

Communicate Effectively and Develop Relationships



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Do not

Principle 2: There is consistent evidence that effective communication and relationship development creates environments in the school that are welcoming, respectful, and conducive to family engagement. The school places an emphasis on effective two-way communication with every family and stakeholder within the learning community and seeks to develop relationships based on mutual trust.

2.1 The school creates and maintains a welcoming and respectful environment that is inviting, supportive, and encouraging to every family.

2.2 The school employs strategies that extend opportunities to develop relationships beyond the school walls so that every family can substantially contribute to the education of their children.

2.3 The school ensures that healthy, two-way communication is consistently maintained. A sense of caring to truly collaborate with every family exists as evidenced by numerous mechanisms to allow families to communicate easily and directly with the school.

For more information, materials, and tools to support your work with Principle 2, see Chapter 7 in *Engage Every Family* (Constantino, 2021).

CASE STUDY 2.1 WHAT HAPPENED IN SCHOOL TODAY?

Jimmy Hennessy came bursting through the kitchen doorway, just as he had done each day before. His mother, Caroline, was there to greet him with the snack that he would undoubtedly ask for within seconds, and then she would engage in a fishing expedition to find out what he did in school that day.

“You have to sign stuff.” Jimmy reached into his bag and took out the tattered weekly folder. He then reached into his bag and took out his equally tattered agenda book, assigned to him at the beginning of his sixth-grade year.

“What am I supposed to sign, Jimmy?” Caroline said as she shuffled through the papers in his folder.

“I don’t know. The teacher just said you have to sign, and I have to bring it back tomorrow.”

Caroline found a sheet for her signature inside the folder and the agenda where she had signed before, so she just continued to sign next to Jimmy's assignments. Caroline wondered if there was a better way for her to be engaged in her son's education. Jimmy's teacher sent a lot of things home for her to sign, but it was information about activities and work that Jimmy had already done in school. Caroline thought to herself: *How do I engage with something that is already over with?*

Stop and Reflect

- Does the conversation between Caroline and Jimmy sound familiar?
- What information would Caroline need in order to have a better conversation with her son?

Caroline thought a lot that night about her role in helping Jimmy to be successful in school. She was curious about what was happening in school, day-to-day, so that she could be more of a partner in Jimmy's education. She wondered if there could be a better parent-teacher partnership. Would the teacher care to know that she *wanted* to be supportive of him and the school?

Caroline was motivated to contact Jimmy's teacher the next day. When she was able to speak with the teacher, she was informed of Jimmy's progress thus far, highlighting some of the great work that Jimmy had done. Jimmy's teacher gave Caroline her son's score on the recent reading test and explained how he compared to the others in the class. The teacher also said that Jimmy sometimes misbehaved in class by talking out of turn or talking to his neighbors. Jimmy's teacher asked for Caroline's help in reinforcing good school behaviors. He concluded by reminding Caroline that what she should do to ensure Jimmy's success was to check homework, read to Jimmy, support daily attendance, and make sure Jimmy was prepared with materials and supplies requested by the teachers.

Stop and Reflect

- Jimmy's teacher defined Caroline's role as Jimmy's parent. What do you think of the teacher's comments?

Caroline did not get the partnership response she was looking for. What she got was the information she had gotten many times before: where Jimmy was academically in comparison to others in his class and where he was on the continuum of acceptable school behaviors.

Caroline thought that there must be more she could do to engage with Jimmy's teachers, but how?

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to communication? Expectations?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. Is Caroline justified in wanting to be more engaged in Jimmy's learning life? Why or why not?
2. What aspects of the culture of the school or classroom can be gleaned from this case?
3. What communication protocols could be put into place to enhance stronger two-way communication between Caroline and Jimmy's teacher?
4. Come up with strategies that would lead to Caroline feeling a better sense of self-efficacy about her role.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Both Caroline and Jimmy's teacher demonstrate an interest in building a partnership to support Jimmy in school. Caroline's instincts are good, and she knows there are better ways for her to guide her son's learning at home, but she doesn't have the tools. Likewise, Jimmy's teacher is eager to share information with Caroline that he feels will be the most useful, but the teacher, too, misses the opportunity to engage the family in a meaningful way.
- Schools, for the most part, do a good job with one-way communication of information, student events, and progress, but it takes a more deliberate effort to build parental efficacy. Families with strong efficacy are more likely to be engaged with their children's education throughout their schooling and, in turn, support a healthy learning environment at school.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

Consider the case study you just read and think of a similar situation that you and/or your colleagues may have experienced in your school, district, or community.

