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**School Practitioner
Listserv**

**A Weekly Community of Practice Network
for Sharing and Interchange**



January 25, 2016

**Can schools enhance parent participation
in student conferences?**

- **Comments from the Field**
- **Invitation to Listserv Participants**

Featured set of center resources:

>Home/family engagement with school

**Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.**

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of
the weekly exchange, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

**For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>
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Note: In keeping with the *National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*,* this community of practice network has expanded in number of participants and topics discussed.* The thematic emphasis is on (1) daily concerns confronting those working in and with schools, (2) the transformation of student and learning supports, and (3) promoting whole child development and positive school climate.

Can Schools Enhance Parent Participation in Student Conferences?

At this time of year, schools across the country are scheduling parent-teacher conferences. For some families, this is only one of many ways they interact with the school. For others, this may be one of the few times they have met the teacher. For too many families, this is another missed connection with the school.

Many schools wrestle with how to increase parent participation.

From the perspective of enhancing student and learning supports, we see *home involvement and engagement* as one of the six major elements of a learning supports component (see Chapter 6 “Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling” <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>).

What’s the problem? In the Philadelphia school’s *Chalk & Talk*, teacher Christopher Paslay wrote:

“Parental involvement in Philadelphia public schools is notoriously low. Over the past decade, less than 10% of my students’ mothers and fathers have shown up for school functions such as Back to School Night and Report Card Night.

Colleagues of mine from other parts of the city report the same problem: The majority of mothers and fathers do not show up for school functions.

According to information published in the ... The Philadelphia Public School Notebook: Focus on Parent Involvement, here are 10 reasons why parents of Philadelphia public school children don’t attend teacher conference:

10. Some parents can’t read letters sent by schools inviting them to attend conferences.
9. Parents do not receive information far enough in advance to adjust their schedules.
8. Parents do not have the time because they have multiple outside responsibilities.
7. Cultural barriers make it difficult for some parents to be involved.
6. Schools are not clear in terms of how much and in what ways they want parents involved.
5. Some parents are not involved at school but are involved through informal

conversations

or discussions in the home.

4. Schools are not “welcoming” enough to parents; parents feel uncomfortable or intimidated approaching the teacher.
3. Some parents don’t understand English.
2. School staff do not set the right “tone” for parents to get involved in school.
1. Some parents do not know where their child’s school is located. (E.g. school choice

with

transportation from local school)

Excuses or legitimate issues? Maybe it’s a little bit of both. Either way, the district and moms and dads must find some common ground so teachers can truly make parents their partners.”

<https://chalkandtalk.wordpress.com/2008/11/13/10-reasons-why-philadelphia-parents-don%E2%80%99t-attend-teacher-conferences/>

C**omments from the Field:** For a perspective on how schools are enhancing their approach to parent-teacher conferences, we sent the above along with a *Request for Sharing* to a small sample of folks across the country. Below are twelve responses.

(1) “I have worked in education for over 10 years in the US public system, the French public school system and a private international school in Beijing. I’ve seen a whole range of parent involvement. SES does play a role. Are people available to have conversations or are they working multiple jobs to make ends meet? Language and culture are also factors. Will

they understand you when you write and talk? Are you a colleague in their child's education or an authority? However, the culture of a school seems to be the controlling issue in my opinion. Which is encouraging, because that you can change. Administrators need to ask themselves if they want parent involvement and then, ask the parents how to improve it. To assume that we can engage someone without their input in how best to reach them is a mistake majority authority groups have made again and again. I don't see engaging parents within a school community any differently than engaging minority groups within a civil community. You would need to be open to hearing what their needs are and willing to ask questions to gain understanding. At least, that's what my students tell me."

(2) "I would agree that all of those reasons (except number 1) can be issues for our parents. However, we DO get better turnout when we serve food, offer door prizes, have games or competitions, and especially when there is any kind of student performance - either work products, or song, dance, art. Giving parents specific, well-described tasks always helps to get them involved, and making their involvement into a special role that they uniquely can offer or provide is often a winning strategy. We find that asking them to share their special talents (art, carpentry, fishing, music) with classrooms is a feel good for parents and students alike. We're trying a star-gazing night on our baseball field this weekend for the first time - serving hot cocoa, and hoping we get entire families out with their chairs and blankets! To provide context, we are an extremely remote rural Pre-K-12 school (45 minutes from the nearest town in any direction) with a demographic of high poverty and high substance abuse, not unlike many other schools across the country in that way."

