

# **Communicating With Families**

## **Introducing School Policies and Programs**

**The beginning of the school year is a key time to communicate with parents. Some will be new to the school. All will want to know what to expect from schools and new teachers, and how they can help their children learn. Some of this information can easily be mailed to parents or other responsible family members. Below are some methods of communicating and key points to utilizing these practices.**

### ***Early Fall Mailings***

#### **Welcome Letters**

**Welcome letters are generally sent home by teachers at the beginning of the school year or when a new student enrolls. Some items for these letters might include the following**

- **A list of basic activities and broad plans for the year**
- **A list of materials the child will need for class**
- **Phone numbers and times when the teacher can be reached**
- **A sincere invitation to share concerns and provide assistance to parents as they help their child with school work**

**Remember to use clear, simple language and short sentences that avoid education jargon so all can understand. (See information under newsletters for more on how to make written material engaging)**

#### **Information Packets**

**These materials can be distributed at open houses in the fall. Schools often mail these items to all parents who do not pick them up at the open house.**

- **School handbooks and information sheets can contain updated lists of school policies and special programs. They also can contain services offered by the school and telephone numbers of school officials, parent leaders, and room parents.**
- **If the school, district, or community has a school-home connection through a local cable channel, e-mail, or homework hotline, highlight how it can be easily accessed.**

#### **Calendars**

**Monthly or annual calendars highlight upcoming school events and meetings. Here are some tips for calendar preparation.**

- **Calendars can be designed to be conveniently posted on the refrigerator door. Some include ideas for each day on ways families can help children learn. For example, "Have your child identify the items in the kitchen that are square, oblong, and triangular."**
- **Television programs or movies that the family may enjoy together can be noted.**

- **Upcoming community events for families can be listed.**
- **Supplements with more information and event schedules can be mailed later.**

## ***Home-school Handbook***

**The home-school handbook provides families with a handy information packet about the school. Handbooks help parents understand school policies and programs and become aware of the ways they and their children can be involved in the school.**

### **Content**

**A home-school handbook serves as the school's calling card, establishing a tone for its relations with its families. It also serves as a parents' yellow pages, providing all the basic information they need. But make sure all phone numbers, dates, and locations are up to date. Handbooks can contain the following:**

- **Statement of school goals and philosophy**
- **Discipline policy and code**
- **Operations and procedures regarding**
  - **Grades and pupil progress reports**
  - **Absence and tardiness**
  - **How to inquire about student difficulties**
  - **Emergency procedures for weather and other events**
  - **Transportation schedules and provisions for after-school activities**
- **Special programs at the school such as after-school enrichment or child care programs**
- **Parent involvement policies and practices at the school, with items that describe:**
  - **"Bill of Rights" for parents**
  - **"Code of Responsibilities" for parents**
  - **Open house and parent-teacher conferences**
  - **Involvement opportunities such as volunteer programs, advisory councils, and PTAs**
- **A calendar of major school events throughout the year: holidays, vacations, regular PTA meetings, report card periods, open houses, and other regularly scheduled school-home contacts**
- **Names and phone numbers of key school contact people**
- **Names and phone numbers of parent leaders (e.g., members of advisory councils, key people in parent organizations, and room parents)**
- **A tear-off response form allowing parents to ask questions, voice concerns, and volunteer at the school**

**The handbook could be distributed at schoolwide gatherings, such as open houses and parent-teacher meetings, or through the mail to those who do not attend. The main idea is to get the handbook to everyone early in the school year and discuss it briefly if possible when it is presented. While it is tempting to include as much information as possible, avoid making a handbook too long; otherwise, many parents will put it aside.**

## **Handbook Preparation**

**Handbooks that are prepared collaboratively by administrators, teachers, and parents are able to reflect the interests of each group. If administrators develop the book, they may want to ask teachers, parent groups, student associations, and others to review it in draft form.**

### **Other tips for successful handbook preparation:**

- **Use clear, simple language that avoids educational jargon.**
- **Use in-service days to familiarize staff with the handbook so they can be effective in using it with parents.**
- **Translate the handbook into the languages spoken by school parents.**
- **Make sure teachers and parent and student leaders approve of and understand the content of the handbook.**

## ***Open House***

**Schools need to share information about their programs with all parents. One widespread approach is the open house. It is a great way to welcome all families to the school. The open house works best if schools:**

