

Building Block: Communication

Wise Ways® / Academic Development Institute

Indicator: The school's key documents (Parent Involvement Policy, Mission Statement, Compact, Homework Guidelines, Classroom Visit Procedures) are annually distributed and frequently communicated to teachers, school personnel, parents, and students.

Evidence Review:

Research shows that schools can improve their students' learning by engaging parents in ways that directly relate to their children's academic progress, maintaining a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Redding, 2000, Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Thus, effective parent engagement must be comprehensive in nature, with the school consistently interfacing with parents at many points, in many venues, over the course of the schooling years (Swap, 1993). This is vital for all students at all grade levels, in all settings (urban to rural), and even more so for those with disabilities and English language learners (CII, 2011).

Whenever parents meet with school personnel, the school's purpose and its supporting documents can be discussed and reinforced. The supporting documents include the Compact, learning standards, improvement plan, and homework policy. An ongoing conversation between parents and teachers around these documents builds understanding and a sense of common endeavor toward each student's success. The open house and parent-teacher-student conference are typical points of contact between parents and school personnel, and each can be planned to advance an understanding of the school community's purpose, each member's role in that purpose, and the relevance to each child. (Redding, 2006, p. 158)

An ongoing conversation between parents and teachers around key documents and events connecting the home and school builds reciprocal trust and a sense of common purpose. Parents should receive "practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors" (CII, 2011, p. 185). Families need "honest and timely information about budgets, policies, and student achievement. Use test data to identify problem areas that need improvement" (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, pp. 190-191). Further, the school should provide "culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet with one another to encourage the sharing of norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes" and should provide "teachers and staff with professional development and consistent policies to build their capacity to work with all families and to reinforce the school's clear expectations of parents. This includes promoting a strengths-based (rather than deficit-based) view of families" (CII, 2011, pp. 185-186). Parents appreciate knowing:

- how their children are doing,
- what the school is doing,
- what the school expects of parents, and
- how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school. (ADI, 2010)

The current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also referred to as No Child Left Behind) requires in Section 1118 that schools receiving Title I funds have a written Parent Involvement Policy, that the policy is written with the assistance of parents, and that it establish expectations for parental involvement, coordinates with early childhood program's parent involvement strategies, and identifies and attempts to eliminate barriers to greater participation and more effective involvement. Research and best practices from exemplary districts exhibit the need for all schools to develop a shared vision of family engagement (Henderson et al., 2007; Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009). It is necessary to go beyond a compliance-driven approach; schools that lack a systematic approach to design and implementation of parent involvement efforts will be ineffective in improving student outcomes (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002; Paredes, O'Malley, & Amarillas, 2012).

To support this effort, an effective Parent Involvement Policy must focus on improving student achievement and should include a vision statement developed with and for families, highlighting the importance of family–school partnerships (Henderson et al., 2007; Westmoreland et al., 2009).

Parents should organize around a shared vision such as increasing the number of children ready for college or providing a quality education for all children, rather than around interests that often compete and divide parents...the school and parent visions should be aligned and a learning culture developed where educators and parents learn together. Parents should see the benefit of advocating for *all* children, as well as their own. Family engagement should not be an add-on or a program but should be interwoven throughout the school—its instructional program, planning and management, and other aspects of school life so that schools are places of connection. (Moles & Fege, 2011, p. 9)

Edwards (2011) reminds us that it is necessary to define parental involvement clearly so everyone understands what it means for your school community—everyone from senior district administrators to teachers to bus drivers, and a shared vision honors and supports each partner's role in supporting student success (Westmoreland et al., 2009).

To be effective, statements of vision, mission, and purpose must be aligned to practices, including particular links that engage parents and make them full partners (Redding, 2006). An effective mission should be crafted with stakeholders, should be clearly defined, and focused on learning (Murphy, 2007; NCREL, 1995). The function of a mission statement is to create a shared understanding and sense of purpose for the members of the school community, including administrators, teachers, other staff, students, their family members, and other community partners (Hatch, 2006, NCREL, 1995). High expectations must be evident (Bafile, 2007; Redding, 2006). Dr. Cile Chavez, former superintendent, says, "A mission can serve as a centerpiece...a framework for making decisions and for building relationships. Powerful missions give people a sense of purpose and passion" (Bafile, 2007, para. 2). Communication is vital; it is helpful if the mission statement is brief and easy to state and remember. "Above all, talk about it!" advises Chavez. "Host conversations whenever and wherever you can that are centered on the meaning of the mission statement" (Bafile, 2007, para. 12).

