

# Fostering Meaningful Relationships Between Schools and Parents



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## Introduction

One of the most important factors that schools can prioritize in order to improve student outcomes is to provide a basis for a strong, meaningful relationship between schools and parents. Why? One reason is simple: Doing so creates an effective support system for students to continue focusing on their learning goals while at home.

However, new research is showing us that the benefits of thoughtful and worthwhile parent-teacher relationships go far further than raising students' grades (although it does help achieve that goal). Studies demonstrate that when parents participate in their children's schooling—and when parents are involved in school and are active members of their child's academic community—the children and their families benefit in surprising ways. For example, researchers reported that the children of actively-involved parents had higher levels of self esteem, better child-parent relationships, and even better health outcomes. In addition, the parents involved were able to have a significantly more positive attitude toward school initiatives and events.

While teachers and parents alike have to put effort in to achieve this type of partnership, the benefits are mutually advantageous. With greater parental support of a student's scholastic aims, teachers can spend more in-class time leading activities that benefit and excite the entire classroom instead of assisting individual students. Since familial involvement is such a critical predictor of student success, it's important that teachers have strategies to help connect with families, engage with parents, and boost the idea of parent advocacy for their children.

## Case Study: Parental Involvement and Student Academic Achievement in Chile

A 2019 study out of the Department of Psychology at the Universidad Autónoma de Chile, in Talca, Chile, may serve as an eye-opening introduction to the importance of meaningful relationships between schools and parents. Researchers realized that there was a lack of recent school-and-parent relationship studies in Chile, so they set up an analysis of 16 elementary schools there—involving 498 parents and guardians of students in the second and third grades. Through their analysis, the researchers were able to identify parents with low, medium, and high involvement (Lara and Saracostti, 2019).

The researchers then found that the children’s academic achievement correlated strongly with their parents’ levels of school and community involvement. The neighborhoods the researchers chose for their analyses exhibited high levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, and were located in three disparate regions of Chile. The researchers also looked at various forms of parental involvement, ranging from parental support at home to parental involvement activities at school. A cluster analysis revealed, in this case, that students whose parents were heavily involved in both the home and at school tended to have better social and educational outcomes. This agrees with international literature on the subject—and shows that one simple way to boost student achievement is to begin by focusing on strong family involvement (Lara and Saracostti, 2019).

## Section 1: The Importance of Parent Engagement in a Student’s Education

To learn more about why students benefit so dramatically from higher levels of parental engagement, it will be useful, first, to establish precisely what parental engagement and parental involvement are. What do these terms mean? What types of actions help a parent engage—and why is this an initiative worth investing in?

In this first section, we’ll discuss a definition of parental engagement as well as student success paradigms, practical examples of the type of parental engagement that results from meaningful relationships between families and schools, and why both teachers and parents (as well as students) seem to benefit from these simple yet strategic practices.

### What is parent engagement or involvement?

To start, the CDC offers a concise definition of parent involvement or engagement in schools:

**“Parental engagement in schools occurs when parents and school staff work together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents.” (CDC, 2018)**

In other words, a child’s education is far from just about the time and effort that the student personally invests. Research is showing that for the highest chance of student health, happiness, and success, every child’s education should be a whole-family project. This is very different from past models of education, where a child’s classes and homework were very much considered to be separate from a parent’s daily tasks. This

shift in the expectation for parental involvement has come about because of many studies that have delved into the benefits that occur after parents get involved with their child's education. Research shows us that prioritizing the importance of a parent-school relationship in service of the child boosts nearly every metric of student success, as we will explore later (CDC, 2018).

However, the onus isn't only on the parents to make this magic happen. Schools and parents alike share the responsibility to commit to parental engagement. Schools need to try to create meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in practical, effective ways; and parents themselves need to set aside time and mental effort to support their children's learning journeys in active ways (CDC, 2018).

The types of support required are multifaceted, and it's not about parents doing children's homework for them—a trope that is neither realistic nor helpful. Rather, parents working with their children synergistically to enhance learning objectives, the parent-child relationship, and the family-school connection can promote both educational goals and healthy behaviors among growing children and teens. According to the American Psychological Association, the more that parents get involved in their child's education, the more schools see higher attendance, test scores, and child involvement in school events. Greater parental involvement is also correlated with higher child health behaviors, such as safe or healthy decisions regarding sex, controlled substances, violence, or other problematic behaviors sometimes associated with adolescents (American Psychological Association, 2021).

The CDC agrees, calling parental engagement a 'promising protective factor' that can establish a likelihood of success in several different markers of childhood and teen safety initiatives. A solid relationship between parents and schools can reinforce student learning, making their school time more effective, and can also ramify children's ability to make good decisions both at home, at school, and in their own community. Parental engagement can also help children mature in enhanced behavioral ways, from confidence to improved social skills. Whether these positive outcomes come solely from parental engagement or the simple fact that parental engagement often coincides with other healthy behaviors and protective factors—e.g., students completing homework on time, or being involved with extracurricular activities at school—remains to be seen (CDC, 2018).

## Is there a difference between parental engagement and parental involvement?

Engagement and involvement by a student's parents (and entire family) are two slightly different things, although both types of support are useful for a child's health, happiness, and academic success. Both are directly driven by meaningful relationships between a family and a school—between parents and teachers. We'll offer a working definition for both terms here (Waterford, 2018):

- We can think of parent **involvement** as practical parent participation in activities and events that happen at or around your school. When teachers pass learning resources to parents or send information about their student's competencies to parents, they're enabling parent involvement. Parent involvement actually tends to begin with the teachers; the primary responsibility of student growth still sits with the teacher, and the parent acts in more of an advisory capacity. Parental involvement is a great first step to engagement, and is vital in itself; engagement represents another step that parents must take on their own initiative.
- We can think of parent **engagement** as the magic that happens when parents step from an advisory role to one that is more like a partnership with their student's teachers. Parents have a plethora of information about their children, including important information that teachers would have no way of accessing. Both parents and teachers need to come together with their unique perspectives to help a child grow.

A school can try to spark more parent involvement, more parent engagement, or both. The approach that a school might take in each of these areas may differ slightly. A school that wishes to drive up parental involvement might send parents information about school projects and initiatives, student goals, and any needs that the school might have. The school might then simply tell parents how they can contribute toward these aims (Waterford, 2018).

A school that's working toward higher levels of parental engagement tends to start with listening. School personnel might invite parents to come in and tell teachers and staff about their children, as well as what their worries and dreams for their children are—and allow that information and sharing process to spark ideas for how parents and teachers can both work to support their students (Waterford, 2018).

