

Chapter Three

Communicating with Families about the Academic Process

In this chapter you will find information and resources regarding...

- Sharing information in family friendly formats
- Building families' understanding of academic content and achievement standards
- Explaining state and local assessment procedures and results
- Engaging families in monitoring their children's progress

Introduction and Overview

Sharing Information

The Title I law covering Parental Involvement (Section 1118) stresses the need to make school events, policies, activities and information readily available to families in accessible formats. For instance, the law contains statements that schools shall:

- convene an annual meeting at convenient times;
- offer a flexible number of meetings, such as meetings in the morning or evening, and may provide, with funds provided under this part, transportation, child care, or home visits, as such services relate to parental involvement; and
- ensure that information related to school and parent programs, meetings, and other activities is sent to the parents of participating children in a format and, to the extent practicable, in a language the parents can understand.

In order for schools to address these requirements, staff members need to think collaboratively and creatively. Districts or individual schools may want to start by conducting formal or informal surveys of the families they serve in order to determine:

- the best times and places to hold different types of meetings,
- what types of communication technology families have access to and are comfortable using (phones, computers/internet, video/DVD players, etc), and
- what languages are used by the families in their community.

Consider setting up flexible schedules for certain staff members so they can work at times when parents are available. If families cannot come to the school, arrange for staff to visit them at home, or perhaps at work during a break or lunch hour. If meetings are held in the evenings or weekends, provide child care and/or activities for children so that the whole family can attend. Encourage family-to-family networking so that child care or transportation responsibilities can be shared. Ask families and staff members to work together to explore or develop strategies for using websites, emails, video/phone conferencing, informational videos and other alternatives for “virtual” meetings.

As mentioned in previous chapters, schools need to be aware of the home languages and cultures experienced by the children they serve so that those languages and cultures are reflected in the school's efforts. Investigate options for translating printed materials and strive to have translators available for face-to-face communications. Check with local cultural organizations to see if they have recommendations or sources for translation services. Area hospitals, social service agencies and police departments may also have a list of potential translators they could share with schools. Be aware that even though families may list a common language, there may be differences in accents, word usage and cultural norms if those families come from different regions. When possible, look for translators who share the regional origin or culture of the families being served.

Schools often communicate with families through newsletters, handouts or other written materials. Busy families may only glance at papers coming from school. Unless there's something that grabs their attention or shows them that the information is particularly relevant and important, the material may be set aside without a thorough reading. Written communications need to be visually appealing, clear, and concise. Make sure print fonts are attractive and easy to read. Always have several people proofread materials that will be sent home to families. Schools may even want to set up a pool of volunteer readers who will review/edit written materials.

Judicious use of digital pictures, children's art, and graphics can add meaning and emphasis to the words on a handout. Don't overuse "cutesy" images, which can lead people to think the information presented is not particularly important. Select images that will appeal to and include the audience you are trying to reach. Avoid stereotypes that lead people to believe only one type of parent is expected to be involved (see Smythe & Isserlis in the ***Additional Information and On-line Materials*** section.) Make sure that pictures of people reflect the children, families, and cultures served by your school. It may be helpful to collect a sample of materials that have gone home to families over a period of months and have a small group of staff members and parents review the images used. Based on their findings, they could develop some guidelines and suggestions for images that would be effective in future materials.

While children often carry information between home and school, they may not always be the most reliable of couriers. Papers may disappear into apparently bottomless backpacks, be left behind at a friend's house or day care, or otherwise get lost along the way. When families are unresponsive to written communications, check to make sure they are actually receiving them. Important information may need to be mailed or followed up with a phone call or personal contact. If the adults in the family continue to be unresponsive, adult literacy may be an issue and alternative communication strategies will need to be employed.



Sharing information between home and school takes time and energy. Families and staff members must juggle the need to establish and maintain effective communication along with their many other commitments and responsibilities. In striving to help families stay informed, school systems need to develop a range of informal and formal strategies that will work for a variety of children, families, teachers and situations. Some information will need to be shared individually, for instance a review and discussion of a particular child's activities or progress. Other information can be shared with groups of people, such as notices about school events or bringing people together to plan and carry out school improvement efforts. In the ***Resources*** section of this chapter

you will find materials for both school personnel and families that can be used to enhance home-school communication.

Understanding Academic Content and Achievement Standards

The most important topic for home-school communication should be education. Families, children, and educators should develop a shared understanding of the knowledge and skills people need in order to be competent, confident and useful participants in society. Achievement standards are one way in which the state can describe and measure children's content knowledge and progress towards learning the things they need to know and apply in their daily lives.

Links to web-sites providing information about Idaho's standards and subject guides, the State Aligned Learning Continuum, and the Comprehensive Literacy Plan can be found in the ***Additional Information and On-Line Materials*** section for this chapter.