"A school–family compact is an opportunity to develop a clear, written agreement between parents and teachers about how they should work together. Compacts are required for Title I schools under No Child Left Behind and are a good idea for any school" (Henderson et al., 2007, p.198). Best practices indicate that a compact should focus on learning, including ways that parents can support their child's learning at home and opportunities for parents to communicate with the school to increase these supports (ADI, 2011; Henderson, Carson, Avallone, & Whipple, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007).

To ensure that the compact is understood by all parties involved, many parents and teachers will need new skills to bridge language, cultural, economic, and social barriers and to build trust relationships between home and school....The process involved in the development of the compact is its real strength. When parents and school officials sit down and discuss issues related to student success, parents are given a sense of voice and time to think about their responsibilities, while schools are given a strong starting point at developing and sustaining momentum around communicating with families and developing relationships. The compact must outline how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement. (Public Education Network, 2004, p. 2)

Homework is a primary point of interface between the school and the home, and parents are best able to support the school's purposes for homework when they understand what is expected of students and their role in monitoring their children's homework. Consistency from teacher to teacher and across grade levels and subjects, established by a homework policy, contributes to teachers', parents', and students' understanding of the school's purposes for homework and also reinforces students' formation of independent study habits (Redding, 2006). For the policy to be effective, those affected by it must be given assistance in carrying it out, actual practices must be monitored to detect and correct problems, and successes should be celebrated (ADI, 2011). For example, some schools allow the class with the highest homework completion rate for that quarter to have a party. Research indicates that "students learn best when homework is assigned regularly, graded, returned promptly, and used primarily to

rehearse material first presented by the teacher at school” (Redding, 2000, p. 15). Studies of homework that included an interactive element requiring children to talk with someone at home about the assignment have shown a variety of significant, positive outcomes, including improved student skills, increased parent involvement, and better teacher attitudes (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Van Voorhis, 2003).

Parents (who are not school staff) should be involved in creating a clear and constructive classroom visit policy (ADI, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007). This plan should balance the need to minimize classroom disruptions or interference with student learning, maximize safety, and also create a welcoming and transparent environment for families. It can be created with or in addition to policy guidelines for classroom volunteers. While all parents should be welcome to visit, inviting immigrant parents into the classroom may assist them in learning about teaching practices in American schools and ways they can support their children’s achievement (Lim, 2012). The classroom visit policy offers an opportunity to reinforce the goals of the school community and each stakeholder’s role in that community (Redding, 2011).

Questions to ask when creating a Classroom Visit Policy (ADI, 2011)

1. Is advance notice required? If so, how much in advance? Whom does the parent call to request a visit? Where does the visitor first report when entering the school?
2. How is the teacher notified?
3. What is the role of the parent when visiting? Where is the parent to sit? How much is the visitor to be involved?
4. What is the role of the teacher? Greeting. Explanation of what is going on in classroom.

While a procedure for visiting should be established to accommodate parents as needed, some schools have taken creative approaches to offering visit times. Redding (2000) suggests designating a time when teachers are available for walk-in conferences. For example, some schools set aside 30 minutes before school on certain days of the week when all teachers are available to parents, or provide classroom visit days when all parents are invited to school (see Henderson et al., 2007, p. 63).

Finally, any policy can only be effective if it is communicated clearly and frequently to everyone in the school community and implemented consistently. Teachers, front office and other support staff, and administrators may need professional development in providing a welcoming environment for parents and family members of students. However, the results of establishing the kind of environment that nurtures true partnership focused on student learning is worth the investment (Henderson et al., 2007; Redding, 2006, 2011; Redding et al., 2004). Open houses, family–school nights, and parent–teacher–student conferences can be prime venues for sharing information about policies affecting families and opportunities for two-way communication and parent involvement (HFRP, 2010; Redding, 2011).

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Indicator: There is “ongoing conversation” between school personnel and parents that is candid, supportive, and flows in both directions.

Evidence Review:

“Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing” (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26). Positive communication sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect, including home–school relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). “Every interaction between family members and school staff, therefore, is an opportunity to develop or erode trust” (Sheldon & Sanders, 2009, p. 34). Jeynes (2010) meta-analyses predict that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate effectively and

frequently will be successful. Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Redding, 2006).

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

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

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

Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Parents (and their children) will benefit from receiving “practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors” (CII, 2011, p. 185). Families also need “honest and timely information about budgets, policies, and student achievement. Use test data to identify problem areas that need improvement” (Henderson et al., 2007, pp. 190–191). Further, the school should provide “culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet with one another to encourage the sharing of norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes” and should provide “teachers and staff with professional development and consistent policies to build their capacity to work with all families and to reinforce the school's clear expectations of parents. This includes promoting a strengths-based (rather than deficit-based) view of families” (CII, 2011, pp. 185–186).