In recent years, educators have been largely shifting their attention from increasing parental involvement to sparking parental engagement. However, as noted above, the road to engagement often begins with simpler involvement. A teacher might begin this journey by:

- Giving parents resources related to their child's educational journey
- Inviting parents to school-related activities or events
- Ensuring that parents have the tools and understanding to monitor their children's progress themselves
- Partnering with the parents to set unique, child-specific goals for students that work with the child's unique strengths and weaknesses

This takes effort on the part of both teacher and student, but also allows each party to rest, confident in the fact that they are not alone in their support of the child. The child will also benefit from this rich, multifaceted support system. If every child in a given class is benefiting in this way, the class as a whole will also be able to go deeper in its learning journey (Waterford, 2018).

### **How does parent involvement lead to student success?**

It's been said that the most convenient and accurate predictor of academic achievement in young people isn't socioeconomic status or school reputation; it's the extent to which parents are involved in their child's education. Of course, there's a good chance that these factors co-exist; for example, a family of higher socioeconomic status might also be one in which the parents have more time and energy to be involved in their child's school life. However, this information also tells us that families of a lower socioeconomic status may be able to increase their child's achievement outcomes through strategies other than transferring to a higher-priced school or moving to a more expensive neighborhood (Waterford, 2018).

When a parent or both parents are involved in what their children are doing in school, children are aware that they have the home support and parental resources to achieve their academic aims. This can reduce a significant amount of pressure that children experience around school projects—allowing children the emotional space to get excited about their learning aims instead of being intimidated by them. In this way, parental involvement can foster a love of learning in their children that can last their child's entire life (Waterford, 2018).

This isn't just a theory: Schools that implement measures geared to increase parental engagement tend to see a change in their students and in their entire classes. It's not only beneficial for individual children to enjoy increased parental engagement; entire classes grow together when a team of parents gets more involved. Teachers who have focused on building parental engagement for their classes see better grades, behavior, and group motivation (Waterford, 2018).

In the past, working to increase parental engagement was a nice addition to academic endeavors, or a courtesy. Now, it's a very real aim that is seen as one of the best ways that teachers can work to promote a positive learning experience for students—both at home and at school (Waterford, 2018).

### **What are some practical examples of parental engagement and involvement?**

Discussing parental engagement as a vague, amorphous concept does not do it the justice it deserves. Parental engagement is usually not a large, sweeping gesture—nor is it a one-time thing. Parental engagement in a child's learning journey consists of many tiny actions on the part of interested parents. It can look like:

- Parents talking to children about their educational goals
- Parents acting in support when children have difficulties with school or school-related projects
- Teachers and parents working together at school meetings or events
- Parents volunteering at school
- Parents reaching out to teachers to learn more about how they can collaborate to support their students

Of course, these are just examples. True parent engagement or involvement will depend significantly on what children need and what their unique learning experiences look like. For example, parents who are supporting students studying remotely might have a wildly different engagement strategy than parents who have children learning in-person. Fortunately, the benefits seem to accompany parental involvement and engagement—no matter what it specifically looks like in a given situation (Waterford, 2018).

## **Why is parent involvement and engagement important?**

Right now, parental involvement and engagement are vital in education—and we're finding that we need to emphasize these factors because they're on the decline. Studies show us that in 2016, there was a drop in the number of parents who believed that a close-knit relationship between teachers and parents was effective. Over the past years, parents have shown increasing interest in remote communication with their teachers. Tools such as online student portals have become the mode of communication that parents prefer—and parents have become far less likely to take the time to attend school activities or even parent-teacher conferences (Waterford, 2018).

In-person parental involvement has declined dramatically in recent years. What families are missing out on is a vital and irreplaceable part of the student support system. Digital tools, after all, can keep parents apprised of their student's progress from afar—but it is no substitute for ongoing parental support and supervision as students make their way through school (Waterford, 2018).

Why has this change come about? While 2020's pandemic certainly did not help buck the trend toward remote communication, we were seeing parents opt for digital communication tools instead of in-person involvement long before America was asked to shelter at home. Instead, the factors that likely spurred parental interest in quick digital updates were (and are) likely multifaceted (Waterford, 2018).

One thing that's increasingly clear is that it's key to establish a parent-teacher relationship early in the year. As the year goes on, parents are less likely to initiate involvement, instead likely feeling comfortable with the established status quo (Waterford, 2018). It is in everyone's best interest to let parents know that they are seen as partner's in their children's education, that their support is appreciated, and that they are vital and welcome participants.

It's also evident that some demographic groups are at higher-risk for low levels of parent engagement or involvement. For example, if a family is below the poverty line, if a family has older children, or if parents do not speak the language that the school personnel primarily speaks, those parents are far less likely to be proactive about their involvement in their child's education (Waterford, 2018).

## **What are the material benefits of parent involvement?**

When parents and teachers are able to establish a working relationship to support their students, the effect can far outweigh the effort. Studies show us that students who have

engaged parents have higher test scores than their peers—but the benefits go deeper than that. The children of engaged parents have better school attendance, higher graduation rates, and even higher levels of self-esteem (Waterford, 2018).

Other benefits of increased levels of parental involvement and engagement may include:

- Higher grades
- A greater likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education
- More motivation in the classroom
- Better classroom behavior
- Better social skills

In recent years, educational researchers have performed over fifty differing studies on the effects of parental engagement on a student's educational outcomes. One thing they've found is that the earlier that teachers and parents establish a connection and a workable standard of parent engagement, the more that they are able to assist their students with growing their academic competencies and other skill areas. In other words, it's vital to start cementing this level of parental involvement and support in the early elementary years—years when parents might be quick to assume that they don't need to be instrumental (Waterford, 2018).

A recent study also found that increased parental engagement was correlated with decreased levels of absenteeism, as defined by a student who misses more than twenty school days within an academic year. In cases where students were experiencing absenteeism, teachers in the study responded primarily by engaging with the parents of these students with at-home visits. As a result, absentee rates fell by 20%. The study researcher posited that the healthy, two-way communication that grew between teacher and parent helped the students commit to attending school. Moreover, students tended to actively participate more in class discussions, knowing that their parents were very aware of what they were doing (Waterford, 2018.)

### **Do parents and teachers benefit from parental involvement and engagement?**

Yes, parents and teachers benefit from higher levels of communication, involvement, and engagement as well. Here are a few practical reasons why (Waterford, 2018):

- Teachers who have an established rapport with parents can more easily prepare parents to help their students with their homework or projects. As students grow and the subject matter they study becomes more complicated, this support can be vital for parents to feel confident in helping their child
- Parents who are engaged tend to think more highly of the teachers educating their child, which makes them feel happy about their educational choices regarding their family
- Teachers realize that parents respect and appreciate them, which improves staff morale
- Teachers are able to have a more detailed knowledge of what a student is going through in their at-home life, which can help teachers choose lessons that can support a child's specific needs or interests
- Finally, entire classrooms of students tend to benefit when all parents are engaged—because each individual student will be equipped to perform better, the whole class of children can typically move more efficiently through their units—leading to less boredom, less frustration, and more time to work on fun projects or activities that everyone enjoys

Fortunately, it does seem like everyone benefits from higher levels of engagement. That doesn't mean that it's always easy, but it does mean that it's definitely worth working toward. In a later section, we'll discuss practical, effective strategies that teachers can use to drive levels of parental involvement or engagement. For now, we'll discuss what parent involvement might look like—starting with some of the most common practices involved.

