

# Two-Way Communication for Principals



## LEARNING ABOUT FAMILIES

### School Events

Learning about families and students is the basis on which effective two-way communication is built. School events can take many forms but research demonstrates that families are most likely to participate and stay engaged when the focus is on individual student academics and success.

School events are broadly used to describe both one-on-one and group events, as well as events that do not require parents and families to physically be at the school in order to participate (i.e. a community event or a read-a-thon in which families engage from home). One-on-one events such as home visits, family conferences, and surveys provide opportunities to learn about individual families and students and can be an important part of the formative assessment process.

Group events such as parent cafes, focus groups, community meetings, etc. can be facilitated to collect important information from families. In addition, they serve two other important purposes:

1. These formats provide an opportunity to share important information with families and receive their immediate feedback and questions. This ensures that the maximum number of families is receiving the targeted information and provides the school leader insight into questions and concerns.
2. Group meetings also provide opportunities for families to interact with each other, another powerful tool to build capacity and sustainable engagement.

To ensure that you are effective in learning about all families, using a variety of approaches, formats, and locations is important. Consider hosting a few of these out in the community versus the school building.

This resource is designed for principals to reflect on strategies to engage and learn about families in the school community.

**Recommendations**

**Implementation Settings**

- School leadership team meetings
- Principal meetings
- Planned individual time

**Planning Time:** None

**Implementation Time:** 60 minutes

**District leaders** can use this resource to develop policies that provide principals with the resources (human, financial, material) to implement the strategies suggested in the Learning About Families resource.

### Focus Groups

A focus group is a small discussion guided by an experienced leader or facilitator designed to elicit opinions on a designated topic.

Focus groups differ from other types of group events in that they:

- Address a specific, focused topic of discussion;
- Are led by an experienced facilitator who keeps the process moving; and
- Are organized so that the composition of the group and the focus of the discussion are carefully planned to create a non-threatening environment and encourage honest expression.

By virtue of the fact that they are structured, directed and, at the same time, expressive, focus groups can be used effectively to gather significant information in a relatively short time. School leaders can use focus groups to gather input from families and others when introducing a new program or practice, to ask questions and gather feedback that is not easily captured through a survey, and to supplement information that may have been gathered from other sources. As school leaders develop strategies to engage families in the formative assessment process, focus groups can provide insight into the opinions of families and help ensure that policies and practices meet their needs and priorities. Because gatherings are small and designed to solicit candid responses, they provide an opportunity for principals to develop a deeper, more nuanced picture of the families and children they serve.

## Step-by-Step Guide to Family Focus Groups

### 1. **Decide what information to collect and whom to**

**include.** Carefully planning the composition of the group and the discussion topics to be addressed helps ensure a non-threatening experience in which participants feel free to talk and express opinions. The goals of the focus group will determine selection of participants. If the goal is to develop an overall sense of family beliefs and interests or gauge their experiences in being a part of the formative assessment process, the group composition might reflect a representative sample of the school community in general. However, if the goal is to gain more insight and gather input from targeted groups of families, for example, families whose home language is not English, or families who are less well-known to school staff, then decisions regarding composition might be based on a different set of criteria.

### 2. **Reach out to and recruit families to participate in the focus group.**

School leaders can assemble a small group of school staff to help identify families to contact and support the outreach and logistical planning aspects of the meeting. Careful consideration of who reaches out and how must be considered. Receiving an invitation directly from the principal can be a powerful way to engage families. In other cases, identifying another parent or staff member, or even a trusted community leader who has frequent interactions with families, may be most effective. In any case, use a variety of outreach techniques including phone calls, emails, direct face-to-face invitations, etc. The bottom line: personal contact works best. Other suggestions to consider during the recruitment process include:

- Offering incentives that show appreciation and encourage participation (e.g. gift certificates/cards, stipends, passes to events, something to take home, such as a children's book, special recognition, etc.)
- Anticipating and providing resources and supports that might be needed to ensure participation (e.g. child care, transportation, meals or snacks, translation services, etc.)
- Providing adequate background information on the purpose, process, and the target audience, and letting families know that their ideas and thoughts will be collected and used to increase positive experiences for students in the school.