Briefly describe the experience/situation:

How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

Reference and review the appropriate principle information. For more detailed information, see the corresponding chapter in *Engage Every Family* (Constantino, 2021). Once completed, reflect on your original actions and steps. What changes will you make should an issue like this arise again?

CASE STUDY 2.2 FIRST DAY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tomorrow was a big day. Benita Rubio's only child, Anton, was entering middle school. Benita had heard a lot about the differences between middle and elementary school and worried that she would lose touch with her son's progress. To date, Anton's teachers were always so accessible, inviting her to their classrooms, and they were available just about any time she needed them. They were interested to know about Anton, his family, his culture, and Benita's approach to raising her son.

At the middle school open house, Benita and Anton toured the building, found Anton's new classrooms, and met his new teachers, who were warm and friendly. The classrooms were brightly decorated, and the hallways adorned with balloons and motivational sayings to welcome all students to the school year. Her impression of the school was a positive one, and most importantly, Anton seemed quite content with his new school and had already connected with his friends from elementary school.

Benita could not wait for Anton to come home so she could hear about his first day. As Anton emptied his bag, he took out a large manila folder and what looked to be two calendar books. Anton shared, "The teacher gave us this stuff and said we should review it with our parents. She said the envelope was for you." Inside was a letter from Anton's teacher explaining that middle school is a time when students begin to seek their independence and also learn how to accept more personal responsibility for their learning in school. Along with directions for parents to sign agendas and reading logs, the letter stated that any communication between families and the teachers would be "facilitated through the agenda as a primary communication tool." The first conference would be in November and follow an "arena conference" format, meaning that all of the teachers would be available in the gym and parents were free to stop by to talk to the teachers of their choice. Benita didn't know what to make of any of this. Was this the type of communication she could expect now? Would she still be able to visit the school and visit Anton's classroom during the day?

Stop and Reflect

- What do you think about the school's communication opportunities with families?

Stop and Reflect

- Why do you think that the school has "designated" opportunities for engagement?

Benita kept shuffling through the papers and came across a handbook. What she read in the handbook confirmed her worst fears. The handbook, rules, and procedures of the school stated that parents were welcomed to the school at "designated times" and for "designated events." If a parent wished to speak to a teacher outside of the scheduled

arena conference nights, they were required to set up an appointment with the grade-level team. It was made clear that teachers' contact information was posted on the website and parents were free to contact their child's teacher(s) for important matters via email. Parents were not allowed to have lunch with their children. Grades would be published on the student information system. Parents were asked to review grades and attendance prior to contacting the school or their child's teacher.

Stop and Reflect

- Are Benita's expectations for engagement altruistic?

Benita was also introduced to a new social media application. The teacher's letter explained that information parents needed would be communicated through the application as well. Instructions for downloading the app were included in the packet. Benita kept a brave smile while reviewing all the information with Anton but privately knew that middle school would be a very different experience for both of them. Would there be no casual conversations with Anton's teacher? Did anyone at the school have any interest in knowing more about Anton and his family? Was this the new parent-teacher partnership that Benita would need to become accustomed to?

It struck Benita that her expectations for being involved with Anton and his school this year may very well be a bit naïve.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to communication? Relationships? Parental efficacy?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. What are your impressions of the school, and why?
2. The school's policies and procedures present challenges to family engagement and parental efficacy. Identify the barriers and propose solutions to each.