### **What are the ingredients of productive parent involvement?**

It can be very easy to say that driving up parental involvement is key for success. This might even be intuitive; but making it happen is the most difficult part. In later sections, we'll explore practical ways to increase parental involvement and engagement without making parents feel guilty, overwhelmed, or frustrated (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019).

Although teachers are generally aware of the benefits of effective parental involvement, they are not always sure how to best engage the parents. Practical strategies that can help a teacher increase the likelihood that a parent will be able to increase their

involvement in their student's progress—even if they don't feel at the outset that they have the time, talent, or ability to do so effectively include (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019):

- Compliment or praise your parents for being as involved as they currently are
- If appropriate, see if you can meet with parents on their own ground. Instead of asking them to come into school to meet you at your office (which, we have to realize, can easily trigger unpleasant memories of their own school days), meet a few parents at a local coffee shop so the entire experience feels much less intimidating
- Be very transparent about your purpose—why you are inviting your students' parents to be more involved. (The information in this course can serve as a good starting point for this type of purpose statement!) Remember that your students' parents are likely busy and overwhelmed, and exactly primed to be suspicious of additional claims upon their time
- Don't be afraid to let your personality shine through—so your students' parents see you as a human, not as simply their child's teacher. It'll be easier to form a partnership with your students' parents if this is the case
- Be persistent
- Keep it easy. At least initially, as you're trying to get parents involved and help them work toward engagement, make what you're asking them to do very simple. That will make it much more likely that they'll be able to chip in

If all of these to-dos seem intimidating, it's important to remember that, ultimately, everyone benefits from working to boost parental engagement and forging meaningful relationships between parents and teachers. In the beginning, as you first start to work toward these initiatives, there may be some growing pains—but it'll definitely be worth it.

Some common growing pains, challenges, or barriers to forming parent-teacher relationships are listed in the next section.

### **What are some challenges or barriers to parental engagement?**

If parental involvement and engagement are so important, why haven't schools placed more of an emphasis on it until now? Why don't parents already know about it—and why aren't they taking the initiative toward more involvement on their own?

One excellent way to learn more about the barriers to parental engagement in your specific community is to ask your parents. Work with your school district to conduct a survey of your families, reaching out to a representative group of parents and guardians throughout your community (e.g., not just the parents who already happen to have high levels of engagement at your school). While making it clear that there will be no judgment or retribution for their answers (perhaps make the survey anonymous), ask why parents aren't able to engage more with their child's education. The reasons and challenges can differ highly from family to family and community to community, so taking the time to understand your local challenges is best. Once you have an idea of the barriers that stand between your specific school community and heightened levels of parental engagement, you can work with your school district to create actionable goals to reduce those barriers (Salin, 2017).

While it's best to conduct your own local research in this area, it's also good to know that there are very common, universal barriers to family engagement in a student's education. The most common barriers include (Salin, 2017):

- **Lack of time.** This alone was the largest barrier for parents—many reported that they had very busy schedules, which contributed to their inability to become more involved with their student's education.
- **Childcare.** After a busy schedule, this was the second most common rationale.
- **Perceptions.** Some parents found themselves worrying that the teachers and other faculty at their school might treat their children differently if the parents went out of their way to raise a concern.
- **Lack of information.** Other parents simply stated that they didn't have enough information from their child's school to be sufficiently involved.
- **A bad experience with their own schooling.** If parents have baggage from their own memories at school or even if they haven't had a good experience with previous children's educational opportunities, they will likely be leery of putting themselves in similar situations again.
- **Illiteracy.** If your students' parents aren't confident about their ability to be involved as a key source of support for their children, they'll have a hard time reaching out or feeling like they have a responsibility to do so.

While there are certainly roadblocks to boosting parental engagement, most of them can be more manageable when you consider the parent-teacher relationship as a

mutually-beneficial partnership—not an antagonistic one. Fortunately, there are ways to overcome all of these barriers or at least make them easier to work around, as we'll discuss in the final section. Before that, however, we'll take a quick look at the research underlying parent involvement to see some compelling case studies and data that support your undertaking of this initiative.

## **Section 1: Key Terms**

Parental involvement - Parental involvement usually manifests as practical parent participation in activities and events at or around school, as well as logistical support of a child's education at home.

Parental engagement - Parental engagement is the result of a mutually-beneficial partnership between parent and teacher, in which parents become an active participant in their child's education by offering up perspectives and ideas of their own.

## **Section 1: Reflection Questions**

Would you say that the parents in your classroom are actively involved or engaged? What specific practices make you think that?

For parents in your class who are less involved or engaged, can you think of specific barriers that may be standing in their way?

## **Section 1: Conclusion**

Parent involvement and engagement can take a great deal of work to initiate and sustain. Fortunately, there are many reasons to try anyway. Research is showing us that children, teachers, and parents alike benefit from investing in the family-school relationship. However, particular barriers tend to stand in the way of these relationships, from a lack of time to a lack of childcare.

Teachers can take practical and purposeful steps to boost meaningful relationships between schools and families, which will be summarized in Section Three. Before that, we'll take a look at some of the latest research and some promising case studies about parental engagement to gain confidence in the worthiness of this effort.

## Section 2: Research and Case Studies about Parent Engagement

It's easy to be skeptical about the efficacy of boosting parental engagement. After all, dealing with parents can be tough. Much of the time, they're overly-full of strong opinions about the way their children should be taught. The rest of the time, parents can't easily be found. There are not enough parent-teacher relationships that occur in a symbiotic sweet spot that helps both school and family support their students in the best way possible.

In this section, we'll look at some of the latest studies analyzing both the efficacy of increased parental engagement and the best methods for promoting it. That way, when we discuss practical strategies in the third section of this course, we'll have a solid basis for understanding why the investment is necessary.

