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July 22, 2016 **Teacher Essentials**

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Principals Share Lessons Learned About Communicating With Parents, Others

Part 2: Communication Advice and Unique Approaches

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In [part 1 of this article](#), Education Worlds "Principal Files" principals shared some of their approaches for improving communication with parents and others. Below you'll find a few more unique approaches as well as tips for improving and "differentiating" communication.

COMMUNICATION CALLS FOR UNIQUE APPROACHES

Following are a few approaches our "P-Files" principals have tried. There might be an idea or two here that you can use to meet your school communication needs.

Parent Forum. "In the middle of the school year, right around the time of the president's State of the Union address, I plan a mid-year event called Parent Forum," said Lolli Haws. "Informally, I call it my State of the School event. I review the school's achievement, goals, progress, what's underway, what's coming up, what issues are around... Then I ask parents to give me their feedback and thoughts on those same topics. Lots of parents come. And they leave feeling proud of their school and having had an opportunity to address concerns, hear the good news, quell the rumors, and hear what's on the horizon. It is always a very positive event and has created a lot of confidence in the school."

Principal Podcasts. New technologies afford many opportunities to communicate with parents. Keith Ingram produces regular Principal Podcasts that appear on the [Johnston Elementary School Web site](#). In addition, the site includes a video slide show. "We use both of these tools to communicate important information to parents," said Ingram. "Principals should use these technologies and be on the lookout for new ones."

Hall Monitors. At Centerton Elementary School in Martinsville, Indiana, "we have two closed-circuit television monitors in the hallway," said principal Beckie Weddle. "The monitors present a welcome message to

"I'm Sorry"

If a conversation with a parent is about a less-than-positive topic, teachers at Itawamba High School in Fulton, Mississippi, always preface what they have to say with "I'm sorry that I have to call you" or "I'm sorry that I had to ask you to come to school today"

everyone; announce our ranking as a 4-star school [earned for being among the top 25 percent of schools in the state based on test scores and attendance]; inform about the breakfast/lunch menus; and announce any other activities going on."

Parent Survey. Early in the school year, parents at Aorangi School in Christchurch, New Zealand, are invited to a "consultation meeting" at which the school vision is the topic of conversation. "We review with parents our goals and values," explained principal Stephanie Thompson. Then four questions are posed to parents:

- What do you want for your children?
- What are the important things your children must have when they leave our school?
- Where do you want/who do you want your children to be in 10/15 years time?
- What do you think we could do differently or better to be outstanding?

Parents meet in groups to discuss and record their ideas. "This meeting is an overwhelming success, and it allows us to sharpen our vision and shape our curriculum to better personalize learning for our students."

Parents as Improvement Partners. Frank Hagen, principal at Saint Michaels (Maryland) Middle/High School, admits that educators can become myopic if they do not allow parents an equal share in the partnership of educating all children. That's why the principal, teachers, staff, students, and parents on the schools council share "reciprocal responsibility" for governance and improvement, Hagen told Education World. "Parents have a unique and special view of the school consequently, they bring very valuable input relative to any decision associated with governance and improvement," he said. Parents not on the council have opportunities to help improve the school too through an annual survey, which invites responses to four questions:

- What should our school continue doing?
- What should our school stop doing?
- What does our school need to do better?
- What might you (as a parent) be able to do to help improve our school?

The survey also invites parents to request a conversation with the principal. "All of this data is collected, collated, and shared with the school council, staff, and parents, and it is analyzed to provide us with valuable qualitative data on school governance and improvement," added Hagen.

Coffee With the Principal. At North Canton (Ohio) Hoover High School, principal Tony Pallija invites parents to have Coffee With the Principal. "This is something I have done for years," said Pallija. "The meetings are announced in our school newsletters. I often work with the PTO or Academic Booster Club to plan these events."

"We would have preferred that the parent could be at work rather than discussing this problem at school, so we let them know that we are sorry," explained principal Michael McNeece.

It's a very simple approach, but it works. It helps set the tone for a potentially challenging conversation, added McNeece.

"I don't know why we are sometimes reluctant to use the phrase 'I'm sorry,'" McNeece said. "By using it, we are showing that we are always sympathetic with the parent and want the best for the student."