POINTS TO PONDER

- All schools operate under a set of procedures, practices, and policies that provide continuity in process to the organization. In this scenario, these rules seem designed to keep families at bay like unwanted guests, making it difficult for teachers and families to build strong relationships naturally.
- While it is expected that schools will have procedures to ensure safety and to limit disruptions to instructional time, schools can be welcoming by offering opportunities for visits and by providing high levels of customer service during interactions with school personnel.
- Open and honest conversations with an exchange of ideas are critical to building strong relationships. School policies that restrict parents from meeting individually with teachers set the tone for fear and mistrust. Parents may feel intimidated in situations in which they are outnumbered by school personnel.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

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Briefly describe the experience/situation:

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How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

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CASE STUDY 2.3 THE LETTER OF THE LAW

Casey Hiller was the new principal at Bailey Elementary School. Casey was known for being a rule follower, making it clear to all that the handbook, discipline policies, and other procedures would be followed exactly as outlined. Teachers relished the no-nonsense approach and the support they were getting. The school would not tolerate misbehaviors, and if they occurred, families and students could expect swift action and disciplinary consequences.

Teachers knew that Casey had high expectations for all aspects of the school. When disciplinary issues arose, teachers knew Casey would support them and discipline the child appropriately. As one teacher put it, “Casey follows the letter of the law—you can take that to the bank.”

The First Sign of Trouble

Jessica, a fifth grader, slapped another student in the face while waiting in the lunch line. Jessica was swiftly escorted to Principal Hiller.

Stop and Reflect

- So far, what can you determine about the culture that is being established in this school?

"We don't touch, hit, or hurt other students at this school . . . for any reason," Casey said sternly. Though she tried to explain what happened, Jessica was cut off.

When Jessica's father arrived, Casey explained that his daughter was being suspended for the rest of the school day and all the next day.

"We cannot tolerate this type of behavior regardless of what was said." Casey's tone was firm.

Stop and Reflect

- What do you think about the situation and conversation between Casey and Jessica's father? Consider what you might say or do differently.

Jessica's father found the punishment to be harsh and asked if the full day of suspension the next day could be negotiated. Casey cited school board policy and the district discipline policy. "I'm sorry," she said to Jessica's father, "but that is the policy." Fearing the effect this suspension would have on his daughter and feeling Casey was unwilling to listen to the source of the problem, he made his way to the superintendent's office.

The Superintendent Steps In

Jessica's father appeared unannounced at the district central office. He was quizzed as to his conversation with the principal and was insistent that he speak with the superintendent, and he would wait.

The receptionist huffed, "Well, let me call upstairs to his office. I am not even sure he is here."

Jessica's father was slowly losing his patience and said, "When you call, tell them that I will sit in this lobby all day if I must, but I am not leaving until I see the superintendent. You tell them that!"

About ten minutes later, the administrative assistant appeared in the lobby. She greeted Jessica's father and, without identifying herself, led him up a flight of stairs and into a windowless conference room.

Stop and Reflect

- Think about Jessica's father's perception from his point of view. What would you be thinking if you were in his position?

In just a few minutes, the superintendent entered the conference room through another door.

The superintendent greeted him with a handshake. "How can I help you today?"

Jessica's father began to share his version of the situation that had occurred at the school. With each sentence, he became angrier and at one point was yelling and shaking a piece of paper in the superintendent's face.

The superintendent listened patiently as Jessica's father shared how unfair he believed the school is and how "this principal thinks she's queen or something." The superintendent remained calm and simply listened to the father's frustrations. At an appropriate time, the superintendent spoke.

"Mr. Johnson, this piece of paper you are waving at me—may I see it?" Jessica's father threw it across the conference table. As the superintendent suspected, the paper was a copy of the discipline referral for the incident. With that, the superintendent ripped up the referral, and pushed it back across the table.

"Mr. Johnson, you were not motivated to come all the way down here to get a piece of paper removed from a file. I suspect there is more to this story than you have told me. Not so much about the incident in school, but about your daughter. Am I right?"

Jessica's father sat for a minute, and then tears welled in his eyes. He began to tell the superintendent that his daughter was a student with a disability, and she was overweight. She had been teased relentlessly at Sunday School, on the playground, and just about everywhere she went. He explained that her outbursts have happened before and that Jessica had already confessed that the student made fun of her each day in the lunch line, so today she slapped her.

