



A COMMUNICATIONS PLAYBOOK

A diverse group of people of various ages and ethnicities standing in front of a brick wall. One man in the foreground is seated in a wheelchair. The entire image is overlaid with a blue tint.

Strategies for Parent
Teacher Home Visits Week



About Parent Teacher Home Visits

Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a high-impact family engagement strategy designed to build trusting home-school partnerships centered on shared hopes and dreams. Recent studies reveal that PTHV's model for relational home visits strengthens relationships, shifts mindsets, improves teaching, and bolsters student outcomes. These studies also reiterate how critically important implementation fidelity is to realizing the full potential that the model offers.

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INTRODUCTION

How Authentic, Well-Planned Communications Can Secure Support for Your Family Engagement Initiatives

When families and communities are meaningfully engaged with their children's education, everyone wins. This is the core message of Parent Teacher Home Visits and the inspiration behind inaugurating national Parent Teacher Home Visits Week. Students take a greater interest in and ownership of their learning, and their academic and social-emotional outcomes improve. Families report increased collaboration with and empathy for educators, who go on to develop improved capacity to engage students in the classroom.

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As you move toward the planning and implementation of your school or district's Parent Teacher Home Visits Week, you'll need a communications plan to help guide your way to success. A good communications plan will help build excitement and anticipation around PTHV Week. It will help you and your team engage with important audiences before, during, and after the event. It will help keep your team members acting on one accord to avoid some of the common hiccups of event planning, and it will point the way toward the strategies and tactics needed to sustain and grow your home visit practice.

Although many factors can influence school-family engagement, clear and consistent communication stands apart. Communication is one of the most important tools for enlisting the support you need for your programs and initiatives. To be sure, it's difficult to be an expert at teaching and be an excellent public relations specialist too. However, it pays big dividends to



In our work life, every exchange we have with our parents and caregivers is like gold, a precious opportunity to build a relationship that can make a difference in the life of a child.

Patricia Weinzapfel.



invest in careful communication with families. Family engagement efforts, though well-intentioned, may yield disappointing outcomes because of ineffective communication practices.

A dependable stream of thoughtful communications between families and schools must be approached creatively and strategically. It must be an integral part of the planning of any school initiative, whether you are starting a Parent Teacher Home Visit practice, seeking input on a new policy, or inviting community members to school for an event. Communications planning should come at the beginning of all new initiatives, not at the end or as an after-thought.

Like so many other aspects of our lives, good communications start with relationships — strong, trusting relationships that schools and families establish and nurture over time. These relationships are the linchpin of success for all school initiatives and for students' academic achievement. These relationships are a foundation for your communications and help you spread ideas, gather buy-in and cooperation, spark action, and support decision-making. To build effective partnerships with families and community members needed for a successful PTHV Week, schools must first talk to — and listen to — parents, community groups, business leaders, and others who have a stake in your school and your students. Your communications strategy should accommodate the diverse language, cultural needs, lifestyles, and schedules of everyone involved.

The good news is that there are now more communications tools at our collective disposal than ever before. When you begin promoting PTHV Week, start a new practice, or wish to solicit community members' input on a planned initiative, there is a tool for the task.

But how do you put it all together in a coherent way? That's what this toolkit is all about. Whether you are an educator, school leader, or work with a school's family and community engagement team, this guide will show you the tricks of the school communications trade. It is intended to help you promote PTHV Week, along with other school programs and initiatives, and increase engagement while avoiding some of the common pitfalls and challenges inherent to this work.

Communication-related activities form a part of your school community's brand— meaning the feelings, emotions, and ideas that come to mind when anyone thinks about the district. Good communication solidifies a strong school brand, and that's what gets the community pulling in the same direction. It's what draws people to school board meetings, the games, the forums on reform, and the back-to-school nights. It's what gets them to sign up to participate in Parent Teacher Home Visits. It makes their cooperation automatic in times of crisis and secures their participation in practices like home visits.