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

Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers to school-home communication, such as language

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

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

Schools should use every opportunity for parents, teachers, and students to talk about their mutual roles in children’s learning. The Compact, learning standards, and homework policy are good tools for discussion. The open house agenda and parent–teacher–student conference procedures ensure that parents, teachers and students have opportunities for focused conversation....This conversation begins when parents first register their child for pre-school or kindergarten and continues throughout the child’s career at the school....Most important of all is the conversation between the teacher, the parents, and the student. This conversation is an opportunity to consistently reinforce the school’s goals for students, and its expectations of students, parents, and teachers. Frank conversation, encouragement, and practical suggestions help engage parents from the early grades on up and also establish the relationship between parents and teachers. (ADI, 2011)

Examples:

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

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

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

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Building Block: Communication

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Indicator: Teachers use emails, school websites, and/or other electronic means to provide parents with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interactions with their children and to communicate with parents about student progress.

Evidence Review:

Language development begins at birth and centers on the child's interactions with his or her parents. Several parent/child interactions are important in preparing the child to learn in school: talking to the infant, listening attentively to the child, reading to children and listening to them read, talking about what the parent and the child are reading, storytelling, daily conversation and letter writing. It is difficult to separate verbal interactions from the emotional and affective bonds that accompany them. For that reason, the parents' expressions of affection are included with verbal activities as essential to the parent/child relationship. Also important is a constant demonstration by parents that learning is a natural part of life—joyful in its own right, part of the family experience, and especially exhilarating when encountered through discovery at such places as museums, zoos, and historical sites. (Redding, 2000, p. 9)

Researcher William Jaynes' meta-analyses have shown that the most highly correlated components of parental involvement are also subtle—high expectations, loving and effective communication, and a parental style that is both supportive and provides structure (see Jaynes, 2011a, 2011b). Research has also shown that low-income families tend to speak with, encourage, and read to their children less frequently than those in wealthier families (Hart & Risley, 1995; Walberg, 2011). Teachers can, in respectful and creative ways, encourage parents to communicate and support their children. Teachers can also model high expectations and supportive interactions with students.

Email, texting applications ("apps"), and so on are becoming more and more widely available to parents and can be valuable tools for home-school communications. However, teachers must be sensitive to the reality that not all parents have access (or consistent access) to email, smart phones, and other web-based communications. However, when available, many parents seem to prefer these methods of communication (see, e.g., Blaik Hourani, Stringer, & Baker, 2012). "Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing" (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26); email provides one means of inviting two-way communication at a time convenient to each party. Open-ended questions inviting responses may initiate productive conversation (e.g., "What do you think is going well in terms of your child's learning?" see Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 89).

Ramirez states, "Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades," but by establishing positive conversation with families, "both the parent and the student will become allies" (2002, p. 56). Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Family members will benefit from receiving "practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors" (CII, 2011, p. 185).

Graham-Clay (2005) reminds teachers that a primary goal of effective written communication (including electronic writing) is to "organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it" (p. 119). Guidance should be carefully worded; offering a workshop or tip sheet on "parenting" may insult families (e.g., "They think we're not doing a good job! I don't want someone telling my how to raise *my* kids;" Henderson et al., 2007, p. 83). Instead, offer suggestions for maximizing learning outside of school, and invite the families to suggest specific topics of interest.

Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is "the

philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families’ strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & González, 2004). “When school staff have a better understanding of their students’ home cultures, families’ parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14).

Learning about families’ funds of knowledge can provide culturally relevant prompts to encourage verbal interaction between parents and students. In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (in press) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families increased students’ engagement. Interactive homework is another option, in which students are asked to engage with a family member on a topic relevant to their curriculum. Redding (2006) gives a specific example, Reading School–Home Links (available free from the U.S. Dept. of Education in English and Spanish, 1999) which provide interactive reading activities aligned to standards for grades K–3. Also, Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, an interactive homework tool developed by Epstein, Van Voorhis, and colleagues). Email with families regarding these assignments can be useful in encouraging participation. Family math or reading nights hosted at the school can also be extended by email follow-ups suggesting fun learning activities that can be done with low- or no-cost materials at home.

