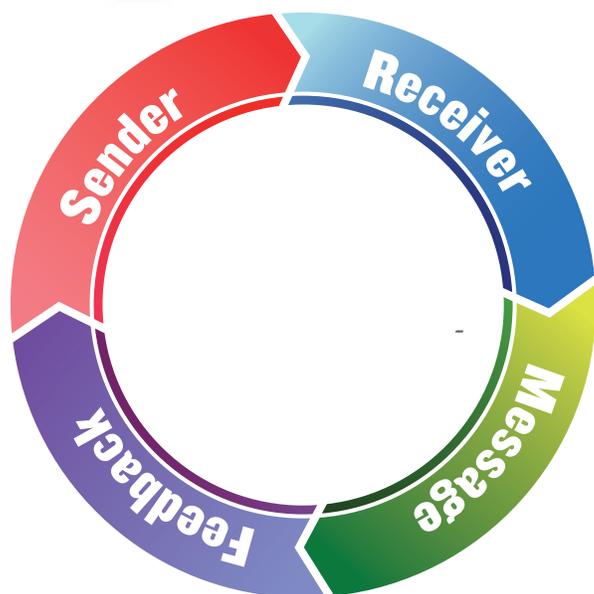


Two-Way Communication for Principals



CREATING A CULTURE OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION



This resource is designed for principals to review and reflect on implementing two-way communication with families. The resource includes research-based information, a discussion template, and a self-assessment tool for principals to utilize alone or with colleagues.

Recommendations

- Implementation Settings**
- School leadership team meetings
 - School community meetings
 - Principal meetings
 - Planned individual time

Planning Time: None

Implementation Time: 60 minutes

District leaders can use this resource to further assist principals in communicating with families about the formative assessment process.

Two-way communication provides the foundation on which solid family-school partnerships are created. When families and staff communicate effectively, positive relationships are formed and students make progress. The more families and school staff share relevant information about a student, the better equipped both are to support learning. Research supports the notion that when effective two-way communication strategies are in place, families are more likely to reach out to school staff.ⁱ

Creating effective two-way communication between families and schools is highly relevant to engaging families in the formative assessment process. Focusing on formative assessment can link family engagement efforts to specific educational goals.ⁱⁱ School leaders can model effective ways to engage families in two-way communication and support teachers and other staff in using appropriate techniques when engaging families in discussing assessment data. School leaders can also promote policies that systematize communications and allow teachers time to gather information from families to inform formative assessment.

THREE IMPORTANT CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES^{vii}

1. Families have access to their child's individual information and provide teachers with information about their child's development.
2. Information shared between families and teachers is understandable and meaningful.
3. Information is used and leveraged into positive action that teachers, families, and school leadership can take.

Discussion Template

For Use Within Your School Community To Help School Staff Reflect on Current Practices With Two-Way Communication

Have school staff respond to the following questions:

What are our core beliefs about families that should inform how we engage them in two-way communication?

What are the messages that we send to families that encourage two-way communication?

What are the messages we may be sending to families that discourage two-way communication?

What gets in the way of two-way communication for families and educators?

- From the educator perspective?
- From the family perspective?

What are we doing now to encourage two-way communication?

What will it take to provide more effective two-way communication? How will we know it's effective?

After the discussion, you can use the results and reflections as a barometer for what the most pressing needs and next steps might be for your families and school community.

Self-Assessment: Two-Way Communication for Family Engagementⁱⁱⁱ

This is a self-assessment that can be used within your school community to “take the pulse” on two-way communication, and to gather examples of the concrete experiences of various stakeholder groups in this area. You can distribute this tool to staff and compile and share the results at a school-wide meeting to elicit reflection. Alternatively, you could have leadership, families, and school staff participate in filling out the assessment, and then compare the results and analyze responses for any differences or inconsistencies.