The bottom line is that creating a healthy environment for the flow of positive, two-way communication between home and school must become a part of our daily work, such that when we need families and community partners to act, they will.

In the pages ahead, we lay out the basic parts of a strategic communication plan—use this as a guide for PTHV Week and each initiative you want to promote to families. At the heart of this document is the playbook, a set of sample activities that school communicators can use to engage the public in PTHV Week. You'll also learn how to deal with barriers to effective communication and how to leverage communication to build trust with families. We include a series of outlines, checklists, and resources to support your planning.



Pro Tip

FAMILY

Use the term “family engagement” in place of “parent involvement” in your communications, both written and oral. This is at once a recognition of all the players in a student’s life, and a more nuanced description of what’s happening. Put simply, involvement means *doing to*, and engagement means *doing with*.



Constructing a PTHV Week Communication Plan



So you want to promote PTHV Week, or a related new program, practice, innovation, or event at your school? You're aware of the broader themes at play around communications and building relationships of trust with families. Now is the time to chart your path forward and turn this knowledge into action. In this section, we walk you through some of the most crucial parts of a strategic communications plan. Executing a plan will take the support of many people, so use your resources, especially your school or district's communication office.

Goals. All successful strategic communications strategies have one thing in common: They begin with a sharp focus on goals. This will lead to smarter decisions around capacity and budget and ensure that strategy is driving tactics, not the other way around. Before focusing on what we plan to do, answer this question:

What are you trying to accomplish? Be specific as possible. Envision what success will look like. For example, we would like a 15 percent increase in

the number of our families who volunteer for home visits this year. This goal is an example of a SMART goal, or one that is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely.

Define your target audiences. To be successful, you need to know exactly who it is you're trying to reach. This will be critical for the next step, which is about tailoring your messages to your audience. Consider how it will be possible for your audience to help you reach your goal. Continuing with the example of home visits, you might think of limiting your target audience to the families in your community. They are a significant component, but not the only one. Perhaps you need resources from your school leader or district to expand your home visit practice. This might include needing your school board to approve spending. Moreover, there may be cultural brokers embedded in community organizations who can let parents know what home visits are all about. Your communications plan will target all of these groups of people.

Messaging. Capturing the power of words and the values and associations they conjure up for your audience is the fundamental task of communications. Therefore, you will want a stable of key messages to accompany your plan. These messages are mental maps that inform everything you do, whether you create a flyer, host a meeting, write a press release or send a series of tweets. But messages must be tailored to the audience. Continuing with our example, you might want to convey the benefits of home visits to everyone. Families might be more attuned to academic benefits. School board members may want to understand the benefits in relationship to the costs associated with the practice. Plan to have a set of talking points about what you are promoting,



Goals & Audiences

What are you trying to accomplish. Be specific and define success. Determine who are your target audiences are and answer the question: what do you want them to do when they learn about your new idea?



Messaging

What motivates your audience to act? What do we need this audience to hear? How does this audience usually get their news and information? How can we make this message targeted and repeatable so it reaches our decision makers?



Strategies & Tactics

WHAT are we going to do? Build a tick tock, a week by week tactical to do list making sure they reach targeted audiences and help achieve our stated goals.



Evaluation

HOW will you know your efforts were successful? What do you plan to measure?



and ensure there is a version of that talking point for each identified audience. See the examples on page 12. You will also want to make some key decisions about your messengers. Who will deliver the messages and under what circumstances? For example, if you conduct a media interview, a student and family might have a wonderful story to tell, and if you are giving a speech before a group that will help fund your new program, perhaps your school administrator or program coordinator might be well-positioned as a spokesperson.

