

Two-Way Communication for District Leaders



DISTRICT-WIDE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Along with creating opportunities to directly communicate with families, another key role of district leaders is to foster district-wide programs, policies, and support strategies to ensure appropriate structures are in place for all schools to consistently engage families as partners. There are a wide variety of traditional communication strategies that exist for schools to connect with families including phone calls, conferences, open houses, websites, newsletters, email, home visits, and social media. To be most effective, these strategies must be culturally responsive to the diverse language, needs, schedules and preferences of families. No single means of communication will meet the needs of all families; rather, multiple strategies should always be employed. Guidance for implementing effective strategies at the school level, such as with focus groups, family surveys, and home visits, are discussed in further detail in the Teacher and Principal resources on Two-Way Communication. District leaders have the responsibility of determining the framework in which schools communicate through establishing equitable district-wide policies and programs that are responsive to the needs of all families. Below are a few examples of promising practices supporting communication with families across school districts.¹

This resource is designed to assist district leaders in developing equitable policies for communicating with families about the formative assessment process.

Recommendations

- Implementation Settings
- District level meetings
 - Planned individual time

Planning Time: 60 minutes to plan

Implementation Time: 20 minutes to read resource

Stories from the Field



HOME VISITS

Wichita Public Schools, KS

School-level family engagement teams help organize “porch visits,” during which school staff visit students’ homes prior to the beginning of the school year. The visits serve to let staff members, who are trained with a family involvement curriculum, to introduce themselves to families and make them feel welcome as members of the school community. In the 2008-2009 academic year, all 80 elementary schools and most of the middle schools participated in this visitation program. The district will be expanding this model to the high-school level.



WORKSHOPS

Federal Way Public Schools, WA

Schools conduct “What Every Parent Wants to Know” workshops, at which parents are invited to ask questions of teachers and administrators. The workshops impress upon parents the importance of their roles in children’s education and provide examples of how parents can support their children’s academic progress. Parents and school staff members can request these workshops, which are jointly led by a parent and the school principal, at any time during the school year, either at the school or in a community location of the parents’ choosing.



DIALOGUES

St. Paul Public Schools, MN

The district is implementing a Latino Consent Decree that requires the district to meet regularly with a parent and community group. The parents meet with the superintendent’s office to discuss educational issues, such as attendance and testing, and to make recommendations to the school board. The district is required to respond formally to these recommendations. Parents also take the responsibility to share district information with those who are unable to attend the meetings.

Source: Harvard Family Research Project - <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/seeing-is-believing-promising-practices-for-how-school-districts-promote-family-engagement>

District leaders can develop equitable policies focused on enhancing families as key partners in the formative assessment process. Existing or new policies can be reviewed to ensure there is encouragement of two-way communication with families - to offer their unique perspective on their child's strengths and needs, ask questions and share thoughts about assessment data, contribute to setting learning goals, and engage in partnership opportunities. Adapted from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) work, the following framework can be used to develop an action plan for policy development (on both school and district levels) or evaluate current policies in support of two-way communication with families.ⁱⁱ

Establish a written formal policy. Successful two-way communication requires a common vision and commitment from all members of the school community including families, educators, principals, and district leaders. "It requires a school environment that welcomes its partners and encourages them to raise questions and voice their concerns, as well as to participate equally in decision-making." Comprehensive policies supporting this vision that are aligned from the school to district level can set the stage for sustained communication and collaboration amongst stakeholders. With respect to implementation of a formative assessment process, aligned policies can also ensure families are systematically involved as partners, from providing input on classroom-level practices to district-level decision-making. Moreover, it is key that communication policies recognize and value the importance of a community's historical, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural resources. Policy development is ideally done in partnership with families to ensure all communication practices are responsive to the diverse needs of families and provide ample opportunities for meaningful input.

Allocate adequate resources to carry out the policy. To ensure effective implementation of policies, district leaders can ensure adequate resources are available. NSPRA suggests "the scope of involvement will dictate whether additional financial resources are needed and where they may be found through reprogramming and identifying new sources - such as district or state education funds, public agencies, foundations, Title I, other federal government funds and local businesses." Moreover, continuity in funding is key and a stable funding source can help to drive maintenance

of policy efforts. Budgets reflect the values of the organizations, and the value of inclusive family voice should be transparent.

Define outcomes. It is important to set goals by specifying the outcomes of the policy and the time period. Outcomes should be verifiable and achievable.

Plan your communication. For successful implementation, it is critical for all stakeholders potentially impacted to fully understand the implication of the policy. NSPRA suggests to "remember that one communication technique is rarely a 'silver bullet' for reaching most parents. You may be able to write the same messages but delivery methods must be culturally responsive and meet the needs of the families...some will prefer e-mail or a listserv, while others prefer the 'backpack method' or delivery through churches or community and social centers. It will take time, but district leaders must assess, with the help of families, what works best for school district stakeholders."

Establish assessment and evaluation procedures. Being able to assess the "wins" of the policy is also a key factor of its success. Ask parents how communication is working. How can the district improve it? How will the district assess progress? Attendance at parent meetings, rising test scores, better student attendance, increased student social/emotional engagement and feedback from teachers that parents are more involved (whether at school or in other ways) are all factors of increased and effective communication.



Guiding Questions for Examining Existing Communication Policies

1. What are our core beliefs about involved families that should inform how we engage them in two-way communication?
2. Do the existing policies reflect our vision for two-way communication with all families? If not, what changes could be made to enhance the policies?
3. What was the role of families in policy development to guide communication practices?
4. Do the existing policies regarding communication recognize the importance of our community's historical, ethnic, linguistic and cultural resources? Which families were present for the decision making process? What race, ethnicity, nationalities were represented?
5. Are there currently adequate resources to fund implementation of the communication policies?
6. Can the funding source be considered "stable" and used to maintain implementation of the policies for an extended period of time?
7. Are there clear outcomes that define what the district hopes to achieve with the policies and over what period of time?
8. How were all stakeholders (e.g. families, educators, school leaders, etc.) informed about the policies? Were multiple communication strategies used, including translation of materials?
9. What procedures are being used to assess the success of the policies in supporting two-way communication?

RESOURCES

ⁱ Westmoreland, H., Rosenberg, H. M., Elena Lopez, M., & Weiss, H. (2009). Seeing is believing: Promising practices for how school districts promote family engagement. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/seeing-is-believing-promising-practices-for-how-school-districts-promote-family-engagement>

ⁱⁱ National School Public Relations Association. (2006). How strong communication contributes to student and school success: Parent and family involvement. Retrieved from http://www.nspr.org/files/docs/Strong_Communication_Students_School_Success.pdf