"When communicating with parents by phone or in person, teachers and I are always sure to include the "magic words" *please* and *thank you* in our conversations too," added McNeece.

Year at a Glance. Each spring, Lolli Haws and her staff at Oakridge Elementary School agree on a calendar for the entire next school year. "All programs, special events, PTA events, concerts, and so on, are set," Haws explained. "The calendar is sent home in the welcome-back-to-school letter that is mailed to parents each August. People can write those things on their calendars, and we go from there." Slight changes occur from time to time, but Haws has gotten a lot of positive feedback from parents who like knowing a year in advance when the talent show is or when the orchestra spring concert will be so they can plan around those events.

Quarterly Newsletters. "Our teachers send home a newsletter every nine weeks [with student report cards] that informs parents about what students will be studying in the weeks ahead," said Beckie Weddle. "Teachers also provide information about projects and deadlines, tips for helping students study, or examples of how to solve math problems students will be learning to do." Weddle likes the quarterly newsletters for another reason: they help keep her informed about what teachers are teaching. All newsletters are posted to the school Web site too.

DIFFERENTIATING COMMUNICATION

Just as teachers are charged with differentiating instruction for a wide range of student abilities, so Stephanie Thompson, principal of the multicultural Aorangi School in Christchurch, New Zealand, uses a variety of strategies to differentiate her school communications.

"Along with the standard approaches -- such as newsletters, regular spots in the city paper, and surveys -- we have regular community meetings," Thompson told Education World. "In order to entice participation, we provide food and childcare, and sometimes we have goodie bags with pertinent items and spot prizes such as gift cards to local merchants. These things are meant to break down some of the barriers families have when it comes to attending these meetings."

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In addition, providing bilingual translators encourages participation by all, added Thompson.

Since Oakridge Elementary School is outside of Washington, D.C., it is home to many who work in government and diplomatic circles. For that reason, its population is a multicultural one and Lolli Haws adjusts her demeanor with parents from of many cultures. "I try to match body language, eye contact, and voice tone and intensity to that of the parent because I'm usually communicating through an interpreter," explained Haws. "In addition, I've learned that cultures where men are dominant have very different interaction expectations with a female principal than cultures where women are in charge of family decisions."

"Communicating through translators requires time and careful attention to word choice and other patterns," she added. "It is important to always convey that I am comfortable, pleased, open and listening, no matter what the culture of the parent or group."

Haws also employs different communication strategies with kindergarten parents. "They usually want a lot more face time and attention than parents of upper-grade students," she said.

For Brian Hazeltine, technology provides tools for differentiating how he informs parents about school activities. "A comprehensive Web site is a great tool for answering questions and addressing concerns of new families who have fairly typical questions," he told Education World.

"Adding audio and video clips to a Web site is now quite simple and adds another dimension," he added. "We have begun to do that, and I think it holds great promise for communicating with the non-readers and ELL parents."

Email is another viable tool for communicating with the school community, if messages are kept short and to the point, added Hazeltine. And the Web also enables schools to connect easily with their alumni populations.

At North Canton Hoover High, Tony Pallijas guidance staff provides meetings designed to address specific needs of the schools parents. This year they will tailor evening meetings for parents who are interested in learning more about specific topics such as state and national testing; graduation requirements; college financial aid; and post-secondary educational options.

PRINCIPALS OFFER COMMUNICATION TIPS

Every school day affords a principal many opportunities to communicate with students, teachers, staff, and other constituencies. Following are a dozen tips for taking advantage of situations that often arise. Each tip identifies the Principal Files principal who offered it.

Publicize important events and deadlines over and over and over. Just because you've said it, posted it, announced it, sent a flyer, and done everything else youve thought to do doesnt ensure you wont have those who say, "I didn't know" (Lolli Haws)

Organize focus groups of parents to discuss any changes you may want to make to the schools behavior management plan or other school-wide policies that impact students and, therefore, parents. (Stephanie Thompson)

Return phone calls from parents as soon as possible, no matter what. Parents need to feel valued. (Marcia Wright)

Include extended articles in your weekly newsletter a few times a month. Articles on child development, education, schooling, parenting, and culture, are appropriate. (Brian Hazeltine)

Dont forget to use the local media. All parents love to see their child's name or picture on TV or in the newspaper. If an administrator makes it a priority to communicate with the community on a regular basis, he or she will have community support when it is most needed. (Marguerite McNeely)