### What does the research say about parental engagement?

In recent studies that have sought to dig into the best ways to build parental engagement, researchers have learned quite a bit about the real and perceived barriers to family engagement. On the other hand, they've also shone a light on the extreme, enduring importance of parental engagement. Here are some of the significant findings that three different survey-based studies conducted over the past several years have shown about parental involvement and engagement (Poth, 2018):

- One research team conducted a study of over 18,000 parents to, first, confirm that the biggest barriers to family engagement were availability of childcare, inconsistent treatment of students, and lack of time or information.
- A 2015 study found that over half of the half-million K-12 parents who signed up for the study's survey said that their preferred method of communication was a simple weekly text message with specific updates regarding their child. In 2010, the researchers in this study had sent out the same survey—and found that only 5% of parents wanted this relatively simple, sporadic level of communication. The conclusion? The numbers of parents wanting a low-level, relatively hands-off level of parent-teacher communication are rising. However, as we've seen, this practice isn't in the best interest of the child.
- Another study surveyed 30,000 parents and found that these parents wanted impactful and timely information—but not a flood of it. These parents wanted to

be kept informed about their child on a regular basis, but did not necessarily want an overabundance of non-essential information. From this we can surmise that we as teachers need to keep tabs on the amount of non-relevant one-way communications that we send to our parents.

These three surveys tell us that parents want information about their child and they are open to higher involvement or engagement—but it needs to be easier for them to become involved, and parents don't want all of the information. To boost engagement, schools need to assist with or at least be aware that parents are busy, parents have other children they need to support, and many parents have poor perceptions of school based on their own experiences. Finally, it seems that we are in fact living in a time where parental involvement is decreasing as many districts are embracing higher-tech, increasingly-digital options, and this needs to be addressed. It's important to find ways to connect with parents in a non-overwhelming way, regardless of the specific tools we choose to do so.

### **Have there been studies focusing on the best way to engage with the parents of students in our classrooms?**

Other studies have focused less on the sheer importance of parental involvement and more on the how—as in, if a school already understands that this is an important initiative, what does the data say is the best way to get started?

Here are a few practical examples and pieces of data that shed a little light on this issue (Adams, 2020):

- One school in Colorado goes out of its way to cement family engagement by holding twice-yearly functions called GET Togethers—or 'Guaranteed Education Teams' events. These occasions are specifically distinct from PTA meetings at which school officials might present rationale for donations; they're also separate from school Christmas concerts or end-of-year musicals. The entire goal of the event is to show busy families the meaningful benefit of their support in their child's classroom. The event is jam-packed with practical tools to help parents support their children at home as well as occasions where parents are invited to give their honest feedback regarding the school's structure and overall experience.
- The school proactively designs these nights to be interactive and entertaining to attract parent interest. For example, one year, instead of having the teachers go

through what they were planning on focusing on in the upcoming semester, the school invited the young students to explain the updated homework policies—which naturally got their parents' attention far more than a presentation from the teachers. At another, the math teachers of the school taught fun family math games to parents, including games designed to be easy to play in the car or over dinner; at another, the school offered boundary and trauma workshops, which were topics that the parents had specifically requested to learn more about. As a result, these events were seen as high-value, and received extremely high attendance.

- Surveys tend to find that teachers consider it difficult to connect with their students' parents. Parents say similar (and opposite) things when surveyed. Therefore, the responsibility for parent-teacher relationships tends to turn into a blame game that distances both parties from beneficial interaction. At schools where the traditional touch points for parent-teacher interaction are few and non-interactive—such as the infrequent PTA meeting or the guilt-ridden volunteer opportunity—teachers can interpret a lack of parents' enthusiasm as a perceived lack of support for their children. On the other hand, parents can interpret the lack of apparent school effort into value-based parent-teacher communication opportunities as a closed door to their opinions and feedback. To combat this, schools need to take the first step and create opportunities that make their students and their students' entire families feel welcomed.
- Another school that has decided to invest strongly in meeting its community on a practical, engaging level has decided to put a significant amount of time and effort into the following research-based actions (Adams, 2020):
  - Sending out personalized invitations to events instead of mass emails
  - Putting significant effort into soliciting parental input on even smaller issues or 'fun' decisions
  - Communicating in as many regional languages as possible
  - Working to benefit the families active in their school community in practical ways—including fundraisers, free groceries, and tuition assistance
  - Prioritizing at-home visits to bring education or resources to a family's front door when needed

Actions such as these help parents realize that the school is on their side, and makes it much more likely that a parent will respond to requests for feedback or other partnership opportunities when the school asks.

Have the schools that implemented these high-effort initiatives seen a return on their investment? So far, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes as indicated by the following (Adams, 2020):

- A recent study sought to probe the effects of active teacher outreach in 71 high-poverty schools and school communities. After implementation of teacher outreach, the study assessed the progress enjoyed by the students in these communities and found that student's math and reading scores improved drastically. The study concluded that meeting families consistently face-to-face, staying in regular touch, and sending helpful, accessible materials home for parents to help support their children seemed to work better than other interventions the high-poverty schools had tried before.
- Another recent study from the Center for American Progress in Washington DC says that consistent and frequent communication between schools and homes is the best way to help students enjoy more success. Initiatives out of the Center for American Progress are suggesting that policymakers for local school districts shift their focus to community-informed projects. According to these suggestions, schools should conduct more frequent parent surveys, higher technology experts to reduce frustration in remote parent-teacher communications, and provide extensive teacher training to help teachers be ever better resources for parents and young families.

If schools are struggling to spark parent interest in attending these types of events in the very beginning, there's some data and anecdotal evidence to suggest that the simple approach is the best. One principal initially tried conducting parent feedback meetings just before PTA conferences, so that the parents would in theory only have to show up on school campus once. Even with this convenience, only a few people attended the extra meetings. The principal took some time to rethink her approach, and then sent out personal invites to each family in her community for an evening event that included free pizza, dessert, and childcare. The attendance at that first meeting was abundant—and she used that time to very simply ask the parents in attendance what they would want to see in order to boost their own attendance. By implementing this very simple approach, this school district has enjoyed extremely high levels of parental involvement ever since (Adams, 2020).

Requests that parents made at that initial meeting included (Adams, 2020):

- More practical resources for them to both support their children in school and to enrich their family life (e.g., boundary workshops as well as homework support)
- Logistical changes to increase school accessibility, such as more strategic traffic patterns on the school campus
- The addition of more after-school programs to support working parent schedules

The school continues to encourage attendance at these optional meetings by keeping them fun and applying time-tested marketing strategies. The principal will go in and cover each teacher's class so the teacher has time to call all the parents to invite them on a very personal level. The office manager prioritizes a friendly, personalized hello to each student's parent in order to make the school feel more welcoming and less intimidating (Adams, 2020).

The State of Colorado recently passed legislation that established an Office of Family, School, and Community Partnerships. The head of this department spends much of his time holding informal coffee chats with the staff of school districts around the state in order to get as much real data as possible. As a result of this boots-on-the-ground research, the department head rolled out a campaign consisting of four elements to increase family-school partnerships. This included the creation of an all-inclusive school community culture, the building of inherently trusting relationships between school staff and student families, the design of capacity-building opportunities, and the dedication of all necessary resources to make the preceding three initiatives into a reality (Adams, 2020).