School websites can provide easy access to electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school’s main webpage. Many systems provide parents with an option to receive automatic emails with updates. Even when a school does not have an electronic student progress reporting system, school websites can be a valuable source of information for parents and offer a convenient and efficient way of keeping communication flowing between parents and the school (ADI, 2011).

Busy families can fall out of the habit of daily conversation. Asking parents to spend at least one minute each day in private conversation with each child, primarily listening to the child tell about his or her day without distraction from other family members or television, will demonstrate how rare and precious such moments can be. Sharing these experiences with other parents, in small-group settings, amplifies their impact. (Redding, 2000, p. 10)

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Building Block: Communication

Wise Ways® / Academic Development Institute

Indicator: Teachers use telephone calls to provide parents with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interaction with their children and to communicate with parents about student progress.

Evidence Review:

Look closely at how your school communicates with families. When families can work closely with teachers, their children adjust to school better, attend more regularly, and

stay in school longer. They also earn higher grades and test scores. In addition, families are far more likely to be satisfied with their children's school (and school district) when they feel it is easy to be partners with their children's teachers. (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 95)

Phone calls are a personal form of communication and may be difficult for teachers who do not have phones in their classroom or within communities where families do not have consistent access to phones or change numbers frequently. However, this type of communication ensures direct contact with families and allows the teacher to be certain that families are indeed receiving important information (ADI, 2011). Phone calls to parents can be an invaluable tool for home-school communications. It is important that the teacher introduces himself/herself, explains the purpose of the call, provides the parent with pertinent information, and encourages parent feedback. Taking time to listen is imperative (ADI, 2011). "Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing" (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26); even brief phone calls can provide this. Open-ended questions inviting responses may initiate productive conversation (e.g., "What do you think is going well in terms of your child's learning?" see Henderson et al., 2007, p. 89). It may be helpful to utilize a brief agenda when making phone calls to highlight special accomplishments or address various topics with the parents. This can serve as an informal script and provide a record of your communication with the family (ADI, 2011).

Bennett-Conroy (2012) conducted parent interviews indicating that parents (in her study, low-income, ethnic minorities) welcomed teacher-initiated conversations concerning students' academics, confirming Mapp's 2003 study. One study found that student performance in math and reading improved at a 40–50% higher rate when teachers reached out to parents in these three ways:

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

Researcher Fred Ramirez discusses the power of positive outreach using telephones:

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

Jeynes (2010) meta-analyses predict that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate effectively and frequently will be successful. Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Family members will benefit from receiving "practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors" (CII, 2011, p. 185). Hiatt-Michael (2001) suggests that secondary school teachers might welcome families at the beginning of each semester and communicate course expectations.

Graham-Clay (2005) reminds teachers that a primary goal of effective written communication (including electronic writing) is to "organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it" (p. 119). Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers such as language differences, a

lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is “the philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families’ strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & González, 2004). “When school staff have a better understanding of their students’ home cultures, families’ parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14). Communicating through phone calls may be difficult for parents who do not have consistent access to a telephone or are not fluent in English. Thus, alternative arrangements need to be made for these families (ADI, 2011).

Telephone calls can easily provide convenient avenues for outreach and communication focused on student learning. Bennett-Conroy’s (2012) quasi-experimental study using TIPS and teacher outreach via phone calls to the families of middle school students found this low-cost intervention in a low-income, high-minority school district was effective in increasing parent-teacher communication, homework completion rates, and homework grades compared to the control group. Redding (2006) discusses Reading School-Home Links (available free from the U.S. Dept. of Education in English and Spanish) which provide interactive reading activities aligned to standards for grades K-3; these were used in as part of the comprehensive parent involvement program Solid Foundation which showed significant student improvement in just two years compared to matched controls (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families increased students’ engagement. Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, an interactive homework tool developed by Epstein, Van Voorhis, and colleagues). In all cases, students’ homework completion and parental involvement increased and grades improved. Thus interactive homework, especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication, can be especially effective in bridging home and school with powerful, positive outcomes for students.

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Building Block: Communication

Wise Ways® / Academic Development Institute

Indicator: Teachers use postcards and notes to share student accomplishments, and parents are encouraged to send notes to teachers.

Evidence Review:

Many teachers prefer to use written notes and find them to be an extremely convenient way to communicate with families. You may choose to send a postcard, brief letter, or note that welcomes families to your classroom. Since families are often overwhelmed with written materials early in the school year, it may help to print notes on colored paper or utilize graphic designs to capture parents' attention. In addition, using larger print and minimizing the amount of written material on the page may also make it more likely that families will read written communication. Families are often more receptive to personalized communication; you can address the note to the family, or include a handwritten note at the bottom of a printed page.