The standards, the subject guides, the Learning Continuum, and the Literacy Plan should be shared regularly with families and can stimulate collaborative discussions about how skills taught in school are related to life-long learning and achievement. Relevant sections can be shared and discussed with individual family members as part of a report sent home or a parent teacher conference. Groups of parents and teachers can also explore these materials through venues such as workshops, web-sites and newsletters. By utilizing, explaining and referencing the standards, schools can show families they are teaching a series of increasingly complex skills that will help children function in the real world.

Understanding State and Local Assessment Procedures and Results

In the current political climate, assessment, testing and accountability, are hot topics. The debate is often polarized; however, there is a common denominator: a genuine concern that children's knowledge and progress be assessed in a meaningful, appropriate and timely manner. Good educational assessments let us know how children are learning so that families and educators can make informed decisions about individual, classroom and school wide educational programs.



Families need to understand that quality schools will use a range of assessment tools and strategies. Educators should prepare and present descriptions of the various ways they measure children’s progress, including informal and formal observations of children while they are engaged in the learning process; records of assignments and homework; skills checklists; teacher prepared quizzes and tests; portfolios; and standardized tests. Anxiety about so-called “high-stakes testing” is often relieved when both participants and their families are informed that decisions about children’s educational programming are not based on the results of a single test but on careful review of a range of information gathered about a child. Indeed, the American Educational Research Association states that, “Decisions that affect individual student’s life chances or educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores alone.”

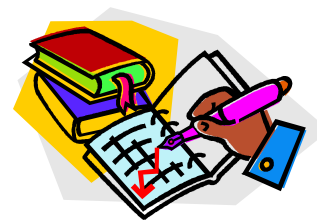
Information about assessments in general, testing related to the No Child Left Behind Act, and Idaho’s Reading Indicator can be found in the *Additional Information and On-line Materials* section of this chapter.

Family Involvement in Monitoring Progress

When schools share information about what children need to know and how children are assessed, families can become more involved in the educational process. They can watch for key skills to emerge in a range of settings outside the classroom. They can provide guidance, practice and support for a child who is working on a new skill. They can alert teachers and school staff to successes and challenges they witness in their children’s daily lives. Families that are involved in monitoring their children’s progress are valuable and informed participants in shaping the educational future of their children.

Strategies for including families in monitoring progress include:

- Provide written material and/or workshops that describe skills children are learning and examples of ways children demonstrate those skills.
- Create child and/or classroom specific checklists of selected skills and ask parents to observe and record their child’s use of those skills. This can be as simple as one or two “skills of the week” or as elaborate as a version of a curricular scope and sequence chart.
- During a parent-teacher conference or visit, jointly review examples of the child’s work and assignments and prepare a mutual summary of the child’s skills and progress.
- Videotape a child engaged in a learning activity; view and discuss it with the child’s family.
- Make sure that family-friendly explanations of standardized tests and results are available.
- Provide a “hotline” number at the classroom, school and/or district level that families can call to ask questions or get additional information about testing procedures and results.



- Encourage discussion of how teacher/family observations of the child compare with the results of formal or standardized testing.
- Explore the *Additional Information and On-line Materials* listed for this chapter for materials that might help the families you work with understand and participate in their children's learning.

Annotated Bibliography

Smythe, S & Isserlis, J., "The Good Mother: Exploring Mothering Discourses in Family Literacy Texts." *Family Literacy Forum*, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall, 2003. Retrieved on June 15, 2004 from: <http://www.lacnyc.org/resources/publications/harvest/harvestFall03.pdf>

Discusses how stereotypical expectations and images of mother/child interaction can work against positive participation of both mothers and fathers in their child's literacy development.

Additional Information and On-line Materials

Home-School Communication

National School Public Relations Association. *Effective Home-to-School Communication: NSPRA Provides an ABC list of tips and techniques*. Available at: <http://www.arsba.org/EffectiveHome%C9hoolCommunica.pdf>

This article provides tips for families on how they can communicate effectively with their children's schools.

University of Illinois Extension. *Helping Children Succeed in School: Parent-Teacher Communication*. Available at: <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/succeed/09-communication.html>

A brief article for families with suggestions about how to communicate with their children's teachers.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Clark, A.M., "Parent Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Champaign, IL 1999. Available at: <http://www.ericdigests.org/2000-2/parents.htm>

Offers families suggestions for enhancing teacher-parent communication, addressing learning and behavior problems, and asking enlightening questions.

Spinelli, L. *Parent-Teacher Conferences: Working as a Team*. Available at:

<http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/parent-teacher.html>

Practical suggestions for helping parents communicate with teachers during parent-teacher conferences.

