



## Engaging Parents and the Community

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# Notes



## Communication

Members of the school council are accountable to the constituents they represent. They should provide consistent, timely, and accurate information about the council's activities to stakeholders and seek their views about issues being addressed. Communication is the key to ensuring strong partnerships.

The first channel of communication to be established is between the chair and the principal. Trust, respect, and open communication are the foundation for an effective partnership and necessary for an effective school council. The principal and chair should establish a way to communicate outside of regular meetings, such as how to receive information. Next, the school council needs to establish communication with the community.

Proactive communication creates an awareness of the school, the school council, its activities and accomplishments. Communications may be internally or externally focused. Internal communications are aimed at parents, teachers, students, staff, and administration. The goal is to get and keep people involved. One way to do that is to make sure as many people as possible are "in the know." External communications are geared to the outside community such as businesses, realtors, and prospective parents. This is how the school tells its story to the community. The goal of effective external communications is to demonstrate that the school is well-organized, knows its business, and is doing its job.

### **Communication Plan**

To ensure timely, consistent information is delivered, a communication plan should be in place *and* utilized. The school council should work with the parent organization and administration to create a plan and avoid redundant efforts.

- Assess current communications:
  - By what means are you communicating?
  - How effectively are you communicating?
- Determine audiences with whom the school council and school needs to communicate.
  - With whom are you already in communication?
  - Whom are you not reaching that needs to be included?
- Agree as a school council on key messages so that your efforts are focused on the purpose of the communication.
  - Who needs to know?
  - What do they need to know?
  - When do they need to know it?
  - How much do they need to know?
- Determine the best vehicles and strategies to communicate with different audiences.
- Establish timelines for communication.
- Determine person(s) responsible for implementing the plan. Clearly designate and use existing vehicles, such as a school newsletter, when possible.
- Define ways of dealing with feedback from the community.
- Review and evaluate your plan at a designated time.
  - How effectively are you communicating your key messages?
  - Are you connecting with all audiences?
  - Are communications shared on a timely basis?
  - Is accurate information being shared?
  - Is the appropriate level of information for specific audiences being shared?
  - Are the appropriate communication vehicles being used?

Since school councils may now meet off the school site, they may periodically meet to network with each other. This gives councils the opportunity to share best practices, to learn of area and regional issues, and be connected to a larger community of leaders.



### **Raising the School Council's Profile**

Make the most of opportunities to let the community know that the school council exists, what it does, and how others can be involved. People are much more likely to want to be on the school council if they see it as a viable group.

- Have a school council information table at school-wide events.
- Put school council information in the school newsletter.
- Post the school council minutes on the school website.
- Join the parent organization and other groups in hosting special programs.
- Make use of regular mailings to include school council information.
- Have a school council member speak at school functions.
- Put school council information on the main bulletin board of the school.
- Use newspaper community news columns to send out information.
- Contact the editors of ethnic newspapers to distribute information to those groups who may not speak English.
- Offer information, workshops, and support for parents to learn more about the school from the policy standpoint – budgeting and flexible spending choices made at the school or system level, use of extended instruction funds, instructional time regulations, comprehensive school reform model in use, curriculum choices, etc.



## Increasing Parental Involvement

Increasing parental involvement is frequently cited as a goal of administrators, teachers, and parent organizations. In a recent survey conducted by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, 83% of respondents said the lack of parental involvement is a serious issue in the public schools in their community. School councils, parent organizations, and schools should work together to address this issue. Partnerships between parents and teachers will increase student achievement and promote better cooperation between home and school. Federal law recognizes parental involvement as an important component in school improvement and student achievement. *No Child Left Behind* specifically defines parental involvement and has state, system, and school level requirements for policies involving parents of Title I students. The requirements do not apply to schools not receiving Title I funds, but they are a good model for building an involved parental community. Guidance on the parental involvement requirements was issued in April 2004 and can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/parentinvguid.doc>.

**The first step is to focus the goal.** “Increasing parental involvement” is more a general term than a specific goal. There is no one, magic way to do it. It takes creativity, clear goals, and various approaches. Parental involvement should be the *result* of a partnership between families and the school rather than an initiative. Each should be a meaningful resource for the other. Planners have to decide what kind of involvement they want to increase: 1) parental support in home-based activities such as homework, attendance, or reading; 2) parental attendance at school events such as parent organization meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or events; or 3) parental participation in school operations and policy such as volunteering in the school, serving on school and district committees, assisting with parenting classes, or advocacy efforts. Some parents want to be supportive of their child’s education but involve themselves no further in the school. Some parents are willing to go further and volunteer their time at the school. Other parents choose to serve in leadership roles. Developing appropriate strategies requires that specific goals be set. A goal of increasing the number of parents reading with their student each night would require a different strategy than a goal of increasing the number of parents volunteering as reading tutors.