Strategies & Tactics. The strategies and tactics section of your plan answer the question: What are we going to do? You want to build a work plan, week by week, detailing all of the actions you will take, ensuring they reach your target audiences and advance your stated goals. A helpful framework for organizing your strategies and tactics is the PESO model. PESO stands for paid media, earned media, shared media, and owned media. Paid media can refer to tactics such as advertising your initiative in the local media, speaker fees paid to local celebrities who champion your cause, social media ads, and any and all payments you make to promote PTHV Week. Earned media happens when you get a trusted third party, usually a journalist, but it could be a blogger or social media influencer to write or post a piece about PTHV Week. This helps increase your credibility and ensures lots of people learn about it. Shared media refer to posts you make on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube. Although you create this content for your audiences, it lives on a third-party site, and you have less control over how far the message will reach. Owned media refers to all of the communications tools you have access to and control over. This could include

your website, blog, student and district newsletters, podcasts, TV stations, intranets, and so on.

Evaluation. Don't wait until you've exhausted your strategies and tactics to determine whether you are successful. Continuous monitoring of how well you are reaching your stated goals will help you refine your plan and course correct over time. You might, for example, consider the number of parents who sign up or express interest in PTHV Week a leading indicator. You might count the registration or attendance numbers at an event. You might look at how well your social media posts are performing and how many people are visiting your website or blog pages to learn more information. How many people listened to your podcast or clicked on a link in an email you sent. All of these are important indicators of awareness, interest, and influence. Refer back to your stated goal to determine exactly which metrics are appropriate to label your efforts as successful.

The section that follows this one contains a breakdown of a select few high-impact communication strategies that can be leveraged in the promotion of PTHV Week and family engagement practices.



Insight

When developing your messaging, consider all the relevant data and statistics that support your statements. In addition, be sure one or two of your messages counter myths and misunderstandings that surround programs like the one you're trying to promote.

Sample Plan Outline

GOALS

Increase awareness of our school's home visit practice among Kindergarten families and increase participation by 10% in one year.

STRATEGIES & TACTICS

June - Send a message to parents of 4 and 5 year-olds enrolled at local child care facilities.

July - Phone Banking/Door-Knocking Day - Invite teachers to make an introductory call to all newly enrolled families.

August - Post flyers about PTHV in local community centers and pediatrician offices. Host a booth at neighborhood events. Start a social media campaign announcing PTHV Week.

September - Conduct Home Visits, invite families to an activity celebrating PTHV Week, and ask them to tell another family about PTHV. Send a press release to media about PTHV Week.

AUDIENCES

- Families enrolled in the school
- Child-care facilities in the community
- Early childhood groups in the city
- Local Pediatricians
- Local Parent Support Groups
- Local Media

EVALUATION

- Number of parents who inquired after messages sent to child care
- Number of parents reached on phone banking day
- Number of inquiries generated by flyers and social media
- Number of inquiries by local media about PTHV Week
- Number of visits conducted, measure of demand for more visits

Sample Talking Points

Focusing on improving the family-school relationship leads to measurable benefits for students, teachers, and the school, confirmed by recent PTHV research. The following are a helpful starting point to bring the facts about Parent Teacher Home Visits into clear view for your audiences.

TALKING POINT #1

Students do better with home visits.

They flourish academically and socially emotionally. They come to school more, and rates of chronic absenteeism go down by 21 percent. All students do better at schools that systematically implement, even if their family did not get a visit. Their odds of scoring proficient on English/ Language Arts tests go up 35 percent.

TALKING POINT #2

It's the right model. Parent Teacher Home Visits have been rigorously evaluated in independent studies by Johns Hopkins University and RTI International. It's a model that works. Robust, systematic implementation of Parent Teacher Home Visits lays the groundwork for a positive school culture where family engagement is highly prioritized.

TALKING POINT #3

Teachers change their thinking about

students. When educators visit with families, they learn to see the whole child in the context of their whole lives. They learn things about the student that will make the student more motivated and engaged in learning in the classroom. Teachers also change their thinking about families. Home visits are the exposure needed to root out implicit biases.