- Emphasizing the benefits of participation - family input will inform how the school will move ahead with family engagement and help ensure their students are receiving the supports and resources they need.

### 3. **Prepare the questions.** It is important to ask the right questions to get the desired information. School leaders can begin generating a list of questions by requesting teachers, staff, and families think about the kind of information that they would find valuable to know in order to effectively engage families in the formative assessment process. In finalizing questions, be sure to use language that is appropriate for the audience and questions that are clear, brief, and free of jargon. Questions should be both general - "What do you think about ...?" and specific - "In which ways can you support your child's progress?" Information that might be most valuable to administrators and teachers include:

- Families' educational and social emotional goals for their children;
- Concerns and questions about their children's learning and development;
- Information families want about their children and the best ways for them to access information;
- How they feel comfortable and successful in supporting learning; and
- General feedback on what they think about being engaged in the assessment process, what their previous experiences have been, how they would like to be engaged, etc.

### 4. **Choose a focus group facilitator.** The success of the focus group depends on the skills and effectiveness of the facilitator. Choosing the right facilitator who can connect with the group is important. The goal of the focus group is to solicit honest and candid feedback from participants. To that end, choosing a facilitator who is from outside the school and is viewed as neutral, or in some cases considered a trusted community resource, is often the best way to ensure full participation. If these options are not possible, a school staff member or school leader may conduct the focus group, or prepare a parent or family member to do so, reminding participants that information shared is anonymous and will be used to improve schoolwide practices. In all cases, focus groups must be conducted in the language(s) spoken most comfortably by the participants. When

possible, a moderator of the same race or ethnicity as the participants can help establish rapport and facilitate an open-dialogue.

5. **Conduct the focus group.** Accurately capturing all that is said is important and ensures that information shared can be used later on to plan approaches to engaging families. Be sure to designate a “recorder” to collect all input in written form. Or, use a recording device with assurances to families that all discussions will be kept anonymous.

**Below is an effective sequence to follow when conducting the focus group:**

1. Thank the groups for agreeing to participate (Set the tone, put people at ease);
2. Review the purpose and the goals of the session;
3. Review the process - how the session will proceed, how each participant can contribute, encourage everyone to participate;
4. Ask the questions that have been developed;
5. Keep the questioning going, summarize, paraphrase, ask for more input, include follow-up questions when necessary, and encourage quiet participants to engage; and
6. When all questions have been asked, solicit final or closing thoughts and comments, share with the group what the next steps will be and what participants can expect to happen next, and thank the participants for their time and assistance.

**After the meeting, review the collected data.** If the session has been recorded, prepare a transcript and summary. Ask a number of people to review the information independently, and then convene the group to discuss, looking for emerging patterns, common themes, new questions or concerns raised, or surprises. Share the findings with the focus group participants, to honor their contribution and set the stage for further engagement with the school.

Information obtained from focus groups can be used to gain a deeper understanding of all families in the school and provide insights that cannot be gathered from written surveys or less targeted group events. School leaders can use information about families’ beliefs and values, as well as their ideas and feelings, to design a more effective approach to engaging families in the formative assessment process and other aspects of school programming and operations.

## Family Surveys

Schoolwide family surveys are an effective tool for school leaders to use to gather information from many families at one time. Surveys can be used to collect information from families about themselves and their children, to gather input and ideas about family-school partnerships, family engagement in the formative assessment process, and other aspects of family-school connections.

### Gathering Information from Families About Themselves and Their Children

Asking families to share information about themselves and their children is an important first step--both in building meaningful relationships with families in the school community and in informing the formative assessment process. Family surveys conducted at or before kindergarten entry can be particularly useful in providing background and baseline information to inform teachers’ understanding of the children entering their classrooms. In subsequent years, schoolwide surveys can be used to expand or update an overall profile of the families and students in the school. This can be a valuable tool for school principals as they plan professional development and instructional support for staff, as well as their own approaches to working with the families and students in the school.

