good, the bad, and the ugly. [Electronic Version] *EducationWorld: The Educator's Best Friend*. Retrieved June 5, 2013, from http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice082.shtml

Excerpt: Seasoned teachers will recognize all three types of parents – the good, the bad, and the ugly – described by educator Max Fischer in this week's Voice of Experience essay. Less seasoned teachers will learn from Max's experiences and from his tips for handling all types of parent complaints.

Robinson, V.M.J. & Le Fevre, D.M. (2010). Principals' capability in challenging conversations in the case of parental complaints. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(3), 227-255.

REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.

Abstract: Purpose-Positively engaging parents who have concerns about their children's schooling is a key part of effective educational leadership. The purpose of this paper is to use empirical research on complaint interactions and interpersonal effectiveness to develop and trial an assessment of principals' interpersonal effectiveness in challenging conversations with parents. The paper presents descriptive data about principals' level of skill in one such type of conversation. **Design/methodology/approach-**A complaint scenario was written and an actor trained to play the role of the parent during a videotaped conversation with each of 30 newly appointed principals. The tapes were transcribed and assessed on six dimensions of interpersonal effectiveness. A code book was written which included definitions of each dimension, a five-step progression on each dimension, coding rules and examples. The actor also provided ratings of effectiveness of each principal. **Findings-**The findings indicated that the principals were, on average, more skilled in advocating their own position than in deeply inquiring into and checking their understanding of the views of the parent. Many had difficulty respectfully challenging the parent's assumptions about the situation and reaching a shared understanding of what to do next. **Originality/value-**The paper provides rarely obtained behavioural data about the interpersonal skills of school leaders and provides a strongly grounded theoretical framework for analyzing these skills. Detailed suggestions are made about how further research can contribute to both the evaluation and development of interpersonal skills required to achieve positive outcomes from challenging conversations.

State of Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2009). Addressing

REL Pacific Ask-a-REL Response: Leading Practices and Strategies for Positive Family-School Communications

parents' concerns and complaints effectively: Policy and guides. Retrieved June 5, 2013, from [http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/commrel/contacts/POLICY AND GUIDES/Addressing_parents_concerns.pdf](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/commrel/contacts/POLICY_AND_GUIDES/Addressing_parents_concerns.pdf)

Excerpt: This publication contains: the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (the Department) policy and procedures for addressing parent concerns and complaints (including service for schools to develop their own concerns and complaints procedures) and fourteen guides that provide practical advice for principals, teachers and other educational personnel about issues to consider when implementing the Department's policy and a school's procedures on managing complaints.

Section four: Practices and strategies for effective two-way communication between school personnel and families who are homeless and/or families of children with high absenteeism and tardiness

This section includes research, guides, and reported strategies available for effective communications between families who are homeless and/or families with children with high rates (or incidences) of absenteeism.

Bryan, J. (2005). Fostering educational resilience and achievement in urban schools through school-family-community partnerships. *Professional School Counseling*, 8(3), 219-227. Retrieved from <http://graingered.pbworks.com>
PDF link: <http://graingered.pbworks.com/f/Resilience+%26+Family+Partnerships.pdf>

Abstract: In this era of education reform, school counselors are among educators being held accountable for the academic achievement of minority and poor children. School counselors in urban schools serve a disproportionate number of minority and poor children at risk for school failure. Urban school counselors can play critical roles in engaging their school's stakeholders in implementing partnership programs that foster student achievement and resilience. This article discusses team facilitator, collaborator, and advocacy roles and strategies for urban school counselors and specific types of partnership programs they need to promote to foster academic achievement and resilience in minority and poor students.

Miller, P.M. (2011). Homeless families' education networks: An examination of access and mobilization. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47(4), 543-581.

REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.

Abstract: Purpose: This study sought deeper understanding of how sheltered families accessed and mobilized educationally related relationships and resources during periods of homelessness. Such work is posited to be especially relevant considering that there is a growing crisis of family homelessness in the United States and school and community-based leaders need to develop more nuanced understandings of how to meet their needs. **Research Design:** The study was situated in a large urban region in the eastern United States, and data were collected through surveys of 151 sheltered homeless mothers, focus group interviews with 51 homeless mothers, and analysis of countrywide homeless management information

REL Pacific Ask-a-REL Response: Leading Practices and Strategies for Positive Family-School Communications

system. Data analysis was informed by Lin's network theory of social capital, which, among other relational issues, purposefully considers embedded resources, resource accessibility, and resource mobilization.