TALKING POINT #4

Families change their thinking about

school. Families are less intimidated and less distrustful of schools after Parent Teacher Home Visits. They begin to feel – and act – like partners with teachers and schools. They begin to communicate more with teachers about school, and they begin to support their children's learning more, at home and at school.

Messaging Checklist

1

Concise: Focus on three to five key messages per topic; write one to three sentences for each key message; should be read or spoken in 30 seconds or less.

2

Strategic: Define, differentiate, and address benefits.

3

Relevant: Balance what you need to communicate with what your audience needs to know.

4

Compelling: Design meaningful information to stimulate action.

5

Simple: Use easy-to-understand language; avoid jargon and acronyms.

6

Memorable: Ensure that messages are easy to recall and repeat; avoid long, run-on sentences.

7

Authentic: Use active voice, not passive; do not use advertising slogans.

8

Tailored: Communicate effectively with different target audiences by adapting language and depth of information.

Ground your message in humility, empathy, and transparency. Get the facts out, but ensure the tone is welcoming so that families feel they can ask questions. Root your messaging in your core values and principles as a district. Don't oversell your program or treat it like a silver bullet or cure-all to all the problems your community faces. Acknowledge there are barriers or challenges that come along with the initiative. Assure that working together, you can mitigate or overcome them. Clearly communicate the benefits of the initiative for everyone involved, students, educators, parents, and others.



Pro Tip

CULTURAL BROKERS

Whenever you want to introduce a new program or invite families to do something, consider recruiting a group of families who may act as cultural brokers on your behalf. Whether they are translating language or explaining the new program in an accessible way for those who share cultural backgrounds, they can become trusted sources who can help more families participate.

Sample Activities

To execute a communications plan for PTHV Week, you will need to establish a set of activities, called strategies and tactics, to help you get your messages out into the world and secure participation in your events. Your communication strategy is the “what” you are trying to achieve. The tactics are the “how” you are going to achieve it. Consider all of your people and your resources as part of your communications toolbox. Broadly speaking, you’ll want to make use of your website, blog, and email newsletters. You’ll want to harness social media, local print and broadcast media, including your school district’s internal news organization. You’ll want to make use of graphics like flyers, brochures, infographics, posters, signs, and banners. You’ll want to record video, take pictures, and if possible host contests or gamify aspects of PTHV Week. Most importantly, you want to connect people: families, community members, educators, media, and local policymakers to share their stories and testimonials. You want a method to archive those stories for future use, and you want to collect data along the way to gather feedback on your efforts. The following are just a few high-impact activities you could consider when promoting or celebrating PTHV Week.



Parent Teacher Home Visits

Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a high-impact family engagement strategy designed to build trusting home-school partnerships centered on shared hopes and dreams and on-going communications. Use these encounters to tell families about PTHV Week, solicit their participation and ask them to tell other families in their neighborhood about Parent Teacher Home Visits. This is word-of-mouth marketing, and it is the most important way to spread awareness.



Media Strategy

A good media relations program is critical to your communications plan due to the impact media can have in shaping the opinions of the individuals and organizations in your community. Think about the ways that media has impacted your community. If your community is like most, you have probably experienced local issues that have generated a lot of press, whether positive or negative, and that press has in turn generated a lot of positive or negative word of mouth. When people read a positive story about your Parent Teacher Home Visits practice, they are more likely to have a favorable opinion of your initiative. In creating your tactical plan, you are strategizing to get the most attention—and the most positive attention—for your initiative, and in so doing generate the most support for your effort. Reach out to your local newspaper, radio and TV stations, and other influencers and tell them about PTHV Week. Ask if they have a **community calendar** section or segment, where they can announce your PTHV Week celebration.

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If you have a compelling story to tell about the difference PTHV Week has made in your community, invite media for a **briefing**, whether in-person or virtual and gather your messengers — families, educators, and others — to be on hand to tell their story and answer questions. Be sure to have a press kit available for media. It should describe PTHV Week, your school's home visit practices, pictures, graphics, and other materials media can use to help you amplify PTHV Week.