Surveys can help provide a more complete picture of a child and family. Engaging families early in contributing to the school’s understanding of their child also sets the stage for ongoing engagement of families in the school’s overall educational process - including formative assessments.



## Common Elements Included In Family Surveys

Basic contact and family characteristics  
Home language  
Children's previous experience  
Family composition  
Routines and preferences  
Child's personality  
Child's developmental skills  
Child's health  
Parent goals and expectations  
Home-school communication  
Curriculum and assessment  
Relationships with teachers, school administrators, staff overall  
School environment  
Support for cultural and linguistic diversity  
Access to family engagement opportunities and events  
General satisfaction

### Gathering Information from Families About Home-School Partnerships and Two-Way Communication

School-wide family surveys are an effective way to develop baseline information about the strengths and needs of a school's family engagement strategies. School leaders can assess current practices and conditions, identify areas needing improvement, and monitor progress. With a strong rate of return, principals will be able to gather information from different grade levels, as well as make comparisons across demographic, cultural, and linguistic groups of families. Unlike focus groups, which provide a more in-depth look into parents' beliefs and practices, surveys offer the school leader a way to get a general feel for families' perspectives on engagement practices and policies.<sup>i</sup>

### Step-by-Step Guide to Schoolwide Family Surveys

This four-step process can be used by school leaders to plan, distribute, analyze, and act upon schoolwide family surveys. For the purpose of this work, examples are provided of survey questions that gather family feedback about the formative assessment process.

**1. Determine the desired information, how it will be used, and how to communicate the purpose of the information.** Is this an effort to gather information from families about themselves and their children? Or, is it to gather information from families about strategies supporting home-school partnerships? Is the purpose of the surveys to inform a broader school approach to two-way communication with families? Will I need family consent to share results from the surveys?

Prepare the questions. Tips for writing survey questions:

- Ensure questions correspond with and are appropriate for the reading levels of diverse families;
- Translate materials into the home languages of families;
- Use accessible language and avoid jargon;
- Keep surveys short and limit lists of options in multiple-choice questions; and
- Check your items for biased or leading questions.

**2. Distribute the survey.** Schools use a variety of methods including paper and pencil and on line platforms such as Survey Monkey or Constant Contact. Electronic distribution tends to be most efficient for collecting and compiling results. Where there is limited family access to technology, the school can set up a computer station that families in the school can use to complete the survey. Community liaisons could also support family members by working with them to complete the survey. The school could also offer a coffee and dessert hour that families are invited to attend and have coffee and treats while filling out the survey. Interpreters and translated surveys could be available for this.

**3. Analyze data and use it for ongoing planning and implementation.** School leaders can convene a group of school staff and families to review results of the survey to determine next steps, and

to further strengthen school practices, including those related to ongoing assessments of student learning. Results can be used to identify existing strengths, gaps and weaknesses, opportunities for improvement, and policy and practical barriers in order to build a more inclusive approach to family engagement overall, and specifically, with regard to formative assessment. By using an analysis protocol such as the one above, school leaders will be able to assume a schoolwide approach to engaging families.

## Community Visits

School leaders can use community visits to gain a deeper understanding of children and families lived experience. Visits help principals understand children's lives outside school and how they may impact learning, development, and achievement. In addition, getting to know the community is a strategy for identifying resources that may be available to support families and supplement school-based services.

### Why Should Principals Make Community Visits?

The experiences of families and children that are discovered in the course of a community visit can be used to inform more authentic interactions and communication with families. The goal of conducting a community visit is to identify resources in the community that can be used to enrich family engagement and instructional practices.

### How Can Principals Collect Information About the Community?

To gain more insight into the community, school leaders can:

- Interview parents and other long-time community residents;
- Ride along on school bus routes with their students as a way of learning more about the surrounding community;
- Interview students in the school; and
- Conduct an asset-mapping exercise.

