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Principals Share Lessons Learned About Communicating With Parents, Others



Seldom does a day go by when most school leaders don't learn something *new* about the importance of communication, which evolves as new tools are introduced, old approaches revised, and new lessons learned. Here, our team of experienced "Principal Files" principals share their thoughts and tips about the most effective communication strategies.

Just as the best teachers clearly differentiate instruction in their classrooms, wise principals differentiate strategies they use as they communicate with parents and the wider school community, including school neighbors, business partners, the district office, and community leaders.

"We make a rule at our school to keep all stakeholders informed through a variety of communications and media," said Marguerite McNeely, principal at Lawrence Middle School in Deville, Louisiana. "One form of communication does not work for all, so we use newsletters, yearly and monthly calendars, weekly folders, e-mail, phone, regularly scheduled PTO meetings, school Web sites, and flyers posted at local businesses."

McNeely and other members of Education World's [Principal Files team](#) took time recently to share their communication success stories and offer some strategies that other principals might not have considered.

NEWSLETTERS: THE KEY ELEMENT OF ANY COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

If there is a universal element to most principals' communications plans, newsletters are it.

The weekly newsletter is key, according to Brian Hazeltine, principal (retired) of Airdrie Koinonia Christian School in Alberta, Canada. "It is delivered each week, physically, into parents hands; it's easy to read; and it can be kept around for future reference," said Hazeltine.

Principal Lolli Haws agrees. "Instead of sending home lots of flyers and hoping parents read them, I send a weekly newsletter from my desk. The newsletter, which I call Necessary News, is never more than one page long. It quickly summarizes upcoming events, school activities, announcements, and deadlines."

Parents know to look for Haws' Necessary News each week, always on Thursday, for everything they need to know.

On the same day her Necessary News goes home, teachers send home all student work along with special requests as part of their students Thursday Folders. Using this weekly tool "has really cleaned up communication," Haws, the principal at Oakridge Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, explained.

Many school principals time the delivery of their newsletters to be part of a weekly folder. To learn more about this concept, see an Education World article, [Weekly Folders Deliver News from School to Home](#).

As an added bonus, "We have saved a lot of trees by sending home far fewer flyers and announcement pages, all of which scream for attention in large, bold type," Haws added.

In addition to Haws' weekly newsletter, Oakridge Elementary's PTO sends out a monthly newsletter. "That newsletter includes honor roll lists, newsy items, and longer articles," Haws explained. "That enables me to keep the Necessary News short and to-the-point, and focused on the upcoming week or two so folks get the important dates marked on their calendars."

WEEKLY IS BEST

The regularity of Haws' Necessary News is one of its key elements and a fact not lost on most other principals.

Even more important than communication itself is "the critical need to be consistent in the ways and times we communicate," said Jack Noles, principal at Shallowater (Texas) Intermediate School. "Parents and community come to expect and depend on certain information to arrive at the same time and in the same manner."

Noles' weekly "Mustang Messages" is the most important tool in his communications arsenal. If the weekly newsletter doesn't show up, "even the happiest of constituents can become a little cranky," said Noles. And, in his mind, that's a good thing. It is proof that people are watching for it, even depending on it, and that they are eager to be informed about what is happening at his school.

Another upside of communicating regularly with parents is that "they are the very people who will carry your message to the rest of the community, and they are the first who will jump on whatever bandwagon you need them on," Noles added.

At Oakleaf K-8 School in Orange Park, Florida, Larry Davis has responsibility for more than 1,900 students. In a school that large, it's difficult for a single, concise newsletter to cover all the communication bases. A strong plan is essential, and weekly "Tuesday Folders" are part of Oakleaf's school-wide communication effort. The folders include the teacher's weekly newsletter, which keeps parents informed about academics and upcoming events.

"Our communications are grade-level appropriate," said Davis. "In addition to the classroom newsletters, we have a PFA (Parent Faculty Association) newsletter, a junior high school newsletter, and a monthly newsletter created by students in our journalism class."

Parents at Johnston Elementary School in Woodstock, Georgia, are well trained to look for the school's "Friday Packet" on Thursday night, according to Keith Ingram, the school's principal.

"We picked Thursday because we saw so many things get lost over the weekend," Ingram told Education World.

If the weekly newsletter doesn't show up, "even the happiest of constituents can become a little cranky" -- which is proof they are eager to be informed about what is happening at school.