In addition, you will want to send the media a notice about your PTHV Week celebration. This is called a **media advisory**. See an example on the next page. It tells the media about an event that's going to take place, usually in the next week so that media outlets can assign someone to cover the story. If you host an event, you'll want to also distribute a **press release** on the day of the event and distribute it to your local media. The purpose of a press release is to announce something newsworthy and get coverage of it and get noticed by your target audiences. See an example on page 17. When you meet with media, remember your job is to use the skills you've honed as a family engagement expert to develop those relationships over time. This will make it easier to reach out should you want to do additional promotion in the future.

Another opportunity for media relations is a **letter to the editor** or **op-ed**. These are excellent tools to have your key messengers, whether they are educators, families, or others, to share their home visits story in the media. The letters and editorial pages can often be one of the most well-read and most talked-about sections of the paper. And they serve as a real litmus test for how certain issues, opinions or decisions are being received by the community.



Sample Media Advisory



MEDIA ADVISORY

PRESS CONTACT:
Sylvia Smith, PTHV Coordinator
Office # (718)555-1212
Cell # (718)555-1213
Email: ssmith@school.edu

HUNDREDS OF FAMILIES, SCHOOL BOARD WILL GATHER TO CELEBRATE THE ACADEMIC BENEFITS OF HOME VISITS

BROOKLYN, NY (DATE) - School will host a gathering of hundreds of families who have participated in the school districts Parent Teacher Home Visits initiative. The event will kick off the district's first PTHV Week, a celebration of the academic and social-emotional benefits of visits between families and educators.

WHAT: Parent Teacher Home Visits Week launches. During the week, educators will make extra visits and encourage families to share how the visits helped their young learners.

WHO: An estimated 300 families and 60 educators will conduct brief visits off school grounds. They will get to know one another and share their hopes and dreams for students.

WHEN: (DATE). A launch rally will take place at 9 a.m.

WHERE: Home visits will take place citywide. The launch rally will take place at School's athletic field.

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[This indicates the conclusion of the media advisory.]

About: End with your school's "boilerplate," or short paragraph describing your school or district. It should be italicized.



Sample Press Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESS CONTACT:

Sylvia Smith, PTHV Coordinator

Office # (718)555-1212

Cell # (718)555-1213

Email: ssmith@school.edu

EDUCATORS MET WITH 350 FAMILIES IN THEIR HOMES TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Missoula, MT (DATE) - After a week-long rally to engage educators and families in intimate conversations about their children, educators met with a whopping 350 families enrolled at School. PTHV Week, part of a national observance spearheaded by Parent Teacher Home Visits, is being conducted in more than 525 communities around the country.

"Parent Teacher Home Visits work," said Principal Henry Smith. "Since we introduced this practice two years ago, it has been a win-win for the school and community."

With Parent Teacher Home Visits, educators go to students' homes, or another location off school grounds where the families and educators agree to meet. The 30-minute encounter is designed so that family members and educators can share their hopes and dreams for the future of their learner. Nationally, more than 26,000 visits were conducted in homes, at parks and community centers nationwide, even during the pandemic, as more schools realize the profound benefits of this practice.

"We saw test scores go up. Kids came to school ready to learn," said Darrell Smith, fifth-grade teacher at School. He conducted 25 visits during PTHV Week.

"What I didn't expect" said Smith, "was how much I learned in the process. We tend to think if we don't hear from parents, they simply don't care. But all families want the best for their students. I picked up at least 10 lessons from families this week that I can incorporate in instruction time."

Parent Alicia Smith wasn't sure she wanted a visit at her home. She thought it was an invasion of privacy and teachers had an ulterior motive. Her fears were allayed.

"They came with respect and humility, and all they wanted to know was what was best for my son," she said. "I can't wait until his younger sister is old enough to have a home visit"

To learn more about School's Parent Teacher Home Visit practice, visit www.school.edu/PTHVWeek.