## What Is The Best Way To Capture Experiences and Lessons Learned From A Community Visit?

Making notes, taking photographs or videos, and collecting artifacts are three good ways to document a community visit. As a school leader, it is useful to convene others who participated in the visit to debrief, share learning and impressions, and discuss how what was learned can be leveraged to best meet the communication and engagement needs of families in the school.

## Parent / Long-time Resident Interviews

Examples of questions school leaders can ask to develop a deeper understanding of the community:

- Where do community members gather most frequently? What happens at these gathering spots?
- What are the trusted institutions in the community (e.g. library, church)?
- How do students in the community spend their out-of-school time? What activities and resources are available for students?
- What activities and resources are available for families and children to do together?
- What are the daily living activities in which most families engage?
- What public spaces are available to children and families?
- What modes of transportation do most families use (e.g. car, bus, walk, etc.)? How would you rate access and availability of public transportation?
- What support services are available in the community (e.g. health, family services, education, recreation, etc.)?
- Where are most students cared for before they start kindergarten?

## Student Interviews

Students are often good resources for finding out more about their community. Examples of some questions that teachers and/or school leaders can ask students about their community include:

- What can you tell me about your neighborhood?
- Where are the places that you like to go?
- If there is one place you could make closer to your home, what would it be? Why?
- Where do you and your family go together?
- Where do you go and what do you do when school is over each day? On the weekends?

***Asset-mapping Exercise (An exercise that identifies the strengths and talents family and community members have that can be used to support the school.)***

- Surveys asking residents and organizations to identify assets in their community;
- Community walks through a neighborhood of interest to map out and collect information about that neighborhood's resources and dynamics;
- Interviews with community residents and stakeholders; and
- Community-Engaged Mapping (CEM) - A group mapping exercise designed to answer specific research questions and gather feedback from community members (who live, work or attend school in the area).<sup>ii</sup>

***Other Ways Principals Can Use Community Visits to Learn About Families and Children***

- Walk in the neighborhood where your students and families live, meeting and greeting community residents;
- Frequent establishments used by families and children such as grocery stores, restaurants, gas stations, etc.;
- Make a map of the school's catchment area and highlight important institutions and resources in the area;
- Get to know the preschools and other child care facilities in the area and build relationships with providers; and
- Provide professional learning and development for teachers on conducting community visits and invite community resource providers to share information with teachers.

## Home Visits

Home visits have been identified by research as one of the most effective strategies to promote family engagement in schools. Home visitations by teachers let parents and children start to establish relationships that can strengthen experiences during the school year. Also, schools that provide time and resources for teachers to visit students and families in their home and community support teachers in learning more about their students and bridge cultural gaps that might occur between student and teacher. Most teachers report their home visits have a lasting effect on the child, families, and family-teacher communication.

Home visits by teachers aren't a new idea. Based on the significant research supporting the impact of home visits, the federal Head Start program standards have mandated them for many years. Head Start teachers are required to make at least two home visits for each student during each school year, in addition to regular parent-teacher conferences at school. Many U.S. kindergartens, and a growing number of elementary schools also require home visits by teachers before school starts.

Teachers' visits to students' homes can take many forms. In some schools, teachers prefer to travel in pairs to their visits, which allows a level of security or ease of communication through a translator. Other teachers visit one-on-one with the family. Some interact with the child and the other family members. Many teachers may bring along learning activities for the student that also involve a family member's participation. Normally, visits can last anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the design of home visiting within the school/district.



## Distinguishing features of this model that can inform principal's planning

- Teachers visit all students' homes irrespective of student achievement level to ensure that the visits are not associated with problems or disciplinary action;
- Voluntary participation by parents and teachers;
- Compensation for teacher time;
- Multiple visits per year over the course of the students' entire school career elementary through grade12<sup>iii</sup>; and
- Teacher professional development and allocated time to debrief.

## RESOURCES

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Gillanders, C., & Gutmann, L. (2013). Exploring families' beliefs and practices. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, FirstSchool.

<sup>ii</sup> Community Places. (2014). Community planning toolkit. Retrieved from <http://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/connected-educators-connected-families>



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