PROGRAM/SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Sets norms and expectations for how to communicate with families that are culturally and linguistically sensitive				
Is available to hear family concerns, listen to family feedback, and individualize communication with each family				
Is familiar with cultural and linguistic characteristics of families enrolled in the school and knowledgeable about needs of each family				
Monitors and supports positive two-way communication between families and staff				
Encourages and supports the use of multiple communication methods to meet the needs of all families				
Maintains regular documentation of communications between school staff and families				

PROGRAM STAFF (TEACHERS, COORDINATORS, COACHES, SPECIALISTS, ETC)

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Uses language that conveys trust and respect				
Plans and offers regular opportunities for meaningful connections				
Focuses communication on strengths rather than challenges				

FAMILIES IN THE SCHOOL/PROGRAM

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
See themselves as partners with teachers and schools				
Are aware of and uses multiple options for two-way communication (communication opportunities come in a variety of forms)				
Contribute to or offers information about their child's progress and any challenges				
Feel welcome in the school and classroom				

OVERALL LANGUAGE AND MESSAGING

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Used to convey trust and respect				
Culturally and linguistically adapted to reach and effectively engage each family				
Connected to student learning and well-being				
Oriented toward all family members (including fathers, mothers, grandparents, and other caregivers)				
Focused on establishing shared goals and aspirations				
Focused on strengths				
Emphasizes solutions and oriented toward supporting learning at home and at school				
Communicates trust and respect while avoiding judgment				
Adjusted to linguistic preferences				

Guide for Using Strengths-based Language for Two-Way Communication with Families

Supporting family strength is a fundamental aspect of creating strong partnerships with schools that can result in increased family capacity to support children's learning. By taking a strengths-based approach to connecting with families, school leaders can be instrumental in encouraging families to become active contributors to the educational process. A strengths-based approach respects each child and family's diversity, home language, cultural and ethnic background, and the family's own perceptions of the child's development. Strengths-based practices see families as powerful partners as opposed to being "at-risk." A strengths-based paradigm in engaging families in two-way communication begins with these guiding principles:

- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children;
- Families are partners and play an important role in their children's learning and development;
- Families have expertise and valuable information about their children and family; and
- Families make contributions that are meaningful, authentic, and valuable.

Two-way communication that builds on strengths exposes families to important knowledge so they can be more informed, prepared, and empowered to improve their child's long-term learning success. The key is to move away from the "deficit model" frequently used in the past and which assumes that families are not equal partners in their child's education and do not care about their success. Instead, the use of a strengths-based model recognizes that families care about their children, are able to support their learning, and may benefit from targeted support that can put desire into action.^{iv}

Using Strengths-based Language with Families: Self-Assessment and Tips^v

Principals and school leaders can use this self-assessment, reflection sheet and associated tips to explore effective strengths-based communication and build understanding and practice within the school community.

A Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach to engaging families in the formative assessment process can be especially useful as teachers review assessment findings and solicit input from families as part of an ongoing goal-setting process for increasing children's learning. School leaders can help staff adopt a strengths-based approach to communicating with families by encouraging them to:

First

Remember and share with families what research and experience tells us about a child's learning and development – it is dynamic, complex, and holistic and children demonstrate learning in different ways.

Next

Start with what is present, not absent – and talk about what works for the child.

Key Characteristics of Effective Strengths-Based Communication With Families: How Do We Measure Up?

Is our communication with families:

- Open and honest – important information is being exchanged?
- Positive and focused on understanding family strengths?
- Accepting and non-judgmental?
- Respectful of families' language, culture, beliefs, learning priorities, and cognitive experiences offered at home?
- Focused on identifying positive attributes and unique family perspectives?
- Free of jargon and field-specific terminology?
- Able to incorporate interpreters and translated materials when needed?

Do we:

- Ask families what they believe their strengths are?
- Use positive language and the right words to empower families to engage?
- Ask families to tell their stories and listen to what they say?
- Help families develop a picture of the future and develop realistic and actionable goals?
- Point out progress and change as it occurs over time?
- Identify achievable action steps and strategies and work with families to generate ideas?