**The second step is to look at what is already in place.** Consider what is already in place at your school that can or should include parents. There are usually whole school activities such as Earth Day or reading a particular book. Grade-level and classroom activities offer a variety of opportunities in and out of school. There are also specifically-focused activities such as Math Superstars, the school council, and school committees. What efforts are already being made to inform and include parents? Which efforts are successful? What changes are needed? What is the district parental involvement policy? Survey administration, teachers, and staff for their attitudes about parental involvement, training needed to work with parents, and specific tasks for volunteer activities. Parents should also be surveyed to determine their needs and interests. Keep in mind that the goal is to build a partnership between the families and the school.

**Then, build from what you have.** The school council, parent organization, and school should develop a long-term plan that integrates all activities into one cohesive parent involvement plan. Once the long-term plan is in place, write a detailed one-year plan for the year’s work. To be successful and sustainable, this is a process that must engage participants rather than be mandated. Teachers must be part of the planning and implementation process. **Research suggests the essential element to improving parental involvement in any category is not the specific strategies used but the implementation of the chosen strategies.**



Activities conducted at school should support the teacher-parent relationship. Teachers should be provided opportunities to learn techniques for sharing information with parents and suggesting ways parents can assist their children. Teachers need a variety of skills to work with parents:

- Conducting effective conferences
- Working with parents when the student has a problem
- Communicating a student's progress
- Helping parents understand class goals, strategies, and methods of assessment
- How to help parents reinforce what is learned at school

Parents' needs usually center around their child: classroom information and information about their child, informative parent-teacher conferences, strategies to support academic skills, and problem-solving skills and information. Parents also want to be welcomed, valued, and needed at various levels of involvement.

### **The Collaborative Community**

Collaboration is the result of a planned process. Building a collaborative community requires more than remembering to invite a parent to sit on committees. It begins with looking at the work that goes on and including a community component. Invite school council members and other parent and community leaders to board workshops. The meetings are open to the public, but receiving an invitation is different from seeing a notice that the event is taking place. This practice would build a pool of informed leaders. It would also ensure that more people hear factual information and form a communication pipeline. School councils can also be invited to make short presentations to the board on the work they are doing. This builds the relationship between elected board members and the school council representing the community. It also allows school boards to see if the school councils are on task. School boards can look for other ways school councils can complement their work, such as inviting them to review proposed policies. Schools and school systems should look at opportunities available for the community to be involved in the improvement process. How does a parent or community member find out about those opportunities at the school and system level? Make the system as easy to navigate as possible and information readily accessible. School boards, superintendents, and principals who regularly seek input from school councils on policy issues are working collaboratively. It would also be helpful if school councils were told how their advice had been taken into account when decisions were made. Acknowledging their work shows the work is noticed and valued. Including school councils in the development or revision of policies and guidelines or the implementation of education initiatives affirms their role as a partner in the education system.

#### **Compare these two systems:**

##### System A

Provides all required data and notices.  
Puts in newsletter where to find annual report card.

Provides public notices as required for meetings.

##### System B

Provides data and notices as required.  
Decides what data gives an accurate snapshot of system and distributes it.  
Invites targeted community members to information and work sessions.  
Distributes list of specific opportunities for involvement.

Which system would you expect to have stronger involvement?

Which system is most likely to have school improvement based on their accountability measures?

Which system is yours most like?

What can your system do to build a more collaborative community?