"Each one of our homeroom teachers sends home his or her own newsletter on that day," Ingram added. "This has been a great help with parent-teacher communication.

"We also issue all students in grades 2-6 a student agenda, which is like a student Day-Timer. Students record homework and test dates, and parents sign the agenda each night."

CLARITY IS KEY

No matter what is being communicated, writing *clearly* is essential. While that probably goes without saying, most principals can share stories about lessons they learned when their writing lacked clarity and created confusion.

"I've learned -- mostly the hard way -- that communication is everything," said Lolli Haws. "Offhand remarks, things I might say as a joke, kidding, or as a generalization are largely quoted and often misquoted in all kinds of ways that can come back to haunt or hurt me or my role or the school."

This is especially important when you are a new principal, added Haws, who has been the "new principal in town" a couple times. "When you're new, everyone is listening carefully for something to talk about," she said. "In your first six months in a community, you must choose your words very carefully. You have to be willing to have everything you say printed on the front page of the newspaper."

"Anything that can be misunderstood will be misunderstood by at least some of the people some of the time," said Brian Hazeltine. "Don't be offended when your best efforts are either ignored or misunderstood. It happens. Expect to be misunderstood from time to time, and refine your writing skills accordingly."

Hazeltine has also learned to be sensitive to how articles, and especially requests, are worded. A statement such as "parents must" is always received more poorly than a statement that says "we need parents to," he added.

Marcia Wright, principal at Clinton (Michigan) Elementary School, agrees. "One tactic that works well for me is approaching parents from the perspective that we are a team working on behalf of their child. If we begin our tough phone calls and meetings with "I need your help with," that helps to settle hostility before it even appears."

PHONE SYSTEMS TO THE RESCUE

More and more school districts and schools are taking advantage of telephone technology to aid them in communicating with parents and others. Les Potter is one principal who is pleased to work in a district that had the foresight to invest in something he believes is

But I Don't Know Anything About Iowa!

A lack of clarity in written communication can cause confusion, hurt feelings, and even more serious repercussions. Keith Ingram recalls one situation that occurred back when he was an assistant principal. In hindsight, the story makes him smile, but it wasn't very funny at the time for one child.

The story takes place in the days before NCLB, when standardized tests were only a periodic occurrence, noted Ingram. "We had been making morning announcements to encourage our students to do their best on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills," he recalled.

"Then, one day, a mother came in and shared that her very bright child was completely stressed over the upcoming tests. She tried to comfort him, to tell him he would do fine, but he couldn't be

"the best device for communication I have ever seen in education" -- the [Connect-ED](#) phone message system.

"I can call all our schools' parents home or cell numbers in less than 10 minutes," Potter explained. "Or I can call groups of parents -- for example, parents of sixth graders or parents of boys."

"I get a printout that tells me the percent of parents who received the call -- usually over 90 percent -- and I have noticed that our attendance at functions has greatly increased.

"Parents seem to be very pleased with the Connect-Ed system, and we get fewer phone calls from parents looking for information than we got when we used more traditional methods of communication."

Beckie Weddle, principal at Centerton Elementary School in Martinsville, Indiana, can use her school's phone system to contact all parents within about five minutes. "I can do it from my computer," said Weddle. "I can put in as many as three contact numbers for each parent. The system will begin the calling when I tell it to, and it will also continue to attempt to call. It lets me know who was contacted and whose phone has been disconnected."

Weddle says the system is great for letting parents know when weather conditions will delay the start of the school day.

She also uses the system to remind parents about upcoming events. "For example, I will call kindergarten parents to remind them about Monday's field trip. I remind them "Be sure your child has lunch and dresses warmly. We will return to school by 2:30."

[Go to Part 2 of this article](#)

Click the link above to read our "P-Files" principals practical tips for improving communication as well as unique approaches you might not have considered for communicating with parents. Plus: "Differentiating" communication for different constituencies.

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Last updated 11/15/2011

helped. She finally asked what was worrying him so much. The little guy said he knew the tests started first thing on Monday morning but here it was Thursday afternoon and his teacher still had not yet taught him one single thing about the state of Iowa!"

That story helped convince Ingram about the importance of clarity. Just when a principal thinks he has gotten out his message, he must keep trying because someone is probably missing a key piece of information that he might be able to clarify.

The district's new phone system is "the best device for communication I have ever seen in education."

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