There are several ways to deliver written communication to families; prior to the start of school these letters can be sent to families through the mail. After school begins, many teachers choose to send home written communication with students. A great way to ensure that written communication is received by families is by hand delivering it at orientations, registrations, or when parents come to pick up or drop off children.

Notes to the home can be used to keep parents informed of children's progress. Through the use of these notes, you can make specific, individualized comments about children's skill development and achievement. It is important to recognize at least one positive accomplishment of children when creating progress notes. In addition, you can provide additional ways for parents to facilitate children's learning and achievement. In order to foster two-way communication, you can request that the parent send a note back to you. You can also encourage parents' responses by allocating space for comments or including a few brief questions for return. This practice also keeps you informed of parents' ideas and concerns. However, it is important to promptly respond to parents' remarks and/or questions.

A welcome letter can provide basic information about classroom practices. Within this letter, it is helpful to highlight key information related to classroom routines, homework, and communication practices. As always, it is best to continually encourage parent involvement and remind parents that you are available to discuss questions or concerns.

Welcoming communication efforts can also come from the principal. Many schools utilize a school-wide welcome letter that provides families with orientation information about school policies, but letters from the child's teacher are always especially appreciated by parents. (ADI, 2011)

Celebrating student accomplishments encourages not only the family, but the student as well. One study found that student performance in math and reading improved at a 40–50% high rate when teachers reached out to parents in these three ways:

- Met face-to-face with each family at the beginning of the school year

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

Graham-Clay (2005) reminds teachers that a primary goal of effective written communication is to “organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it” (p. 119). Teachers must, however, be sensitive to determine when a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate than a written exchange (Davern, 2004, cited in Graham-Clay, 2005).

Ramirez states, “Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades,” but by first establishing positive conversation with families, “both the parent and the student will become allies” (2002, p. 56). Hiatt-Michael (2001) suggests that secondary school teachers might send families messages at the beginning of each semester with a welcome note, overview of the course, and expectations. Jaynes (2010) meta-analyses predict that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, hold high expectations of students, and communicate effectively and frequently will be successful. Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010, Redding, 2006). Family members will benefit from receiving “practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors” (CII, 2011, p. 185).

Written communications translated into the parents’ preferred language are especially important. Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is “the philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198).

Interactive homework, especially when coupled with teacher outreach and invitations for two-way communication, can be especially effective in bridging home and school with powerful, positive outcomes for students. In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families increased students’ engagement. Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, an interactive homework tool developed by Epstein, Van Voorhis, and colleagues); Bennett-Conroy (2012) also used TIPS and teacher phone calls as the basis for a quasi-experimental comparison. Redding (2006) discusses Reading School–Home Links (available free from the U.S. Dept. of Education in English and Spanish) which provide interactive reading activities aligned to standards for grades K–3; these were used in as part of a comprehensive parent involvement program Solid Foundation, which showed significant student improvement in just two years compared to matched controls (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). In all cases, students’ homework completion and parental involvement increased and grades improved. Bennett-Conroy (2012) conducted parent interviews indicating that parents welcomed teacher-initiated conversations concerning students’ academics, confirming Mapp’s 2003 study. Written communications can easily provide convenient avenues for outreach focused on student learning.

Example:

Happy-Grams

Print pads of Happy-Grams for teachers to send notes to parents complimenting students for specific achievements and behaviors. Because teachers also appreciate notes of kindness, distribute pads of Happy-Grams to parents or print blank Happy-Grams forms in the newsletter. Parents can clip the forms from the newsletter and send notes to teachers. (ADI, 2011)

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Building Block: Communication

Wise Ways® / Academic Development Institute

Indicator: The school has a web-based student information system to inform parents of student progress and updates information weekly.

Evidence Review:

Web-based student information reporting, sometimes referred to as “E-parenting,” offers a web host and portal system for monitoring student assignments, attendance, grades, school nurse activity, disciplinary, and even lunch information. Such systems are touted to increase parent involvement and raise student achievement. For parents whose work removes them from the home environment, these systems allow frequent checking and monitoring of their child’s academic activity simply by logging on to the school’s secured information system.