One of the first realizations that the newly-formed department made was that many of the family engagement initiatives that Colorado schools had been using targeted, primarily, affluent two-parent families. One of the first initiatives of the new administration was to create support systems designed to attract a more inclusive definition of family—one that more closely mirrored the actual populations of students attending Colorado schools (Adams, 2020).

Here are the results of a few more studies looking at the effects of parental engagement across the nation (Adams, 2020):

- One study, an analysis that dove into the performance of 100 Chicago schools, found that those with strong parental involvement were four times more likely to

achieve their reading initiatives or improve in a steady fashion; those same students enjoyed a ten-times-higher likelihood at improving in math.

- Another study out of Johns Hopkins found that students of families who enjoyed personal at-home visits from school faculty or staff had 24% fewer absences over the course of a school year when compared to their peers. These students were also more likely to read at the expected grade level (or above it) than students who did not receive home visits from their teachers. Why? The managing director of this initiative, based around D.C. area schools, theorized that “Many see home visits as a powerful way to start this process ... to rebuild trust.”
- An across-the-country model known as Academic Parent-Teacher Teams is used in over 25 states. This model encourages teachers to hold at least three classroom meetings with the parents of students in their classes to explain the academic goals of the semester, to share individual child performance data, and to suggest fun and powerful home activities. Included in this model is also a short conference involving the student, family members, and teacher that is meant to be a two-way conversation sparking a collaboration between family and school. This model is working very well so far: Researchers following its efficacy note that it seems to be promoting community, decreasing instances of disciplinary issues, and facilitating teacher-parent communication.

In addition to at-home or teacher-parent conferences to jumpstart the new year or semester, these types of programs are encouraging teachers to stay in touch with families on a personal level throughout the year. One principal makes sure this happens by designating time in her teacher’s schedule to write positive postcards home to spark joy and interest regarding student education. Parents on the receiving end of these postcards—which also contain updated contact information for each teacher—feel more welcomed and believe that they have the resources to reach out when necessary. One mother commented that after receipt of such a postcard, she felt like she could text her child’s teacher to alert the teacher that the child was having a rough morning—which helped circumvent behavioral issues later in the day at school (Adams, 2020).

One parent even said that because of the resources distributed by her school, she was able to learn how to communicate with her children better—including how to manage bedtime in a more efficient way, which had been a huge source of stress for their family. The school district had given community members access to free parenting lessons. As a result of this community outreach, the parent felt more supported by the school—and, as a side benefit, she had more time and energy (due to more strategic home and family

management practices) to be involved in her school community. Further, her school district had ensured that she had access to the parenting classes in Spanish, and had worked with her to get library cards for her entire family at the end of the six-week session (Adams, 2020).

Teachers involved in these efforts recognize that they require more of an investment, but are enjoying the effect that their work is having in the community. One teacher, who was volunteering with her school's new universal free school breakfast program, said, "I feel like we are meeting their basic needs more than me just meeting them academically" (Adams, 2020). It's important to note, however, that we cannot expect the entire effort of building meaningful relationships to fall on teachers without supporting teachers, too; most teachers report that they're already working at capacity. Administrations need to realize that if teachers are expected to invest in parental engagement, they need to give them the time and resources to do so.

### **What does research have to say about other benefits of increased family engagement in student education?**

Recently, researchers have shifted their focus to study the roles and purpose of family engagement with specific regard to child- and youth-serving programs. Why? The past decade has brought with it massive advancements in brain science, diversity initiatives, mental health awareness, behavioral health programs, and child welfare awareness. Now, more than ever, schools have the knowledge that they need to help children across any background thrive.

Recent research has focused on the best ways to implement programs and practices that improve family engagement and the lives of the families in our care. Fortunately, the researchers studying these initiatives are finding that promoting family engagement appears to be a win-win for everyone involved. For instance (Youth.gov, 2018):

- Increased family engagement correlates with increased student outcomes, including student achievement, better teacher-student relationships, and fewer disciplinary issues.
- Family engagement at school tends to help families associate more with health care professionals, such as any school nurses or behavioral specialists that happen to be on campus. As a result, families are getting better health attention and care coordination, which can result in higher health outcomes.

- The children of families who are more engaged in their communities tend to show higher levels of behavioral and emotional strength, as well as enhanced relationships with both their peers and with adults.
- Parental involvement in school communities was found to lead to lower rates of high school dropout, higher incidences of completing high school on time, and higher overall grades.
- Researchers found that the youth in families who had higher levels of school and community engagement engaged in fewer risky health behaviors, such as alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, weapon use, and becoming sexually active..
- Heightened family engagement tended to lead to higher levels of positive health habits, such as physical activity in school.
- Studies seem to suggest that when teachers and other child support staff develop plans for student success with the involvement of parents, parents are more invested in those plans—and more dedicated to helping achieve them through means such as at-home support.
- Ultimately, researchers found that establishing a collaboration between families, schools, and other members of a child's community tends to increase the chances that the school will be able to identify and meet each family's unique needs in an effective and achievable manner.

## **Section 2: Reflection Questions**

What practical methods have you and your school used to support families in your community?

If you were to conduct a survey of the parents in your classroom, what type of communication do you think they'd prefer?

In order to invest more time into your relationship with the parents in your classroom, what type of support would you need from your school's administration?

## **Section 2: Conclusion**

The research is showing us that boosting family engagement or building meaningful relationships with the families of students in your class is likely far more about small, practical supportive actions—and less about once-a-year gestures. The research also shows us that investing in parental engagement is, in fact, an investment; it takes time.

However, surveys and studies also continue to reinforce the idea that increasing parental engagement is worth it for all concerned.

## Section 3: Building a Meaningful Parent-School Relationship

Now that we've spent time learning about the reasons we need to invest in parent-school relationships, it's time to talk about the ways we can work to connect, engage, and sustain parental connection and engagement. This section will contain practical tips to support the parent-school relationship.

To start, we'd like to make a clear distinction between two types of communication.

### What's the difference between one-way and two-way parent-teacher connection?

When you're working toward building an efficient, effective parent-teacher communication system, it's best to prioritize two-way communication over one-way communication. Why? There are several associations that each mode of communication has. For example, people tend to believe that one-way communication is (overly) authoritative and linear—and is limited in how much good it can do for either participant in these types of conversations (Waterford, 2018).

On the other hand, when two or more parties engage in two-way communication, the result is more interactive conversations. Both parties tend to feel like they're equals or partners, and the feedback contained in these conversations is more helpful and feedback-oriented.

It's clear that two-way communication will likely be the better use of your time. The difference may feel intuitive, but it's an important enough distinction that we'll offer up a brief definition here (Waterford, 2018):

- **One-way communication** constitutes a norm of information flow that goes in one direction: From the sender to a receiver (or group of receivers). For the most part, the sender does not expect or require a response from the receiver. (Think of a presentation without a question-and-answer section, and you'll get the idea). The purpose of this type of communication is typically to command, to persuade, or inform. The role of the audience is entirely passive. The role of the sender is entirely authoritative..