(3) "Many parents are intimidated. Also, many parents have multiple conferences at multiple schools to attend. One thing that isn't listed is that many parents are impoverished, physically and/or mentally ill, or just plain worn out. In my own experience going to my son's conferences, they are unorganized and it can take me 3 hours to get 5-10 minutes with each teacher. Here are some thoughts: Make "conference night" more of an event night. One school I worked at offered (a very good) free dinner which brought in a lot of parents. The family center also gave away clothes, mittens, hats, books. The night could include student recognitions (which parents seem to like) and/or band concert. I work with a lot of parents that seem to like to communicate via text. I think that if the parent feels comfortable communicating with teachers in any way, it doesn't really matter if they come to conferences or not. Of course, email is an option as well, but not everyone has access. Almost everyone does have a phone."

(4) "I'm an attendance counselor. We have increased parent attendance by educating parents about their rights and RESPONSIBILITIES. Per law, parents are allowed to schedule parent meetings so we insert the info on the invite and send it out at least 2 weeks in advance. We also make it mandatory and I walk into each classroom informing the kids, at the same time I make a raffle among the class that gets more parents. I work both angles: mandatory and "it's good for you".

(5) "My CST social worker and I just discussed the value of a personal phone call from the case manager in getting parents to attend, or just participate by phone if they cannot come in person. I think parents forget that they are important members of the IEP team. They need to feel valued."

(6) "Last year, I helped facilitate a parent meeting for a district in need of assistance. Middle and high school parents stated that the school was not welcoming, but parents with elementary students did not have that negative perception. Ironically, one campus housed the elementary and middle schools in the same building; a common/shared lobby with separate entrances was in the front of the building. The question I asked myself was, "How can the culture and climate of the elementary and the middle school be so vastly different when the schools are in the same building?" Administrators need to get out and meet the parents of the children they serve. A child is a most precious gift and school faculty and staff must respect the responsibility of the gift in

which they were entrusted to teach and to educate for 7.5 hours 5 days a week. Notice I said *teach* and *educate*. I deliberately used both terms because I define them differently. All children must be *educated* and learn the academic content that is aligned in the state standards, as realized in the Common Core. More importantly, we must *teach* all students the *soft skills*. We must *teach* empathy, kindness, respect, responsibility, resilience/grit, active listening, respectful disagreement; and we must *teach* all students how to effectively work in groups, how to speak using a phone/skype/zoom/facetime, and how to engage with people from cultures other than their own. I used to be a PBIS trainer and most of the push back I received from teachers was "we don't have time." Even when presented with scholarly research articles that explained the positive relationship between behavior and academics, teachers did not want to change. I deviated from your original question on purpose because I believe if schools believed in and taught the soft skills to all students and made the parents aware of it as part of their vision and how they do business, perhaps engagement would follow. The same parents that attend high school football games don't attend conferences. Perhaps schools need to host events (i.e., chili dinners; ice cream socials) in conjunction with conferences. Making it mandatory that the student attend and be an active participant in the conference, is another thought."

(7) "In my experience, people have time for events they value. If parents aren't showing up, that tells me they probably don't expect much of value to happen at the conference. All of the below reasons have strong face validity with me. 'Non-welcoming' is probably the strongest. I suspect part of the problem is the way educators try to save time by using jargon, acronyms, and initialisms. Even experienced educators can have trouble communicating with educators from other areas that name common educational activities differently. Test scores can be explained using arcane statistics; if grade equivalent scores are reported, they are usually misinterpreted. Using plain English would go a long way to breaking down barriers.