These systems can also give parents insight into the subject matter in their child’s classes at any given time and become alerted to areas of difficulty while there is still time to make improvement during the grading period. Often times a link directly to the teacher is offered on the report summary page providing an immediate avenue of communication to express concerns or ask questions about the information being viewed. The system also gives teachers the flexibility of responding to parent concerns as time allows during their busy day. (ADI, 2011)

School websites usually provide easy access to such electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school’s main webpage. Many systems provide parents with an option to receive automatic email updates. Email and other web-based communications are becoming more and more widely available to parents and are therefore valuable tools for home–school communications. Teachers must be sensitive to the reality that not all parents have access (or consistent access) to email and other online systems. However, when available, many parents seem to prefer it as a method of communication (see, e.g., Blaik Hourani, Stringer, & Baker, 2012).

Parents find school and class websites to be helpful, especially to check for homework information and school dates (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). However, these must be kept up-to-date and functional, or frustration from both teachers/school staff and families will result (Blaik Hourani et al., 2012). Similarly, electronic mailing lists can be a convenient, instant, low-cost, one-way communication tool to reach a large audience (Hiatt-Michael, 2010), but the email address list must be kept current.

“Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing” (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26); email provides one means of inviting two-way communication at a time convenient to each party. Information about student progress can be accompanied by open-ended questions that invite parental responses and may initiate productive conversation (e.g., “What do you think is going well in terms of your child’s learning?” see Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 89).

Graham-Clay (2005) reminds teachers that a primary goal of effective written communication (including electronic writing) is to “organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it” (p. 119). Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). Schools should make sure communications are available in parents’ preferred languages (Vera et al., 2012), and teachers must be sensitive to determine when a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate than a written exchange (Davern, 2004, cited in Graham-Clay, 2005). Bennett-Conroy (2012) conducted parent interviews indicating that parents welcomed teacher-initiated conversations concerning students’ academics, confirming Mapp’s 2003 study. Web portals, email, and other electronic communications can easily provide convenient avenues for outreach and communication focused on student learning.

Examples:

A web search of Student Management Software will produce an extensive listing of software packages and providers for student management programs. Most software packages are available in modules with topics ranging from student registration to grade reporting, and from accounting to personnel management, making it easy to custom tailor a management service to the needs of the school or district. The provider websites offer a view of sample forms, reports, and virtual tours of sample schools. (ADI, 2011)

For a quick sampling of products available visit:

<http://www.blackbaud.com/> (Blackbaud)

<http://www.edline.com/> (Edline has merged with Blackboard, Inc., see also <http://www.blackboard.com/>)

<http://www.powerschool.com/> (Pearson School Systems)

<http://www.skyward.com/> (Skyward)

<http://www.infinitecampus.com/> (Infinite Campus)

Note: This listing is far from exhaustive and has not been vetted by ADI.

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Building Block: Communication

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Indicator: The school's website has a parent section that includes information on home support for learning, announcements, parent activities/resources, and procedures on how parents may post items.

Evidence Review:

School websites often house useful information such as department and staff listings with links to teachers' and administrators' electronic mail boxes; school and sports calendars; lunch menu; clubs and organizational information; activity announcements and schedules; alumni information; and, sometimes, homework assignments. In addition, school websites usually provide easy access to electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school's main webpage. Studies have shown such web-based student records help parents stay more informed about their child's academic performance (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Many systems provide parents with an option to receive automatic email updates. Email and other web-based communications are becoming more and more widely available to parents and are therefore valuable tools for home-school communications. However, teachers must be sensitive to the reality that not all parents have access (or consistent access) to email and other online systems. When they do have such access, many parents seem to prefer it as a method of communication (see, e.g., Blaik Hourani, Stringer, & Baker, 2012).

Parents find school and class websites to be helpful, especially to check for homework information and school dates (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). However, these must be kept up-to-date and functional, or frustration from both teachers/school staff and families will result (Blaik Hourani et al., 2012). Providing an email link and clear instructions on how parents can report any difficulties or request that an item be posted may alleviate such frustrations, provided these links are monitored and requests are responded to in a timely fashion.

A Parent Resources webpage on the school site is an excellent way to keep important information readily available to parents. A parent resource section could be used to:

- Post your school's parent involvement policy, Compact, homework policy, and classroom visit policy
- Post tips for parents on such topics as homework help, reading at home, building respect and responsibility, and knowing your child's friends
- Request volunteer helpers
- Provide links to parent resource websites (e.g., <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/RFP.aspx> and <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/English.aspx> (also available in Spanish at <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/Espanol.aspx>)
- Provide links to state and local educational agencies websites
- View and download student handbooks
- Review and download school discipline policies and procedures
- Download school forms such as:
 - Volunteer survey forms
 - School physical forms
 - Authorization to administer medication form
 - Permission to participate forms
 - Pre-arranged or excused absence forms
 - Free or reduced lunch forms (ADI, 2011)

Schools can also post videos for families on the school website or via a link to a video site (such as Vimeo or YouTube). This might include a brief welcome video including an introduction, virtual tour of the school, portions of a "lesson in action," and an invitation to become involved (Aronson, 1995, cited in Graham-Clay, 2005). Additional videos can be created on any number of topics, from how to help your

child with a science project to demonstrations of integration activities for students with significant special needs to summer learning activities.