- **Two-way communication** involves ebbing flows of information back and forth between two people or parties. Both entities get to give and receive information. Both must listen; both are expected to offer commentary on the other's input as well as original information of their own. In the academic world, examples of two-way communication may be conferences and committee meetings at which multiple people get to speak.

There's a time and place for both types of communication, but when it comes to building parental involvement and engagement, two-way communication is the way to go. Parents will want to be more involved if they feel like they're equal partners in the parent-teacher relationship; if they feel like they're being talked at, ordered around, or that their own thoughts are not being heard, they simply won't show up to meetings (Waterford, 2018).

However, the parents of students in your class might not have the initiative to send information your way—or to upgrade the current one-way communication flow to a multi-directional stream. (Why? As noted above, they may not have the time or experience to do so; or, perhaps, their own poor experiences with academic faculty in the past make them less inclined to step up on their own) (Waterford, 2018).

Here are a few ways that you might find it easier to encourage two-way communication and parental involvement in your conversations (Waterford, 2018):

- Rather than sending your student home with a failing grade and a request that their parents help them study more, call the student's parents directly and see if you can work together to create an achievable plan of improvement for their child.
- Invite a parent to a volunteer opportunity or school open house to make yourself and your child's school seem much more approachable and familiar. If it's appropriate, perform a home visit, perhaps with another teacher if that would make you feel more comfortable.
- Use tech-based platforms—but in a strategic way where you make it clear that you're requesting parent-teacher communication or feedback. Setting up a quick Zoom call at the end of the day may be much easier for a parent to handle than a longer in-person meeting.
- Talk to your students' parents at the beginning of the school year about your communication plan. This might feel a little meta, but involving the parents from

the very start about everything, even the expectations that you have for your levels of communication, will convey to the parents that they're equal partners in your plans. Ask parents what their preferences for contact methods and frequencies may be, and use that information to guide how you support each teacher-parent relationship.

- Be proactive—particularly earlier on in the teacher-parent relationship—about sending the parents positive feedback about your student. If you establish your communication plans based around a positive or exciting event, the parents will naturally be more interested in this type of communication. Later, if you need to share something more challenging (or if the parents have something that they need to approach you about that could be sensitive), you'll be glad you began the relationship on more neutral ground.
- Many parents associate parent-teacher conferences with intimidating lectures—almost as if the parents were being assessed. Instead, make it a priority to keep these conversations about the child and keep them neutral or productive. It may help to begin these conferences by listening to parents' questions, observations and concerns rather than you doing the majority of the talking..

## Meaningful Strategies for Sparking Parent Interest and Involvement When Teaching Remotely

Is parent-teacher engagement any less valuable if you're teaching remotely? As it turns out—of course not! The recent shift to virtual learning environments has only made it more clear that families have responsibility for a student's educational experience, too—and that at-home support is vital for a child's success.

Start by assuming that all parents want to support their children, but may not know how to do so effectively or efficiently while handling their job, the technology virtual learning requires, any other children in their home, or a number of other stressors and concerns. Then, apply any of the following strategies for boosting parent involvement and engagement while forming a remote community (Davila, 2020):

- **Resources, resources, resources.** We've mentioned elsewhere that a great way to spark parent interest in involvement is to start by providing them with practical, valuable resources. This is even more important if you're rarely able to be in the same space. Start to build your partnership by delivering on your end—send your

parents targeted tips, tricks, and tools to make remote learning manageable for them in their unique situations.

- **Remind your parents that they have access to a professional.** Parents in today's remote learning environments are swamped with the expectations and logistics that accompany managing their child's education. These parents need to know that you're able to help them—and that you're not there to heighten expectations in an already difficult situation or to assign impossible-seeming projects. Position yourself as a helpful aide in their child's learning journey—rather than as the one who is endlessly creating additional work for their family.
- **Create easy, accessible, and quick systems for informational exchanges.** Email can be overwhelming, texts can pile up, and not every parent has the skillset to understand Google spreadsheets. Talk with your parents to see what types of tech platforms will work for them, so that they're likely not only to read the resources that you send over—they're also primed to have a very easy, intuitive way to reach out to you first when they have a question, some feedback, or an idea to help support their child. This may mean that you have to have the availability and flexibility to communicate in several different formats—or have the persistence to find a versatile tool or platform that works for everyone in your class.
- **Over-communicate.** Send parents a weekly update on their platform of choice to let them know what their child is doing this week, when you'll be available for office hours, and how best to reach you if they ever need any help. Include a picture of a project their child worked on or an exciting class update. Even if this update goes ignored 95% of the time, your consistency will let remote parents know that they have you as a dependable resource when they do need guidance.

### **How to encourage parents to participate in problem-solving discussions and decision-making related to their child's education:**

One reason that parents tend to shy away from speaking with teachers about their children is that no one likes conflict or confrontation. Speaking with teachers about problems or decisions relating to their child's welfare can hit very close to home or be perceived as an attack.

With this in mind, keep the following strategies in your toolkit to manage tough parental conversations with finesse—and to help empower parents to become your partners as you work to support their child (Raising Children, 2018):

- **Maintain a calm, positive approach.** Parents will rightfully be upset if their child is struggling. Before you introduce any suggestions or helpful measures to support their child, try to manage your relationship with the parent by being very calm and avoiding any triggering language that may cause frustration.
- **Show that you value the parent's input.** Parents can often feel that school staff discounts their opinions and information about their child. Starting your conversation by asking parents to describe the situation may help them feel more in control or acknowledged. If they need a prompt or guidance to keep the conversation on-point, ask the parents what their wants, needs, and concerns for their child may be.
- **Keep the conversation centered on support of their child—or on support of their family.** Ask the parents what resources they need, and focus on providing practical support. The tone should be something along the lines of 'How can we both/all help the student with this issue,' instead of going in with statements that resemble or could be in any way interpreted as accusations (e.g., 'You need to do better').
- **If the parent gets defensive or frustrated, use diffusing language and radiate calmness.** Sometimes a parent needs to get frustrations off their chest, and, unfortunately, a teacher associated with a parent's concerns about their child can receive the brunt of this negativity. As long as you feel safe, let the parent speak so they feel heard. Then, acknowledge what they have said—simple repetition is often key for this!—before re-centering the conversation on strategies to provide solutions and support for their child.
- **Take steps to identify the (actual) problem.** Parents, teachers, and students can often get bogged down in stress and confusion at school without taking time to consider what the root issue is. It may be worth scheduling a brainstorming session with a family just to figure out what a child's actual struggles may be, instead of working around them or making assumptions that could be inaccurate.
- **Choose a solution to try while you're still speaking with your student's parents.** Your time is valuable, as is that of the parents. Before you end the call or meeting, make sure that you've settled on an actionable next step—one that both you and

the parents can implement. Make sure, also, that you've talked about further communications and follow-up to re-assess the child's progress, health, or happiness, to ensure that the measures that you are taking as the child's support team are having a positive effect.