"I appreciate you opening up to me with this information. Here is what I would like you to do. Please bring your daughter to school tomorrow morning. I will schedule a meeting for you with Jessica's special education teacher, Principal Hiller, and our district director of special education. I want to be sure we are providing the services necessary for Jessica's success and to see if there is anything else we could or should do to help Jessica have a positive experience in school."

"I appreciate you listening to me, and I appreciate your kindness and understanding. Jessica can be a handful, I admit, but she's a good girl. We didn't raise her to hit other people, I promise you that," said Jessica's father.

"I'm sure you didn't, Mr. Johnson." The two shook hands, and Jessica's father made his way home.

Stop and Reflect

- What was different about the superintendent's interaction with Jessica's father?

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to culture? Communication? Relationships?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. When was there healthy, two-way communication? When was it lacking?
2. Collaboration is key in two-way communication. Is there any evidence in the case study that collaboration took place?
3. Jessica's father sought out the superintendent to remove a suspension. Was that the father's real issue? If not, what do you think was on his mind?
4. Casey's motives in running an excellent school are pure; however, what do you think of the procedures and rules? What could be altered to bring about better outcomes?
5. When was it easy for Jessica's father to communicate? When was it difficult? What could be changed to create a culture of two-way communication?

POINTS TO PONDER

- Compassion is our strongest tool in creating meaningful and authentic two-way communication between home and school. Often, school districts include among their core beliefs the need to have good, two-way communication between families and schools, and that communication should be authentic. Unfortunately, the message of that core belief becomes lost in the daily rituals of teaching and learning. Time becomes an issue, and it is in those instances, when we cut communication corners, that trouble can emerge.
- All staff of every building should have training in communication with families. This includes those times when conversations are critical or crucial in nature. Work into your professional development program time to teach and practice good, authentic communication skills for all staff. Be sure to keep this focus front and center in your school.
- A kind word, a smile, and a warm welcome, even for those who are troubled or angry, can go a long way to diffuse a tense situation. Consider customer service training for your front-office or greeting staff as it is very likely they will have the first encounter with a family visiting your school.

- School behavior and discipline make up a significant portion of communication with certain segments of families—those that are disengaged or disenfranchised, or that feel marginalized. It is in these crucial times that two-way communication protocols can assist greatly in moving toward positive resolutions for all involved.
- Technology has changed the face of communication. Text messages, emails, and communication systems dedicated to family–school communication are very common. However, in many situations, you cannot replace either face-to-face communication or voice communication. Texts, emails, and other forms of the written word can be easily misinterpreted, and it is very common for the intent of written correspondences to be misconstrued. If angry or belligerent emails or texts are received by the school, do not respond in kind. Instead, call the family. Share your desire to resolve the issue, and do all you can to meet face-to-face. And remember the golden rule: Anger is a mask for fear. Find the fear; resolve the anger.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

Consider the case study you just read and think of a similar situation that you and/or your colleagues may have experienced in your school, district, or community.

Briefly describe the experience/situation:

(Continued)

(Continued)

How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

Reference and review the appropriate principle information. For more detailed information, see the corresponding chapter in *Engage Every Family* (Constantino, 2021). Once completed, reflect on your original actions and steps. What changes will you make should an issue like this arise again?

CASE STUDY 2.4 STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Ivan enrolled at Reed High School in the middle of the fall term after arriving in the United States with his family. The family fled their home country unexpectedly, arriving with nothing more than their personal belongings. Ivan's parents tried to describe his school experiences in detail, his participation in advanced classes, and his love of reading, especially nonfiction. Ivan studied English in his home school, and his skills in spoken English language, though still choppy, were more developed than his reading and writing skills.

Stop and Reflect

- Think about families and students in similar situations in your school. What procedures are in place?