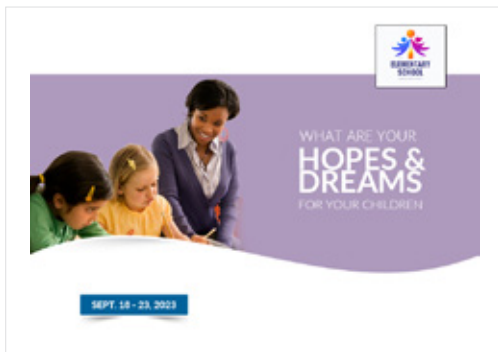
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About School



Multimedia Outreach

Schools and districts need to offer compelling multimedia examples and illustrations of what Parent Teacher Home Visits are all about. These graphics, videos, and stories need to be everywhere your target audiences are. In the hallways of your school, outside the main office, in community centers, on the bulletin board at City Hall, and at the local coffee shop. Most especially, you have an opportunity to harness your digital communications strategy for PTHV Week. Consider placing a PTHV Week banner on the home page of your school's website and on your internal intranet. Place a story in the school's newsletter. Above all, create a steady drumbeat of messages on your school's social media, and ask teachers, parents, and administrators to share those posts. The following offer visual inspiration and are available on the PTHV Week webpage: <https://pthvp.org/national-pthv-week/>







Pro Tip

BRANDING

Use special colors or create a special logo so that people come to associate them with the particular program you are promoting.



School Board Briefing

School boards make important decisions regarding the allocation of school resources, and therefore, it's critical that these community leaders be a target audience for your PTHV Week communications plan. On the national PTHV Week webpage, <https://pthvp.org/national-pthv-week/> are several items that you may consider bringing before your board, such as a resolution to adopt home visits or to proclaim PTHV Week during September. However, you may also want the board to provide additional funding or understand the benefits of home visits. It would be helpful to request adding a briefing to your next school board meeting and bring along teachers and families with direct experience, so that they may share their firsthand experience with the practice. Also consider inviting school board members to go on home visits where appropriate and where families agree. The best way to get an item on the school board agenda is to work with your school administrator in reaching out to the board president or superintendent to create space for your presentation. Should you be able to arrange a visit, be sure to alert your local media.



Circle of Champions

The idea here is to create a small group of PTHV Week brand ambassadors. You want to assemble a list of people in your school community, especially families and community leaders who are natural “connectors.” The main strength of connectors is that they know a lot of people, including other connectors. Because they have such rich networks of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, they can get the word out about Parent Teacher Home Visits and PTHV Week. Ask your principal, school counselors, leaders at community organizations, local social services leaders, and city hall leaders to identify a group of people who can help with this effort. Be sure they reflect the diversity of your community, and it helps to include those who can reach families who speak languages other than English and can translate the cultural nuances of what you are trying to achieve. Consider hosting a webinar or a conference call to explain PTHV Week. Equip them with talking points, flyers, social media graphics, and other information that can spread throughout the community. Keep in close contact with this group and remember to acknowledge them during your PTHV Week celebration.



Pro Tip

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Do not neglect internal communications. You need to be communicating with everyone, but do not let a focus on the public conversation distract you from internal communications needs. Look for ways to reach teachers through channels they will engage with. After all, your colleagues need to hear these messages too, and they will be at the frontlines of this work right beside you.



Pro Tip

UNEXPECTED MESSENGERS

Elevating different voices from our partners and allies in public conversations can dramatically shift the dynamics and help re-frame the issue. Often legislators and policy-makers hear from the same stakeholders time and again on their issues. Using an unexpected messenger can help families or school board members understand how a proposal benefits the community at large, and can provide a unique and important voice in support of the issue. Consider the school bus driver, the local patrolman, an employee at the community center, local historian, or another member of the community with a unique take on your program.