- **Connect again to discuss further steps.** Make it clear to the parents that your connection with them is not a one-off situation; you'll be there for them as long as their student requires support. Evaluate the effects that your actions have had, tweak as necessary, and take further steps to support the student if that is what all of you deem best.

In today's increasingly noisy, digital world, it can be difficult to harness parental attention or engagement. You have a great deal of competition, and the way in which you communicate best may be fundamentally different from the ways that your students' parents are used to receiving information intuitively.

We've found it best to start by assuming that your students' parents really do want to hear from you. We've found that this is usually the case—and the fact that it's sometimes difficult to do so or that a parent's receptivity to your communication plan is less than enthusiastic is largely due to the parents' shortage of time, rather than a lack of willingness on their part.

Your strategy will need to involve making it very easy and attractive for your students' parents to engage with you. Three fundamental ways to make this happen are being very enthusiastic yourself, having a proactive (and different) mindset about messaging, and going out of your way to involve parents, over and over, consistently—until the habit of involvement becomes so ingrained that you find you don't need to press as much any more.

Here's a little more information about each of these recommendations, as well as some practical guidance (Nixon, 2017):

- **Be passionate about what you do.** This is likely a no-brainer—and, as an educator, you are naturally passionate about helping students grow. It's what you do. However, your students' parents may have a more cynical view of the teaching profession, shaped solely by poor experiences they may have had in the past. If you can do anything to reverse this impression by being positive and enthusiastic about your students, you can make communication much more engaging and exciting for your students' parents. Being openly pleased about any time that a child makes progress will be magnetic for your students' parents.

Communicating that excitement with an in-person meeting to celebrate a milestone is much more compelling than a report card—or, if you don't have the time or resources to do so, send a quick video or photo message instead of communicating the information solely by text. If your students' parents begin to expect fun photos and interesting updates with your emails, they'll be more likely to open them and respond to them. It may also help to share your overall learning strategy with your students' parents, and clue them into the why behind each activity. This will help the parents associate productivity with your updates—making them much more compelling from that standpoint, as well.

- **Treat each message from family members differently.** Every family will have unique levels of familiarity with tech platforms, varied amounts of time, and different amounts of energy to expend on communication. While it's tempting to send a mass email or mass reply to several different families at once, it's much more personal and effective to send quick updates individually. It's even better to consider the specific way families prefer to communicate, and to try to accommodate their preferences. Regardless of the specific method, remember that today's parents all have full inboxes and mailboxes. Keep your messages quick, easy, fun, and private.
- **Involve your students' parents as much as possible.** You'll want to get your parents on board with two-way communication as early on as possible in the year to cement the relationship in support of their child. It may feel difficult to figure out ways to reach out to parents, particularly if they're busy, if you're teaching remotely, or if you or a specific parent is particularly introverted. Here's a quick strategy: At the beginning of the school year, brainstorm as many different types of brief, fun, and actionable content as possible (think: Staff introductions, new staff hirings, volunteer opportunities, classroom awards, resources for different academic modules you're introducing in class, parental events and networking activities, etc) and aim to send parents information on these topics on a regular basis (e.g., once a week) in addition to any child-specific updates you may have. Be sure to keep these brief and practical, and include a section for parents to give feedback or answer a specific question in order to indicate that you expect some level of response.

## Practical Frameworks Your School Can Prioritize to Promote Family Engagement

The CDC has realized that promoting family engagement at school is one of the best ways to increase student health and success measures. Because of this, their experts have put together a framework to help families connect, engage, and sustain contact with teachers. This framework involves five different steps or resources to think about when you're first starting to prioritize this endeavor.

These include (Poth, 2018):

- **Finding the right communication tools.** This is an area where it's vital to think outside the box. Depending on the age and background of your students and their parents, everyone concerned might be more comfortable with physical paper documents, phone calls, in-person meetings and even social media tools. It's important to gauge that prior to jumping in, instead of simply assuming that one tool will fit everyone in your class. There are integration tools for teachers that you can find (such as BloomzApp or Remind) that include traditional features of messaging apps, have accessible applications, and promote easy sharing of files and video messages. Whichever tool you ultimately select, it's important to realize that finding the right tool can help reduce some of the more commonly-cited barriers to parent-teacher communication.
- **Shifting to focus on video.** CDC representatives and other experts on health and psychology have come to the conclusion that sharing information by video is more accessible, interesting, and engaging for all concerned. From making simple videos, to sharing quick updates about how students have been performing, to creating a more produced class project with the help of your students to share with their parents, the return-on-investment seems to far favor sending parents a link to a video over a paragraph of dense text. By using tools like Screencastify, Flipgrid, and Educreations, you can quickly record videos at special events, of yourself giving a simple update or announcement, or of resources for parents that they can use to help their children with specific support. This is a particularly excellent option if you are teaching remotely. One way to give some responsibility back to parents and provide an expectation of two-way communication is to have the family make a video. Specifically, you can use the video-sharing platform of choice to have your students' families make video introductions about themselves so you can learn more about everyone in your class—and so can your students' peers..

- **Maintaining a class webpage.** There are many benefits to creating and sustaining a centralized location for class updates and links to different resources. It can give parents a simple one-stop-shop to keep tabs on what's going on in your classroom and, if you include a simple feedback form on the home page, give them a place where they know that they can provide feedback at their leisure. When families are aware that they have an easy-to-access, easy-to-use, and fun or entertaining location to connect with you and with other families in your classroom, it reduces the difficulty of staying connected. As an added bonus, in today's increasingly digital world, having and maintaining a webpage is going to be an increasingly necessary skill. Requiring the students in your class to take ownership over simple website maintenance tasks such as coming up with ideas for blog posts, taking pictures, conducting interviews or writing copy will go a long way toward enhancing their digital competency and leadership skills. Easily accessible and safe online tools to help you make this easy and fun are available, such as Edmodo, Padlet, and Kidblog.
- **Focusing on building a strong school community—and connections with your local community.** Sometimes the simplest strategy is the best: After all, if you don't have to reinvent the wheel, don't. See what types of activities and events are happening at your local parks, museums, and community centers. See if you can partner with a local business to have a parent's night out or a student activity on a weekend. You could invite a local community business to be showcased in your gym, or host a learning event on an evening in association with your local theater troupe. These can all be fun, interesting, and relatively easy ways to get your families interested in spending time on your school's campus or with other school families—which can build community partnerships and make it much easier for your families to feel comfortable investing in the parent-teacher relationship.