Food for Thought: Four Ways to Ensure Families Have the Information and Capacity They Need to Ensure Their Children Are Successful

1. Reinforce and celebrate families' awareness of the important role they play in their children's lives and encourage them to share that as part of a two-way communication strategy.
2. Offer families the opportunities to build skills and help them feel comfortable and confident being an active partner in setting goals and making decisions about their child's ongoing learning experiences.
3. Share information that is realistic and presented through a positive lens – that is, identify areas of potential growth, and let families know that opportunities are within reach.
4. Assure families, especially those who may be unfamiliar with the school culture, that they have a powerful voice and share ways that they can use it.

Communication and Language: Principal Messaging

The way a principal or school leader messages and communicates helps to set the tone for the entire school community. Below is a brief case study that highlights the principal as the leader of family engagement.

Case Study: Principals as the Deal Breakers for Family Engagement

Joe Mazza, principal at Knapp Elementary School in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, sees himself as the family engagement “Deal Breaker” at his school. “Unless I’m the one that’s expecting it, modeling it, creating opportunities for families to engage, providing time and training for my staff, and trying to be the bridge between home and school, family engagement just isn’t going to get done because it’s not yet at the priority level of something like standardized tests—that is, something that “has to happen.”^{iv}

To ensure all messages reach all families, school leaders can support using multiple methods for communication. Messages and outreach must be differentiated to meet families' differing cultural needs. Families have varied levels of involvement and engagement, due to time, access to technology, and primary language. An effective approach to messaging will take into account family capacity, preferred method of communication, and accessibility. School leaders should consider the differences in methods that communicate **to** families and those that communicate **with** families. Each has a purpose, but it is important to be clear that each serves different families. Communicating **to** families is a way of broadcasting information or sharing decisions, while communicating **with** families is a way of entering into dialogue. Schools have traditionally worked to

improve communication with families by sending information and resources to them. School leaders are now focusing on finding the most effective ways of communicating that meaningfully engages families in the kind of back and forth communication that will support their ongoing contributions to their child's learning. To communicate effectively **with** families, it is important for school leaders to be visible to families and adopt the use of technology, which encourages and enables feedback and dialogue.

Principal Mazza also believes that principals need to be the bridge for parents and teachers. He has described himself as passionate about family engagement and equally as passionate about technology and, to that end, had dedicated himself to finding ways to integrate technology more into his school's family engagement work through what he called “e-FACE” efforts – electronic family and community engagement. His goal: use technology as a companion to the school's in-person relationship work. Through technology, he has been able to see first-hand how tools have helped to expand the school's ability to reach out to and connect with families and provide opportunities for families to stay up to date with their child's on-going progress. The in-school family room offers a desktop computer which allows families with limited or no access to technology to be part of the e-FACE community as well.

Family Communication: To vs With

With an understanding that it is important to reach families in ways that work best for them, it is important to use a variety of tools and approaches to communication and messaging.

- Newsletter
- Reports
- Announcement, newspaper articles, ads
- Emails and SMS
- School Website
- Twitter Feed
- Blogs
- Facebook Page

RESOURCES

ⁱ Epstein, 2004

ⁱⁱ Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) 2011, Breaking New Ground

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Models-for-Family-and-Community-Engagement/Family-Engagement-and-Support.pdf.aspx>

^{iv} Moore, Trise (2011) Drawing on Parent's Strengths: The role of districts and school in empowering families to be effective partners in learning. HFRP: FINE Newsletter, Volume III, Issue 2. Issue topic: Emerging Leaders in Family Engagement.)

^v Adapted from HFRP: Using Leadership to Promote Strengths-Based Family Engagement Approaches. To learn more access the archived web conference, November 12, 2013 at: <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/hfrp-interact-join-the-conversation-and-explore-promising-practices/web-conference-using-leadership-to-promote-strengths-based-family-engagement-approaches>

^{vi} <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/connected-educators-connected-families>

^{vii} Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (2011). Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment series. Retrieved from the Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Center.