As Ivan's parents struggled to understand and to be understood, it became clear that they would benefit from a translator if they were to communicate with the school effectively. The school counselor, realizing the same, noted that unfortunately the school did not have a translator on staff. He tried to explain that without official records Ivan would be placed in the grade level commensurate with his age, and he would be enrolled in courses that would lead to a standard diploma. Despite meeting the district's minimum requirements for language proficiency, the counselor enrolled him in English language learner services for a portion of the school day because teachers felt it was best practice for students for whom English was not a first language.

Ivan's parents carefully monitored his progress during the first few weeks, watching for signs of trauma given the circumstances of their relocation. They understood that a move to another country would be a significant adjustment for all of them but most especially the children. They were surprised at the changes they saw in Ivan within a month of starting school. Ivan, normally quiet and studious, became angry and vocal about his negative feelings about school. He was unwilling to even attempt his homework assignments and showed little interest in the activities that he once enjoyed, especially reading. Ivan's mother reached out to Father Benjamin at the Orthodox Church, who was sponsoring their stay. After listening to her concerns, Father Benjamin offered to advocate for Ivan, and a meeting was scheduled with his teachers.

During the meeting, Father Benjamin conveyed Ivan's parents' observations at home and shared with the teachers the kind of student they knew Ivan to be, describing the high level of academic success he had experienced prior to their relocation. While the counselor and the teachers empathized with the family, they were not seeing Ivan's potential in class. Ivan's English teacher insisted that the U.S. education system was more rigorous than others and suggested that Ivan was going to have to work harder. His science teacher stated that Ivan would have to take responsibility for his learning; otherwise, he would fail the semester due to incomplete assignments. Ivan's mother swallowed hard and, holding back tears, said in her first language, "I know my son. He loves to learn, and for some reason he doesn't want to learn from you. Is there anything we can do together to inspire him?"

Father Benjamin quickly translated for her so there would be no miscommunication. The counselor looked to each teacher for a response. After a few shrugs and a long pause, Father Benjamin addressed the English teacher: "Would it be possible for him to read some of the books for your class in his first language? I will be happy to provide them. Ivan would get so much more out of the class, and this might make him feel like he belongs here."

Stop and Reflect

- What conditions might be present such that Ivan's mother felt her only option was to reach out to Father Benjamin?

Stop and Reflect

- How would it make you feel if you were Ivan's parent, and you were told your child had to "accept responsibility for his own learning"?

The teacher thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Ivan simply needs to learn English, and when he does that, he will fit in better."

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to communication? Bias? Cultural responsiveness?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. In what ways does the culture of the school community impact school efforts to engage families in the academic lives of their children?
2. If you were leading this team of teachers, what strategies would you suggest they employ to help Ivan adjust to his new setting?
3. What steps did the school miss in building relationships with families with limited English proficiency, and how might they correct them?

POINTS TO PONDER

- Families from other cultures must be at a minimum bicultural. Schools must learn to adapt to the different cultures within their school communities.
- Exploring, learning, and valuing family beliefs are important foundations when working with families with limited English proficiency.
- Communication is a key factor in working with families with limited English proficiency. Adopting a process of bilingual volunteers, commonly a parent or community member, like Father Benjamin, can enhance communication by explaining practices, help with registering new students, and build teacher capacity for understanding cultural nuances of different families.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

Consider the case study you just read and think of a similar situation that you and/or your colleagues may have experienced in your school, district, or community.

Briefly describe the experience/situation:

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Communication refers to the exchange of information through both sending and receiving while engagement requires a state of being engaged, emotional involvement, and commitment (Constantino, 2021). For many schools, communication focuses on imparting information and news related to policies, rules, and happenings through a one-way exchange. The evidence is clear that schools that are welcoming, respectful, and conducive to family engagement have in place effective two-way communication and are intentional in their efforts to build strong, enduring relationships with students and their families.

Family engagement isn't always written into the policies of the school, and relationships with families rely on the individual actions, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and values of the school staff to build relationships with families. As we see in the cases in this chapter, school policies and practices must be embedded; otherwise, how we communicate and engage families may facilitate or challenge efforts to sustain a school culture that welcomes and joins with every family (Constantino, 2021).

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