- **Hold them just once or twice a year.**
- **Schedule them at times of low "calendar conflict".**
- **Attend to the 3 P's—publicity, planning, and preparation.**

## **Publicity**

**A carefully thought-out publicity campaign is essential to success. The open house should be scheduled about a month after classes start so that teachers are somewhat familiar with their students and there is time to contact all parents. Districts need to hold their schools' open houses on different evenings so parents with children in more than one school and teachers who have school-age children can attend each open house.**

**The most important element in success is to set an expectation among all students that their parents will attend. The following strategies may be helpful in a publicity campaign:**

- **Have students design personal invitations to the event for their parents.**
- **Mail every parent an invitation from the school that explains in detail the event and what parents can expect to learn.**
- **Note on the invitation the transportation and child care arrangements that the school will provide.**
- **Hang posters developed by classes of students in local grocery stores, banks, and the public library.**
- **Set aside time for teachers and parent volunteers to call all parents, particularly new parents, a day or so before the event to personally invite them.**
- **Use the loud speaker to remind all children on the day of the event that the school staff is eager to meet their parents that evening at the open house.**

## **Planning**

**Open houses are successful when they meet the real needs of parents. The best way to ensure success is to involve parents in the planning process. Open house programs could include:**

- **A welcoming session, led by the principal, introducing the teaching staff and the school's philosophy.**
- **A tour of the school.**
- **Time for parents to meet in their children's classrooms and hear about the year's curriculum and the teachers' expectations. Encourage parents to try some of the student activities.**
- **A chance to meet and talk with children's teachers. Make sure parents have enough time to ask questions.**
- **Open houses can also include an opportunity for teachers to:**
  - **Demonstrate some of the activities which will take place in their classrooms.**
  - **Describe the kinds of assistance they would like from parents.**
  - **Give parents a chance to ask questions about the upcoming school year.**

## **Preparation**

**The school will want to convey a warm and inviting atmosphere to parents and ensure that teacher and staff presentations are informative and enjoyable. The administrative team can contribute to the success of the open house by:**

- **Arranging to direct parents with clearly marked signs and support staff around the building**
- **Making sure arrangements for child care and transportation run smoothly.**
- **Providing translators for parents who do not speak English.**
- **Arranging for a display table that has copies of the school's annual report, handbooks, discipline codes, and other items of interest to parents.**
- **Requesting art classes to prepare a welcome sign for parents and put art work all around the school.**
- **Requesting that bulletin boards are bright and up-to-date.**
- **Encouraging band and chorus classes to play and sing in small groups around the school before and after the open house activities.**

**Teachers can help by:**

- **Making clear, brief presentations about the curriculum and teacher expectations.**
- **Preparing handouts for parents that reinforce their presentations and involve parents in a typical interesting class activity.**
- **Increasing parent enjoyment of the open house with techniques such as**
  - **Displaying unfinished student work to give parents a sneak preview of what's in store for their children.**
  - **Giving parents a chance to complete a few of the activities on which their children have been working**
  - **Inviting children to conduct a few learning activities with their parents.**

## ***School-Parent Compacts***

Many schools are developing voluntary agreements between the home and school to define goals, expectations, and shared responsibilities of schools and parents as partners in student learning. Compacts incorporate the unique ideas and activities of different school communities. They usually have sections for schools, parents, and their children to sign if they choose. As an example, the Title I requirements are paraphrased below.

School responsibilities (a) describe how the school will provide high-quality curriculum and instruction in a supportive and effective learning environment that enables students to meet high performance standards and (b) note the importance of communication between teachers and parents on an ongoing basis by such means as:

- Parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools, including discussion of how the compact relates to the child's achievement.
- Frequent reports to parents on their children's progress.
- Reasonable access to staff, to observe classroom activities, and to volunteer and participate in their child's class.

The parent responsibilities section of the compact indicates some ways that parents can support their children's learning. They can:

- Monitor school attendance, homework completion, and television watching.
- Volunteer in their child's classroom.
- Take part, as appropriate, in decisions on the education of their children and constructive use of extracurricular time.

Compacts need to be used in combination with other family involvement activities, not as the only way schools communicate with parents. They are more likely to be effective when well planned, appropriate to the situation, sensitive to individual needs, flexible, and accompanied by supports of money, time, and teacher and parent training.

Adapted from ***Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools*** – August, 1996  
available at [www.ed.gov/pubs](http://www.ed.gov/pubs)