### **Specifics**

- Offer a variety of ways and levels for parents to be involved.
  - Beginner and advanced level volunteer activities
  - One time activities, once a month, once a week, etc.
  - At home, in the school, in the district
- Use more than one form of outreach. Remember parents have different learning styles and varying amounts of free time.
  - Newsletters
  - Phone calls
  - Discussion groups
  - Workshops
  - Handouts
- Extend personal invitations as much as possible.
  - Let parents know their participation is wanted and they are missed when they are not there.
  - School leaders can select 2-3 parents to personally invite to an event. If they do not attend, follow up with information they missed by not attending.
- Make all communications personal and goal-oriented.
  - The communication should have a purpose other than it is time to send something out.
  - 80% of readers spend 30 seconds or less looking at unsolicited information. Let them know quickly how the information applies to them.
  - Provide important information briefly and frequently.
- Give parents specific things to do to help their children.
  - Have teachers provide 3 specific things they want parents to do at home.
  - Provide family activities that are practical, easy to do, and linked to skills and attitudes needed for student success.
  - Teach parents how to effectively communicate with teachers to assist in overcoming challenges.
  - Teach parents how to help in the selection of courses in middle and high school.
- Share the school's educational goals and how you plan to achieve them.
  - The school improvement plan
  - Early intervention program or other services for underachieving students
  - Enrichment opportunities available
- Provide staff training and support for parent involvement.
  - Share research findings
  - Jointly develop ideas
  - Spotlight successful staff practices
  - Social activities for parents and teachers
- Provide training and support for parents
  - Share research findings
  - Jointly develop ideas
  - Target workshops to parents needs
  - Recognize parents for the time they volunteer not just the money they give
- Have a written plan specifying how the staff will be involved and what parents will be asked to do.
- When trying to increase the number of volunteers, first think about *why* people volunteer. The belief that their work benefits themselves or someone else inspires people to volunteer. The benefit usually falls into one or more of the following:
  - They see a need.
  - They believe they can make a difference.
  - They enjoy the task.
  - They see an opportunity to develop new skills.
  - Someone asked them to so they feel valued.

**Make sure volunteers receive the appropriate training, ongoing guidance, and recognition.**



## Engaging the Community on Policy Issues

When a policy or law is proposed or enacted, it is time-consuming and often difficult to determine the actual impact it will have on students, the local school, or the school district. Understanding and communicating that impact is crucial to involving the school community in important school issues.

When rules change, implementation often brings a loud chorus of:

- I didn't know it meant me/my child.
- When did this happen?
- How did this happen?
- Why didn't anyone know about this?

School leaders are frustrated by these responses since they usually try to let the public know about proposed changes. There is an expectation that providing information will lead people to act -- whether to support the change, oppose it, or to prepare for it. The audience sometimes does not understand they are *supposed* to respond. They simply accept the information provided. The audience may fail to respond because they do not understand how the change applies to them or will affect their lives. For example, if a meeting is announced to discuss proposed changes in the graduation requirements, those who will be most interested are the parents of juniors and seniors because they are the ones focused on graduation. Any proposed changes, however, would not affect those students, so it would attract the wrong audience. Information has to focus on whom the changes would affect both positively and negatively. Here are points to consider to make your communications effective.

1. What is the central issue the policy or legislation is addressing? Why is it important?
2. In real English, what does the policy or legislation mean? Explain it as simply and concisely as possible.
3. Be sure you have a complete understanding of the policy/legislation itself before analyzing the possible effects on your community. What are the arguments for and against it?
4. What does it mean to the students in your school? In your school district?
5. If the immediate effect is on the central administration (e.g., a position is cut), what will ultimately be the result in the school?
6. What are the intended consequences?
7. What are the possible unintended consequences? Are these challenges that can be managed or do changes need to be made in the policy/legislation?
8. What does the community need to understand about this to
  - a. provide support for successful implementation?
  - b. help change what is proposed (if applicable)?
  - c. participate in the program created (if applicable)?
9. What is the specific purpose of your communication?
  - a. To provide information only?
  - b. To provide information and/or request some action to be taken?
  - c. To provide information and/or request participation?
10. Has the purpose been made clear to the audience? Is follow up needed?



If requesting the audience to contact decision-makers, it is helpful to provide them with a fact sheet that defines the issue, provides background information, shows how this will affect your school or community, and states what you want to happen. Provide everything needed to make the contacts requested. Make it as easy and quick as possible for them to work with you. If a form letter is provided, encourage them to personalize it before sending it.

Legislators, school board members, and other decision-makers appreciate receiving factual information and suggested solutions. Elected officials are not experts on everything. They need information from the community to know what the local impact will be. Be sure you know who has the power to make the decision you want. This is particularly important if you are trying to change an existing policy. If the local policy exists because of a state law, then legislators are the targeted decision-makers not school board members. It would, however, be very helpful to have school board members support your efforts.