At the end of the day, it's important to remember, above all else, to act in a way that nurtures the parent-teacher relationship despite any hardships or frustrations that come your way. Even if all else fails, prioritize keeping your interactions respectful, receptive, and responsive. This means that you should go out of your way to be responsive to everything that the parents of students in your classroom say. Ideally, you should be able to provide feedback that soothes parents who may be frustrated or confused. And, of course, you need to ensure that all conversations you have are rooted in mutual respect.

There's an idea, too, that parents need to be enabled to be 'the child's first teacher,' so, if it helps, you could consider brainstorming a list of actions that parents can complete at home to help them feel more involved in their child's educational journey. As the child's teacher, you can work to create and support those home-based opportunities or make them easier to identify for the child's parents. The next time that one of your parents reaches out to you to ask what type of at-home activities they can employ to engage with their child's education, point them in the direction of one of the following:

- **Reading a story to their children.** It's a basic idea, but one that will have abundant benefits for the parent-child bond and the child's early literacy journey.
- **Completing a simple art activity.** This can do wonders for hand-eye coordination, shape recognition, understanding the simple logical flow of a project, and a child's sense of accomplishment.
- **Going out in nature or on walks around the child's community.** This will help children get a sense of their world and environment, can provide a visual familiarity for later studies in civics or biology or even architecture, and will provide physical activity for the child in a stress-free way.
- **Play freely and strategically.** Many traditional forms of play for children are educational in themselves--for example, playing with blocks, which can help with hand-eye coordination and recognition of visual patterns. Simply by taking time to play with their children, parents are helping form them in positive ways. Along the same lines, a seminar on the value of play could be an excellent choice for a valuable event that could boost parent participation or attendance at a school gathering.
- **Volunteering with their child.** While this isn't specifically an at-home activity, the act of going out and doing a little good in the world with their child will help the community and it will help parents and children alike have a better appreciation for their world - which will only help with educational endeavors the child will have in later years.

### **What are some strategic ways to get a parent to come to an event?**

We mentioned above that the best strategies for getting parents to come to an event were usually quite simple: Feed them and provide them with free childcare. However, there may come a time where you need a few more nuanced tricks up your sleeve. Here, we'll help you brainstorm several different ideas that may help your parents decide

they're able to come—or, notably, that may help different groups of parents want to get more involved (Kerri, 2020):

- **Start by providing clear value to busy parents where they already are—on their devices.** Work with your school district's graphics, marketing, or outreach department to create social media posts and easy-to share, optimized-for-mobile graphics that explain learning goals and initiatives in extremely accessible, relatable ways. Use the same method to invite parents to your events: Reach out to them through social media, or in the same graphic or document as a very practical list or parent resource.
- **Try a new time.** Most PTO, PTA, or school presentations tend to be held in the afternoons or evenings. Instead, try a brand-new time, such as 9 a.m. At this time, many parents will already be at school to drop off their children. If you advertise free coffee and donuts at this early meeting, it's guaranteed you'll attract a whole new crowd of parents.
- **Put together a punch card or pseudo-loyalty program for parents at your school.** Have them punch their card (virtually, if that's easier) at each significant parent event or resource that you host (or that they access, read, or use in support of their child). Once they've filled out their punch cards, enter the parent in a raffle to win a fun prize!
- **Form a panel of students from your school to lead a parent-teacher meeting.** This is sure to be funny and engaging and the unique nature of the event will draw attention and a new crowd—at the very least, the parents and friends of the children leading the panel. Use the interest generated by this meeting to funnel parents into other types of meetings, programs, or to helpful resources they can use. (Hearing salient talking points and invitations from children can also help them hit home a bit more for parents, if that would also be helpful).
- **Use ongoing communications to talk up and advertise your meetings in a strategic way.** Take cues from savvy real-world marketing techniques and go further than simply announcing the date, time, and location of a specific event. Write a simple subhead for each event that makes it sound tantalizing—what, exactly, is going to be the practical benefit a parent can expect to learn or receive from an event? After the event has happened, refer to it often in your email or social media copy, talking about the high points or anything significant that occurred during your meeting.

- **If you have any local celebrities or very popular personalities at your school or in your community, see if you can work with them to attend or spread word about the meeting.** Note that ‘celebrity’ can be an extremely wide category; if you happen to know a TV star, that’s great, but the owner of the local coffee shop might be just as effective an option.
- **Put together a door prize for attendance.** If you’re a teacher, you know that your students operate better when there’s a clear incentive. Adults aren’t that different. Get local businesses to donate snack items or small local goods, advertise the fact that there’ll be a door prize at your event, and follow through on it—and then repeat the idea next time so people have time to get excited.
- **Partner with other schools in your area to put together bigger events.** If there’s one thing we’ve learned from the research surrounding parent-teacher relationships and the effects they can have on student achievements, it’s that every community can benefit from strengthening these partnerships. Additionally, if you aren’t drawing large enough crowds or your school doesn’t have the resources you need to make these types of meetings interactive or momentous enough, team up with other educational communities. If parents hear that more and more people throughout their community are talking about a larger event, they’ll be more likely to attend as well.

### Section 3: Reflection Questions

Think about the practices you may already have put in place to help drive parental engagement. Are any of them similar to the practices we have listed here?

Do you think that any of the practices we have listed here would be easy for you to implement?

When it comes to communication practices with the parents in your school, do you have a positive association with the activities you perform? Why or why not? What could you change to enhance the experience for both you and the parents in your class?

## Course Conclusion

When it comes to parent engagement, it’s clear that schools, students, and parents themselves can benefit from any small steps that teachers are able to take. Fortunately, it does seem that even small steps can make a big difference, as long as they’re intentional and practical. Research tells us that investing in parental engagement and

involvement is one of the best ways to ensure that children receive an ever-better education. While administrators and families alike all need to invest more in fostering meaningful relationships between parents and schools, it is likely up to teachers to take the first step.

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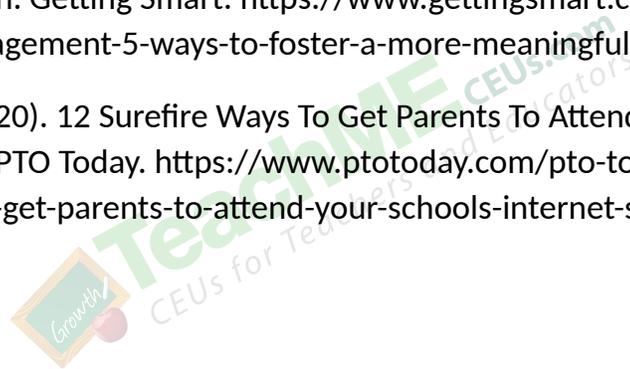
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