Academic Content and Standards

Administrative Rules related to Idaho Achievement Standards and Guides to the Standards, by subject area and grade level, can be found at:

<http://www.idahoboardofed.org/saa/standards.asp>

Contains links to the Administrative Rules governing the state's achievement standards and a series of guides, listed by subject area and broken down by grade level. These K - 12 teacher guides for the subjects of health, humanities, language arts/communications, mathematics, science and social studies are in a PDF format which can be downloaded and/or printed out. Each guide describes academic content knowledge and skills expected at each of the different grade levels.

Idaho's State Aligned Learning Continuum Release 1.0 Available at:

<http://www.sde.state.id.us/dept/docs/standards/NWEALearningContinuum-Draft1web.pdf>

Description of the state's learning continuum which reflects Idaho's Achievement Standards. A tool for teachers, administrators and the public to better understand the learning objectives measured by the Idaho Standards Achievement Test

Idaho's Comprehensive Literacy Plan Outline and Overview. Available at:

<http://www.sde.state.id.us/instruct/reading/comp-reading-plan.asp>

Literacy skills, teaching interventions and assessment strategies are listed for each grade level, Kindergarten through Third Grade

Assessment

American Educational Research Association (AERA) Position Statement Concerning High Stakes Testing in PreK-12 Education. Available at:

<http://35.8.171.42/aera/about/policy/stakes.htm>

AERA is a professional organization that focuses on the scientific study of education. This position statement defines "high stakes testing" and outlines a "set of conditions essential to sound implementation of high stakes educational testing programs."

Idaho's SDE. *Parent Guide to the IRI (Idaho Reading Indicator)*. Available at:

<http://www.sde.state.id.us/Vault/DocVault/CurrAcc/IRI/ParentsGuideFall2003.pdf>

Information for parents about the Idaho Reading Indicator, with an explanation of what children are expected to know at each level, Kindergarten - Third Grade.

Pellegrino, J.W., Chudowsky, N., & Glaser, R., eds. Naomi and Robert Glaser, (*editors*), 2001. *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment*. Committee on the Foundations of Assessment, Board on Testing and Assessment, Center for Education, National Research Council. Available at: <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309072727/html/>

Explains how “expanding knowledge in the scientific fields of human learning and educational measurement can form the foundations of an improved approach to assessment” and explores “implications for policy, practice, and research.”

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Position Statement on Early Childhood Assessment. Available at: http://www.nasponline.org/information/pospaper_eca.html

Recommends assessment practices that are appropriate for preschool and primary grade children

National PTA: No Child Left Behind (ESEA) Testing Accountability and the Law. Available at: http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/helpchild/hc_gc_nochildleftbehind_testing.asp

Discusses what parents need to know about No Child Left Behind and mandatory state tests.

U.S. Dept. of Education. *Testing for Results: Helping Families, Schools and Communities Understand and Improve Student Achievement*. Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/testingforresults.html>

Explains accountability and testing aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, discusses measuring student progress and explores myths and realities of testing.

Resources

- A. Home-School Information Checklist.** Suggestions for ways schools can reach out to families using various formats. Prepared by staff at the University of Idaho’s Center on Disabilities and Human Development for Idaho’s State Department of Education.
- B. Sharing Home-School Information: A Handout for Families and Teachers.** Reviews some of the types of information that will help parents and teachers support children’s learning at home and school. Prepared by staff at the University of Idaho’s Center on Disabilities and Human Development for Idaho’s State Department of Education.
- C. A Survey for Families: What’s the Best Way to Communicate?** A survey that can be sent home to families by a classroom teacher in order to learn about families preferred modes of communication. Prepared by staff at the University of Idaho’s Center on Disabilities and Human Development for Idaho’s State Department of Education.

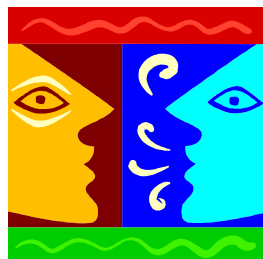
D. Additional Resources. Schools are encouraged to add to this list any other resources that their programs have found useful in empowering families.

Home-School Information Checklist

Use the checklist below to think about how you share information with the families in your school and explore new possibilities for enhancing home-school communication. Consider how you might “mix and match” different types of information with a variety of sharing strategies.

