

Ideas for Connecting Families to Student Learning

What are children learning in school? How can parents be involved and help support their children's learning? To keep families positive about school, make sure they're informed about what their children are learning and how they're doing. The following are ideas educators can use to keep families aware of the curriculum and expectations for student learning and homework. No matter what you do, be sure to ask families how their children learn best. Leave time to listen to families' comments and questions.

How many of the ideas below does your school use to link all parents to their children's learning throughout the school year?

Build Positive Relationships

- ___ Invite new students and families to a "Get-to-Know-You" session before or soon after the school year starts.
- ___ Hold a potluck supper for students and families by grade level or classroom, followed by a short presentation about the curriculum.
- ___ Schedule school open houses for one grade level at a time. Smaller groups give parents a chance to know school staff and each other better.
- ___ Give staff time to extend the personal touch to families, through phone calls, notes, and home visits. It's important for families with limited English skills or those unfamiliar with the school, to know that their presence at school events is appreciated and needed.
- ___ Get to know families by strolling through students' neighborhoods or attending neighborhood coffees in a family's home. Invite families from one neighborhood at a time to meet and chat with school administrators at the local community center.
- ___ Disseminate information not only about *how* parents can reach school staff, but also about *when* teachers are available during the school day to answer parents' questions and discuss children's progress.
- ___ Use parent meetings and the school newsletter as opportunities to introduce school support staff to families. Explain what each support staff person does, how she or he helps students, and how parents can contact that person.

Welcome Families to the School

- ___ Establish regular family visiting days throughout the school year as a way to welcome families to the school, observe classes, and find out what their children are learning. Send out reminders to families a week or so ahead of time.
- ___ Hold school open houses at various times of the day and night so all families have a chance to attend.
- ___ Ask volunteer parents to greet families as they arrive at school for events, to answer questions and direct families where they want to go. Identify volunteers who speak Spanish, Hmong, or other languages spoken by school families.
- ___ Host a "Bring Your Parent to School Day" or a "Back-to-School Day" for parents to meet teachers and learn about the classes children will attend.
- ___ Open the school computer lab to families. Invite students to teach and demonstrate to parents new computer skills they learned.

- ___ Provide new families with a videotape about the school, staff, and programs in the family's native language. Highlight opportunities for families to become involved.
- ___ Host a "Families and Friends" program that brings together families from different neighborhoods or cultural backgrounds. Have families share a simple meal, student performance, or learning activity together.

Link Families to Learning

- ___ Work with fellow teachers to develop grade-level brochures that list what children will be learning in each subject this year, major school events, and homework help tips. Downloadable templates for these parent brochures are on the DPI web site at <http://dpi.wi.gov/fscp/doc/gradebro.doc>
- ___ Work with the Building Leadership Team, action team, or parent group to organize a parent forum to discuss new academic standards, state tests, or school improvement efforts. Ask parents to suggest topics for the parent forum.
- ___ Let parents know how they can access school or district data on the WINSS (Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools) web site at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sig/index.html>.
- ___ Designate a "family shelf" in each classroom, the school family center, or the local public library with materials parents can check out on child development, discipline, homework techniques, and learning styles.
- ___ Place copies of school textbooks for each grade in the public library for parents to review and reference.
- ___ Offer several interactive homework options every quarter. Ask children to "interview" their parents about family history or current events and write about what they discovered. Summarize class results in the classroom newsletter.
- ___ Organize a child-and-parent field trip so they can learn together.
- ___ Offer "learning together" opportunities for students and families: Build a birdhouse or a volcano; do an art or music project; feature family fitness activities. Issue special invitations to fathers for hands-on learning events.
- ___ Create a youth service-learning project especially for families. Use families' talents and expertise in designing and carrying out the project.
- ___ Invite parents to a staff inservice on preparing young children for school, new reading strategies, or improving math skills. Publish a brief article with dot points of what participants learned and strategies parents can do at home.

Communicate Effectively

- ___ Organize neighborhood communication networks. Find five parents in each neighborhood willing to make one or two phone calls to pass on information about school events. Ask each person contacted to make one more phone call.
- ___ Invite families to receive the school newsletter or school announcements via email. Once a list of email addresses is created, only updates need to be made to reach 300 to 500 families easily.
- ___ Reserve time at the start of every staff meeting for staff to talk about how the school can improve communications and relations with families.
- ___ Develop a "How Parents Can Help" handbook that explains school goals for student achievement and behavior. Ask parents for tips on what works at home for completing homework, motivating children, and staying in touch with school.

- ___ Reserve one corner of each school newsletter for updates from the school parent group, the Building Leadership Team, and other school committees with parent members.
- ___ Enclose a two-minute survey in school report cards asking parents how well they think the school is connecting families to student learning. Ask parents what they need more information about or help with to support their child.

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