Keep a phone log. I write down every phone call I receive and make and summarize the outcome in a few words. I start a new page each day so I have a record of whom I called or who called me. This has been very helpful in many ways. (Lolli Haws)

For new principals, the best thing is to be visible. Dont hide away in your office. Get out

Free Newsletter Features For Parents

Have you seen Education Worlds [Newsletters R Us features](#)? These ready-to-use features, which are written for parents, are free to you to use! Simply copy and paste them into your school newsletter. Features include

- **[The ABCs of Student Success](#)** Helping students achieve from A to Z.
- **[Caught on the Web](#)** Educational sites to share with parents.
- **[Clipart Library](#)** Free art livens up newsletters.
- **[Fun Facts](#)** Fun and educational newsletter content.
- **[Parent Newsletter Templates](#)** A new template for each month.
- **[Math @ Home](#)** Math activities for parents and kids.
- **["QuotED"](#)** Educational quotes

to the gate to welcome and farewell students. During your first few weeks, tell parents that you will be in the foyer, happy to meet with them before and after school. While you may not get any takers for the first few days, eventually people will trickle in. (Stephanie Thompson)

to inspire.
 • **Parent Pointers**
 Ponder these themed parenting tips.

Let an angry parent vent. Don't interrupt. Once the parent is finished or comes up for air, respond by saying, "I know you must be very frustrated." Rephrasing what has been said helps the parent feel listened to and it builds rapport. (Marcia Wright)

Many of our area business partners have bulletin boards, and they are very willing to allow us to post our school newsletters on them. Publix supermarket, for example, is very supportive. Parents and others who shop there can learn what's going on in our school. (Larry Davis)

I take advantage of lunch duty as an opportunity to communicate with students. I am able to answer many questions they might have and get a good sense of their concerns. (Beckie Weddle)

Send home copies of your weekly newsletter, but post them to the school Web site too. We also have a hotline that parents can call to hear a recording of school events. (Marcia Wright)

No matter how long you've been a principal, *listen* more than you talk. (Lolli Haws)

COMMUNICATIONS IMMEASURABLE BENEFITS

In 30-plus years as an educator, Frank Hagen has used a myriad of methods to communicate with parents. He has employed newsletters, positive telephone calls of praise, auto-dialed messages about upcoming events, emails, open houses, parent orientations, technology workshops, publishing his home telephone number. All of those things are intent on creating a welcoming atmosphere for parents and other visitors to his school.

"I have spent considerable time and energy doing these things because I know that parents are a very important part of the equation in educating a child for success in the 21st Century," Hagen told Education World.

"It is incredible the amount of parent and community support a school receives when you take the time and energy to genuinely value the expertise and input of parents," Hagen added. "There is a synergistic partnership formed based on the mutual respect parents, teachers, staff, students, and administrators have for one another's expertise, caring, and input."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Parent Involvement

Explore Education World's archive of articles on this topic.

"Principal Contributors" to This Article

The following members of Education World's "Principal Files" team shared their thoughts in this article about effective communication strategies.

- Larry Davis, principal, OakLeaf K-8 School, Orange Park, Florida
- Frank J. Hagen, principal, Saint Michaels (Maryland) Middle/High School

- Dr. Lolli Haws, principal, [Oakridge Elementary School](#), Arlington, Virginia
- Brian Hazeltine, principal (retired); adjunct graduate faculty, Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Dr. Keith Ingram, principal, Johnston Elementary School, Woodstock, Georgia
- Michael McNeece, principal, Stern Enhancement School, Greenville, Mississippi
- Marguerite McNeely, principal, [Hayden R. Lawrence Middle School](#), Deville, Louisiana
- Jack Noles, principal, Shallowater (Texas) Intermediate School
- Tony Pallija, principal, North Canton (Ohio) Hoover High School
- Dr. Les Potter, principal, Silver Sands Middle School, Port Orange, Florida
- Stephanie Thompson, principal, Aorangi School, Christchurch, New Zealand
- Beckie Weddle, principal, Centerton Elementary School, Martinsville, Indiana
- Marcia Wright, principal, Clinton (Michigan) Elementary School

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Article by Gary Hopkins

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