Sharing Information about Individual Children	
<i>Types of Information to Share</i>	<i>Strategies for Sharing Information</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Important events and achievements, such as completing a project or reaching a new skill level <input type="checkbox"/> Comments (especially positive ones) about activities, interests and/or behavior <input type="checkbox"/> Concerns about a child’s health, behavior, or attendance <input type="checkbox"/> Skills the child has accomplished <input type="checkbox"/> Skills the child is working on <input type="checkbox"/> Strategies for helping the child at home with a particular skill <input type="checkbox"/> Test scores <input type="checkbox"/> Progress summaries <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities to support child’s learning <input type="checkbox"/> Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous conversations or “on-the spot” chats <input type="checkbox"/> Notes (sent home with child or mailed) <input type="checkbox"/> E-mails <input type="checkbox"/> Phone calls <input type="checkbox"/> Customized handouts and information sheets (such as suggestions for books the child might enjoy, specific skill-building activities, or supportive parent materials) <input type="checkbox"/> Home visits <input type="checkbox"/> Report Cards <input type="checkbox"/> Parent-Teacher Conferences (either as needed or at the end of a recording period) <input type="checkbox"/> Other

Sharing Information about the Classroom and School	
<i>Types of Information to Share</i>	<i>Strategies for Sharing Information</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Classroom daily schedules and classroom/school events and activities <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior expectations and guidance policies <input type="checkbox"/> Subjects being studied <input type="checkbox"/> Skills being taught <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching and assessment strategies used <input type="checkbox"/> Relevance of subjects and skills to the child’s life and future learning <input type="checkbox"/> Ways to support learning at/from home <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities to help in the classroom and/or school <input type="checkbox"/> Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Daily, weekly and monthly schedules, calendars and/or newsletters: posted, sent home, and/or available on a web-site <input type="checkbox"/> Overviews of expectations, subjects, skills, strategies, etc.: posted, sent home, available on a web site and/or during presentations <input type="checkbox"/> Back-to-school nights (or Saturday mornings?), potlucks, or picnics <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops on specific learning topics or issues <input type="checkbox"/> Group lunch with the principal (teacher, counselor, Title I coordinator, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Subject/skill specific handouts with a range of suggestions for support activities <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer orientation sessions <input type="checkbox"/> Other



Sharing Information Supports Children's Learning

When parents and teachers know what's happening at home and school, they can reinforce learning in both settings. For instance...

If *families* know that their child's class is studying animals, they can...

- Look for and talk about the animals they see around their home or on a walk.
- Go to the library to look for stories or facts about the child's favorite animal.
- Plan a trip to study animals at a park, museum, zoo, or farm.

If *teachers* know that a child's family is involved or interested in sports, they can...

- Plan math lessons that use sports scores and statistics.
- Suggest learning games to play while driving to and from practices and games.
- Include books and magazines that deal with sport topics in the classroom library.

How can we learn more about what is happening at school and home?

Families can learn more about what is happening in the classroom when they ask their children and their children's teachers questions like...

- What does the daily schedule look like?
- What books or stories are the children reading or having read to them?
- What are the children studying in science, social studies, art, music, etc.?
- What math skills are the children currently working on?
- What kind of learning centers and/or optional activities can the children explore during the school day?

Families can help teachers plan meaningful and appropriate learning activities when they...

- Share information about their family's and child's interests and abilities.
- Let teachers know about the types of reading and other learning activities they enjoy at home.
- Talk with teachers about special events or activities in their child's life.

Because how children are feeling can affect their ability to work in the classroom, parents and teachers also support children's learning when they let each other know if a child...

- is especially excited, enthusiastic or interested in a specific topic,
- is getting used to a new routine or facing changes at home or school,
- has been sick or injured,
- hasn't been sleeping well or seems overly tired,
- seems upset, unhappy or concerned about a particular situation.

Families and Teachers: Together They Help Children Learn!

A Survey for Families: What's the Best Way to Communicate?

It's important for families and teachers to communicate regularly. Please take a few moments to let us know about the best ways we can stay in touch!

Name _____ Child's Name _____
 Phone Number _____ Best Times to Call _____
 E-mail Address _____

I'd like to learn about school events and activities through...

- School newsletters or calendars of events sent home with my child
- Posters and displays at the school
- E-mails
- A school website
- Other _____

I'd like to learn about classroom events and activities through...

- Classroom newsletters or calendars of events sent home with my child
- Phone calls
- E-mails
- A classroom website
- Other _____

I'd like to learn about what my child will learn and be tested on this year through...

- Informational workshops or meetings at the school
- Informational handouts that I can read at a convenient time
- Information and articles posted on a web-site
- E-mailed information and articles
- Other _____

I'd like to learn about my child's individual progress through...

- Report cards
- Parent/teacher conferences
- Personal phone calls from the teacher
- Personal e-mails from the teacher
- Home visits
- Other _____

If someone has good news or concerns about my child I would like them to...

- Call me at home
- Call me at work
- Send me an e-mail
- Send a note home with my child
- Mail me a letter
- Other _____



Please return this survey to: _____
 _____ by _____.