Building Trust

Remember the "Why" in Your PTHV Week outreach efforts, and model trust-building in your communications activities. Despite your best efforts to communicate far and wide, an underlying sense of distrust by family members will undermine the best laid plans.

Parent Teacher Home Visits was founded when parents from Sacramento, California, came together in 1998 to address a deep distrust between the school district and the community. Out of this, parents and teachers created a strategy for engaging families and educators as a team to support student achievement. The model of home visits they created and that we still use today is based upon community organizing principles of empowerment, with a focus on building trust, communication, and partnering on common goals for student success. As the model took hold throughout the country, the comments we heard

from families and educators shared a common thread: because of cultural differences, they did not trust each other or communicate well.

Trust refers to a willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the one in whom trust is placed is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open. By their very nature, schools welcome families and students into their communities to learn and produce the next generation of our nation's leaders, workers, and neighbors. Schools must be a safe place and a place where people feel comfortable getting their educational needs met. If

we expect families to place their trust in educators, and other adults in the school community, they must have faith that those adults will be reliable, and fair and have their child's best interests at heart.

Building trust is a process, a journey if you will, and will blossom and wilt with each interaction and communication. It should come as no surprise then that consistent communication is often ranked as one of the most important strategies for building trust. Under traditional models of family engagement, typically, schools tend to send information home, tucked in students' backpacks – which unfortunately closes the doors for families to give feedback. It's imperative to establish an outlet for two-way communication—this way, families and school staff can collaborate so both will be on the same page and can work together toward accomplishing the same goals.

Another low-barrier method to ensure that schools and families can use communication to build trust is to communicate positive messages as often as possible. Some families only hear directly from schools when there is a problem. If schools regularly communicate positive things about students, such as when a student improves academically or developed a new skill, families will view communication from and with the school as less intimidating.

Seek consultation from families. Before making final decisions, school leaders should reach out to all of the various kinds of families who will be impacted by that decision. Ask for their input and carefully consider them. Use multiple ways for families to offer their viewpoints, and acknowledge that you've received their messages.

Consider home visits. Home visits that adhere to the PTHV model powerfully combine trust-building and communication. Our home visits are short, 30- to

40-minute conversations, in which educators listen, ask questions, and make observations that they can take back to their classrooms to improve instruction for the learner. As a two-visit model, PTHV encourages the initial, ice-breaking visit to occur in the summer or early fall. This first visit focuses on sharing hopes and dreams. The intention is for communication to continue after the first home visit, allowing an opportunity for teachers to consult families to support instruction and for families to find new and additional ways to engage with the school and the child's coursework. A second visit that focuses on academics or any other relevant issue to the student or family builds on the relationship and communication efforts.

Schools would also do well to take a pulse of trust within the school community. The perception of school staff and families may differ significantly. In addition, take steps to let families know they are welcome whenever they interact with school personnel. Ensure that all staff know how to meet the needs of families who communicate in languages other than English and how to accommodate any challenges with hearing, sight, learning, or mobility. In all cases, repeated acts of respect, professionalism, and taking concerns seriously will be reciprocated with similar doses of trust.



Insight

All successful strategic communications strategies have one thing in common: They begin with a sharp focus on goals, audiences, and objectives. This will lead to smarter decisions around capacity and budget and ensure that strategy is driving tactics, not the other way around.



Barriers to Effective Communications

Just as educators are skilled in the art of teaching in different environments, they also need knowledge to effectively communicate in spite of challenges. However, ensuring good communication between school and home has become more challenging in recent years due to a number of key trends impacting family engagement.

Difference. Teaching and administering a public school today are an exercise in communicating across difference. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 53 percent of the 49.4 million students who enrolled in PreK-12 in 2020 were students of color. However, the nation's public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students. NCES reports that nearly 80 percent

of educators identify as White. All communication is cultural, however. It draws on ways we have learned to speak, cue, and convey messages, and therefore the potential for misunderstanding and roadblocks to relationship-building is rife. School communication requires the ability to work through differences in race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ability status, and more.