Websites may provide links to surveys as a means of evaluating a parent program or listening to parent voices and prioritizing improvements (Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Redding & Keleher, 2010). “Indeed, the capacity to link homes and schools with new technologies provides many novel opportunities to enhance communication with parents beyond the traditional formats” (Graham-Clay, 2005, p. 123).

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Building Block: Communication

Wise Ways® / Academic Development Institute

Indicator: The school's newsletter includes articles by parents, information on home support of learning, announcements of parent activities, and provides procedures on how parents may submit items.

Evidence Review:

Newsletters provide a valuable tool for communication, if used appropriately. Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Parents (and their children) will benefit from receiving “practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors” (CII, 2011, p. 185). Families also need “honest and timely information about budgets, policies, and student achievement. Use test data to identify problem areas that need improvement” (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, pp. 190–191). Newsletters can highlight classroom learning from each grade level (including special education classes), so parents get an idea of the scope and sequence of what is being taught (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Provide translations of each newsletter in parents’ preferred languages. Parents in one school gave their principal some great advice to improve his long, monthly newsletters: “Keep it short, send bulletins out on an as-needed basis, and stick to the point” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 230).

Newsletters can also provide a venue to celebrate accomplishments of students and adults alike as the school community makes progress in academics and toward other goals.

School personnel—teachers, support staff, parent leaders—like everyone else, respond to sincere praise, public recognition, and reward or celebration of accomplishment, both individual and team. The balanced coupling of clear expectations with recognition for accomplishment is essential to effective school leadership (Blasé & Kirby, 1992; Evans, 1993; Lortie, 1975). Leaders who understand motivation know that success and improvement are “every bit as social as they are structural” (Schmoker, 1996, p. 104). (Redding, 2006, p. 42)

One way effective leaders “shepherd goals is through the actions they take to recognize, celebrate, and reward the contributions of community members to the development, the implementation, and, most importantly, the realization of school goals” (Murphy, 2007, p. 73). Celebration of accomplishments can help the school community bond, promote its vision, affirm the possibility of improvement, maintain enthusiasm and optimism, and provide energy and inspiration for future work (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007, Murphy, 2007; Redding, 2006).

Classroom newsletters can also be utilized. With newsletter templates readily available in word processing programs, many teachers are creating attractive updates for their students’ families on a weekly basis (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Some teachers attach weekly work and request a return signature, email, or text message from the parent to acknowledge they received it (Duncan, 2007, cited in Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Some teachers have students help to create the class newsletter, which may foster parent–child communication about types of writing or about classroom activities (Hiatt-Michael, 2010).

Example: Tips for Using Newsletters to Communicate with Parents (ADI, 2011)

Many schools publish newsletters to establish school–home communication. A quality newsletter needs to be well planned and organized to reach parents effectively. Use this tip sheet as a tool for evaluating your newsletter or to help you develop a newsletter at your school.

What is the purpose of the newsletter?

- To inform parents about what is going on at the school
- To stimulate interest in school activities
- To communicate expectations
- To celebrate successes
- To share information from one parent to others
- To solicit feedback from parents

Questions to ask about your school's newsletter:

- Who is it for?
- What do we want to communicate?
- How do we present the information?
- Who is responsible for developing the newsletter?
- Who is responsible for designing, formatting, and copying the newsletter?
- How will it be distributed?
- Who needs to approve the newsletter before it is sent out?

Content of a quality newsletter:

- Feature specific items from the school community compact
- Feature specific items from the school's parent involvement policy
- Explain the school homework policy and parents' role with homework
- Suggest books for children to read, parents to read, and families to read together and discuss
- Share recent accomplishments of the students in all areas of activities
- Include upcoming changes in school policies or programs
- Announce service projects that the school is implementing
- Include a calendar of upcoming events: testing, workshops, conferences, etc.
- Include human interest items featuring students, class project, volunteers, etc.