Findings: The findings revealed several significant obstacles to homeless families' access to and mobilization of network relationships and resources. Amid these challenges, however, the leaders and structures of residential homeless serving agencies appear to play key roles in helping families develop new opportunities. **Conclusions:** It is suggested that shelters develop programs and philosophies of action that are consonant with their service capacities and locations. Furthermore, shelter, school, and community leaders are urged to construct systems of collaborative understanding and practice. Finally, several suggestions for future research are presented.

Osher, T.W. & Huff, B. (2006). Spotlight: Strategies to engage families. Retrieved from <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/resources/spotlight/spotlight200608a.asp>

Excerpt: The evidence is in. The impact of parents and families on student outcomes and school performance is now well documented. Reaping these benefits for children who are at risk or adjudicated as neglected or delinquent and placed outside their home, school, and community is an ongoing challenge. Involving families in the education of these students can be further complicated by institutional restrictions or court orders.

The key to family involvement is establishing communication and building relationships with the student's parents and family members. Some family members are easy to connect with. Some families are harder to reach and engage.

Establishing communication with a student's family may require creativity and persistence on the part of the education program staff. Don't assume the family is not interested just because you don't initially get a response to your first communication efforts. Use more than one strategy to reach out to a family-send a message in the mail, make a phone call, and also try to meet the family in person the next time they visit their child at the facility. Keep trying if there is no response to the first attempt. Seek out further information-from their child perhaps-about the best way to be in touch with a family who is not responding.

Verstappen, P. (n.d.). Engaging hard-to-reach families. Retrieved from <http://www.southbridge.school.nz/downloads/NZPF%20Sitech%20Final%20Report.pdf>

Abstract: This paper reports findings from a study trip to England and the USA in 2011 to investigate how schools and education systems improve the engagement of students from marginalized or hard-to-reach families. The report describes successful strategies observed in a range of primary and secondary schools, most of which serve communities with high numbers of hard-to-reach families. Consideration is given to the reasons why some families and communities are estranged from mainstream education, including socio-economic factors, culture and religion. Special reference is made to the experience of Gypsy/Traveller students in English schools and to ways in which schools are using digital resources, particularly online learning environments, to bridge the gap between school and home.

Examples of good practice are discussed within a model of successful home-school partnerships drawn from the work of Epstein (2001) in the USA, Biddulph et al (2003) in New Zealand, and others. The experiences of English and American educators are compared to New Zealand settings and strategies, and the report seeks to give practical advice to teachers, school leaders, parents and community members who seek to improve the home-school partnership.

Process for Conducting a Search for Informational Resources

Keywords and Search Terms Used in the Search

Family-school involvement, family-school partnerships, parent involvement; family-school interactions; home-school communications; parent-teacher communications; family-school communications; parental complaints; school communications; hard-to-reach families and schools; strategies for parent-teacher communication; school and homeless students; friendly school office staff; effective parent teacher interactions; handling parent complaints

Search of Databases and Websites

Google, Google Scholar, ERIC, Ed.Gov

Criteria for Inclusion

The provided resources were found via web-based searches. The first set of criteria used for finding resources was to include publications in peer-reviewed research journals within the last five years. A limited number of resources met these criteria, thus criteria were then expanded to include reports, papers, guides, and reviews in non-peer reviewed journals and sources within the last 10 years to expand the list of available resources.

Priority was given to (a) research strategies on positive family-school interactions, (b) research strategies on positive family-school communications, and (c) published studies exploring different methodologies for positive family-school communications. In addition, documents selected for inclusion met the following criteria:

- Published since 2003¹ on Google, Google Scholar, or ERIC
- Text was available in English;
- Publications provided a meta-analysis of research or an overview of best practices; and
- Publications were peer-reviewed. Non-peer reviewed publications were included if all other search criteria were met.

Resources included in this document were last accessed in May or June 2013. URLs, descriptions, and content included in this document were current at that time.

¹The resource Henderson & Mapp (2002) is outside of the criteria date. This resource, however, provides relevant and unique information and tools and was therefore included in this response.

Descriptions of the resources were quoted from the publication abstract (Abstract), the publication itself (Excerpt), or the publication's host website (Description, Program Description). An abstract was always used when available. However, if there was no abstract for a resource a relevant excerpt was pulled directly from the source to provide

basic information.

This response is funded under Contract# ED-IES-12-C-0010 by the Regional Education Laboratory Pacific Region, administered by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. The information expressed herein does not necessarily represent the positions or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education is intended or should be inferred.