Polarization. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 was a galvanizing moment for the United States in that it sparked new conversation, and a racial reckoning appeared to emerge. Less than seven months later, however, 42 states had introduced bills or initiated other measures that would restrict conversations about race relations and gender issues in the classroom. Moreover, all of this has happened against a backdrop of people becoming increasingly distrustful of public institutions. K-12 education is frequently the topic of negative news reports. Because all politics is local, educators seeking to communicate with families and communities are at the front lines of these broader shifts.

Culture. Each of us is shaped by many factors. One of the most powerful influences is our culture. It is a lens through which we see ourselves and make sense of the world. Communication and understanding can suffer when the lens of school staff members differs from that of the community it serves. Teachers and their families may have different communication styles, different attitudes toward managing conflict, different approaches to completing tasks and making decisions, and different beliefs about how much they should share with others. A Learning Heroes report in 2018 even noted cultural differences in the ideal frequency and form of communication, with parents prioritizing in-the-moment contact, such as calls and text messages, whereas teachers who were interviewed prioritized scheduled meetings as the best indicators of family engagement.

Discourse and Implicit Bias. What educators think of their students and their communities matters, and it shows. Implicit bias, or the unconscious ideas we associate with people, have been well-documented and linked with academic performance. When we are

blind to our own biases, we tend to assign blame and ill-intent to what we see. This can lead to negative discourse around families and perpetuate stereotypes about how much families care about their children's learning. All families want their children to succeed. Mine your messages for such biases.

Edu-Speak. Parents' upbringing may have included negative school experiences that may hinder engagement, and they may experience trouble interacting with the school community to advocate for their own children. A common communication barrier is the use of jargon and acronyms and other shorthand education professionals use to carry out their roles. What educators say matters: your communication can welcome families in or effectively shut them out. Closely monitor your communication messages to ensure they avoid technical terms, or they are explained where necessary. Remember, the goal of communication is to be understood.

Limited Family Engagement Options. Although parent-teacher conferences are exceptional opportunities to meet families and address academic issues, the average 15-minute session is hardly enough time to get a relationship off the ground. The power dynamics at play and the rush to speak to all families create an impersonal atmosphere, albeit unintentionally. If the bulk of your school's family engagement is in the form of these short interactions at school, you are missing powerful opportunities to connect, such as Parent Teacher Home Visits, and learn about your students in the greater contexts of their lives.

Access and Language. Families may have limited access to technology so if all of your communication is one-way and takes place online, for example, you might inadvertently leave some out of the conversation. Moreover, if all external communications about new

programs and initiatives are English-only messages, you are likewise leaving out numerous families who feel more comfortable communicating in another language. Use your resources to translate and interpret, as needed, and ensure families with special needs are equipped to access your messages.

Overkill. Students can interact with many different teachers in a typical school day, and each may use a different tool to connect with their families. When messages on different topics are coming from multiple sources via multiple platforms, families can become overwhelmed and miss the most important information. It's better to communicate often, but when you need families to act, it's important to ensure they receive a personalized invitation in the manner they prefer to communicate.

Though these barriers can seem intimidating, and they are but the tip of the iceberg of what educators face, schools are naturally positioned to be the connective tissues within their communities. It's one of only a few institutions in which parents, business leaders, law enforcement, political leaders, and other community organizations have a vested interest. You can leverage this position and create opportunities to connect and foster dialogue.

And always remember that communication is an ongoing process. You might make a mistake with one of these barriers, but there's always another chance to improve and strike the right note the next time. Families will appreciate your earnest attempts to get to know them and make them feel like they belong.



How do you see the families in the community? Do you look at them through a deficit lens, or do you look at them as assets, people who have knowledge and skills that you need to be an effective educator?


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Resources & Additional Reading

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