## Making Accountability Work For You

The idea of measuring achievement and holding schools accountable for those outcomes is a huge change in focus in policy and funding. Oversight of schools previously focused on compliance with regulations. Now, funding is not just an allocation; it is looked at as an investment that is expected to yield value which is measured in student achievement. A number of measures have been put into place at the state and federal level to create this accountability for schools and school systems.

"Accountability" is a framework of actions that should act as a cycle for continuous improvement. The first step in the process is the setting of standards against which assessment results are measured. Second, an assessment system is put into place to measure achievement. Third, results are reported to all stakeholders. Fourth, adjustments are made in instruction and programs as needed in collaboration with all stakeholders. The assessments are given again and the cycle continues. The process often disintegrates in the third and fourth steps. Results are reported to educators for diagnostic purposes. They can see where instruction succeeded and where it failed and determine how to address that. Results are reported to the public so they can see the effectiveness of the schools, ask questions, and be involved in the improvement process. This element is what creates the accountability aspect. Accountability means to be answerable for someone or for some activity. Otherwise, we simply have an assessment system and a reporting system. It is the school – which includes staff, students, parents, and community – which is answerable.

### **Added Value Reporting**

Since raw data is published in newspapers and on websites, stakeholders should consider how to use that data in reports that add value to the information. Businesses and organizations regularly provide reports to communicate the "state" of the organization to stakeholders, to influence policymakers, and as a self-assessment tool. To reap the benefits, it is important to remember that reporting information is not the end goal. It is a *tool* to be used remembering the change in focus discussed above, the purpose of accountability, and the benefits to be gained in reporting. It is a valuable resource in building good will and collaborative partnerships.

### **State of the System Report**

How does one create added value reporting? This is not just one more report that no one has time to do. This is looking at data that is already available or collected and using it in a different way. Federal and state laws require certain information be made public on an annual report card. What else might a school system *want* to make public? This type of information would create a "state of the system" type report. Some examples are:

- Number of schools that met their school improvement goals
- Percent of students in Honors and AP classes
- Graduation rate compared with the state and national average
- Percent of students requiring postsecondary remediation compared to the state average
- Postsecondary choices of students
- Percent of students scoring in the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile and above on norm-referenced tests
- Other meaningful information that shows the work of the school

When the information appears to be negative, let the community know that the school has recognized and understands the problem areas and how they are being addressed. If a school did not make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) but did meet the school improvement goal in that area, let the public know that a plan is in place, the plan is on track, and progress is being made. If there has been regular communication and proactive use of data, the impact of negative news will be lessened. The school will have built goodwill and the image of an efficient, effective organization. All organizations face challenges. It is the public perception of how those challenges are addressed that makes or breaks a school's reputation.



### **Influencing Policymakers**

Another reason to do added value reporting is to influence policymakers. What information could be reported or reframed to influence policy? Some examples are:

- Use of flexible funds to show good stewardship and encourage more flexible regulations
- Creative use of instructional time to encourage flexibility in instructional requirements
- Illustrate the effectiveness of the choices made with a similar schools report from GeorgiaEducation.org.
- Statement of what local funds are purchasing to influence budget decisions

For example, the use of local funds could cover the millage rate, changes in the rate in the past five years, the value of a mill, the total raised locally, and how the funds were used for teacher supplements, benefits, and extra teachers; textbooks; transportation; foreign language programs, etc. This serves two purposes: one, it shows legislators what is required locally to fund the categories for which the state is responsible. Two, it clearly shows the public the educational choices the local board has made. If taxpayers do not favor a millage increase, the discussion becomes “What are you willing to give up?”

### **Self-Assessment**

Finally, there is self-assessment – not just “How did our students do?” but “How are we doing using this information most effectively?” Information required to be made public are indicators of performance for the community. How is the information used by the system? How is this use illustrated to the community? What specific changes are made due to this information? How are these changes relayed to the community? It is action taken in response to assessments and reporting that makes accountability work. Meaningful information empowers and involves the community. Moving away from merely complying with reporting requirements to focusing reports to reap the benefits of added value information is the first step in creating a collaborative relationship with stakeholders. It acknowledges that the stakeholders’ opinions are valued and that their needs have been taken into consideration.

### **Summary**

- Mine the data already collected and reported for opportunities to build public support and engage the community.
- Keep in mind the focus of policymakers and the public.
- Look for success stories to tell, but be upfront about the challenges also.



**Replace with Increasing Parent Involvement Worksheet**