Other Tips for the Newsletter:

- Be sure that content is clear, simple, and direct
- Make sure the letter maintains a positive and upbeat tone
- Ask parents to write articles for the newsletter
- Ask parents for tips for helping kids with homework
- Ask parents to share ideas for family activities and outings
- Feature community resources such as libraries, museums, zoos, and youth clubs

- Provide information for enrolling in youth organizations and activities (ADI, 2011)

Example: School Newsletters (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 96)

Think about how newsletter articles could give parents better information about what students are learning, how well they are doing, and what parents can do to help them. Here are some examples of newsletter entries from our files, and how they could be rewritten to focus more on learning.

Standard newsletter article	Linked to learning
<p>Next Thursday, a noted naturalist, photographer, and lecturer will make a presentation, “Primate Safari,” at the library.</p>	<p>Add: <i>Students are learning that plants and animals have features that help them live in different settings. Ask your children what they noticed about the animals. How do tusks, claws, body shape, and color help animals hide, find food, and protect themselves?</i></p>
<p>The Gift of Reading program helps to build our school’s library collection. Please visit the Bookstore, where books can be “adopted.” Your name and a message will be inscribed on the bookplate, and your child will have the first checkout privilege.</p>	<p>Add: <i>This year we are working hard to raise students’ reading skills. As our school report card shows, only one in five sixth graders is proficient in reading. To become a good reader, every student should read at least 25 books a year. You will be getting a collection of tips on helping your child read. We welcome your ideas!</i></p>
<p>Students in the Nutrition and Wellness Class created displays called Wellness Corners. Each student focused on some aspects of teen wellness (physical, mental, emotional, and social health).</p>	<p>Add: <i>To create the displays, students applied current research on health to develop a personal fitness plan. Ask your student to explain his or her personal standards for healthy behavior, including nutrition, rest, and physical activity, and how these standards fit into the plan.</i> (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 96)</p>

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Building Block: Communication

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Indicator: The school has a bulletin board near the front entrance that includes information on home support of learning, announcements, parent activities, and provides procedures on how parents may post information.

Evidence Review:

Family engagement research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and common sense both dictate that schools should create a welcoming appearance for parents and other community visitors. Bulletin boards should be well organized, visually inviting, and updated frequently. However, they can accomplish much more:

Parent bulletin boards are not typically perceived to be a communication tool, but rather, an information source. Creative uses of bulletin boards can facilitate parent-to-parent communication, school-to-parent communication, and parent-to-school communication. It can create an avenue that encourages parental interaction with and at the school. Centrally located, where parents come and go, a parent bulletin board or message center can reach out to parents who rarely attend school functions or meetings. (ADI, 2011)

“Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing” (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26). Positive communication sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect, including home–school relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find creative ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Redding, 2000, 2006). Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). The school should provide “culturally and linguistically appropriate opportunities for parents to meet with one another to encourage the sharing of norms, standards, and parenting concerns and successes” (CII, 2011, pp. 185–186). See the example below for specifics on how bulletin board message centers can provide such an outlet (ADI, 2011, Redding, 2000). A carefully monitored online bulletin board might provide a similar option if most parents in your school have consistent internet access.

Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers to school–home communication, such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A bulletin board message system (multilingual if needed) may provide a low-stress means of communication for such parents.

Example:

In developing a parent bulletin board, think of it as communication central for ships that pass in the night. Your school’s parent message center can certainly be a platform to post monthly school information such as announcements, calendars, lunch menus, board minutes, and honor rolls and other award announcements. But remember, the nature of communication is two–way, and the goal is to generate parental interaction. Posted information can and does inspire communication from parents to school, but in a school community, interaction between parents is just as desirable.

In addition to a school information section on the parent bulletin board, provide a section for parents to communicate with other parents. Individual parents possess individual expertise, talents, and interests in a variety of areas. Try to view parents as resources to the school and to other parents. Not only is parent expertise and talent beneficial to the school in a volunteer capacity, it can also be useful to other parents if there is an awareness. The parent section of your message center opens the doors to parents helping parents and strengthens parental interaction.

Content of the parent section may require some screening. For this reason, a parent volunteer might be designated to manage the bulletin board project. This parent volunteer would receive items to be posted from parents and prepare the items for presentation on the board. This method would also keep the message center looking uniform and organized.

Here are a few things to consider in planning your Parent Communication Center:

- Keep two-way communication as its purpose
- Place it in a high parent traffic area
- Post clear instructions on how to submit items for posting
- Use a parent volunteer to coordinate the project
- Set a schedule for periodic changes in look and content
- Give it an attractive but orderly presentation
- Keep items simple and to the point
- Provide a Parent-to-Parent section
- Organize the bulletin board as a monthly calendar with a monthly theme (ADI, 2011)

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