Another issue is that the meeting is ostensibly an opportunity to discuss and exchange opinions. In practice, schools typically do not allow enough time for anything other than a one-way presentation of information, from the school representative to the home representative. At the very end you will hear, 'Any questions?', but if you do there is no time left to adequately deal with the issues raised. If all the parent has ever heard from the school is 'bad news', that would be a disincentive to attend. Parents need regular reports about what is working well, too. In my own visits as a parent of a student, I felt more welcomed in the elementary school. The middle school and the high school had a clear 'we are the educational experts here, and you are not, so don't get in our way' message. When I was a Foster parent of students with special needs, the message was 'How dare you challenge anything about our IEPs? You're an educator; you should back us up.' When I was invited to be a parent advocate in a Section 504 meeting, I downloaded the district's 504 manual from the website and studied it before I went to the meeting. The 504 officer told us we had to follow procedures and fill in forms. All of those instructions ran contrary to the district's manual and what I understood as required by Section 504. When I pointed this out, the 504 officer said we had to do it his way, or he would reschedule the meeting for 2-3 months later in the school year, delaying accommodations even more.

Regarding 'feeling comfortable' in school, I've noticed that parents who did well in school and have advanced degrees seem more comfortable in a school setting than people who did poorly in school and dropped out without graduating. Perhaps we should first recruit known neighborhood and community leaders and activists to guide us in designing meetings that respect local cultural traditions and social mores. I've noticed that some neighborhoods require strong physical responses to disrespect. Those same actions within a school context could be considered as assault and result in a student's expulsion. Perhaps there is a way to rectify this misunderstanding. I suspect we need to get together with those folks who do not like to come to parent conferences, and ask them to help us make improvements. We need to spend time with parents building relationships with parents prior to the conference time. We need to provide transportation to make it easy for parents to get to school, child care for the siblings who are not part of the conference, comfortable places for parents to wait their turns, and refreshments. Maybe we should 'pay' parents for their participation in conferences with gift coupons for local

groceries, or clothes, or haircuts?”

(8) “Although educators are interested in academic progress, many parents want to know whether their students are happy, having fun, making friends, are safe and respected. We need to report that information, too. These are just random ideas, but writing them down leads me to wonder whether we need to think of being good hosts at our school conferences, anticipating and providing for the needs of our guests. Give up the industrial model idea of efficiently distributing the information that the school district wants to pass along, and create a social time when adults could relax, eat together, listen to student musicians, get to know each other, and talk about ways to make schools work better for every one.”

(9) “As a parent and educator I think access to grades online and school attitudes towards parents have had a negative impact on parent attendance. Parent teacher conferences are too short to get to the basis of most problems that students might be having. Most schools are using an online system that doesn't allow parents without internet access to schedule appointments. At the high school level, teachers have distanced themselves from parents by not reaching out early on. When parents don't feel connected they don't attend school activities.”

(10) “We have about 95% turnout. The methods that we use are:
>Communicating in their primary language,
>Personal calls,
>Invitations,
>During Back to School, parents sign up for a Parent Conference,
>Home visitation,
>Expectation of teachers to have 100%,
>Last resort, conference over the phone.”

(11) “I am working on making everything much more user friendly: clear language in forms, best times for parents scheduling, availability of child care during meetings, more home visits, teacher outreach to establish relations. Also, make it a point to send home positive messages because parents start avoiding when all they hear is complaints about their child.”

(12) “I work for a day school for autistic children, trying to put together a telehealth program that would be covered by medicare. The program allows parents to speak with behavioral therapists. A telehealth platform to allow teachers and counselors to speak to parents via phone app and/or computer might be more effective for scheduling with a parent. For low income families, providing a cheap tablet that is locked to only be used by for meeting purposes could be issued by the school for a parent meeting. It could also allow for multiple languages spoken by parents, on-screen translation/use of translator services that exist in telehealth already, and include short surveys and write-in/text opportunities to provide more concrete data, at least in a trial run/research phase. It would be IRB approvable and hip. Most teachers I know are willing to schedule an after school/late meeting if they know the parent will show up. A teacher/counselor could use this outside of business hours if needed, but most likely could schedule a meeting on the parents' daytime availability.”

For a helpful resources related to planning for parent teacher conferences, see

Parent Teacher Conference Tip Sheets

<http://www.hfrp.org/var/hfrp/storage/fckeditor/File/Parent-Teacher-ConferenceTipSheet-100610.pdf>

Invitation to listserv participants: With schools across the country scheduling parent conferences and many reporting low turn out:

- >What do you suggest to make conferences positive for teachers/students/ families?
- >What is effective in increasing parent participation at school?
- >Should teachers use student-led conferences?
- >What outreach and follow-up should be done to connect with parents?
- >How should teachers and student support staff work together to strengthen home connections?

Send ideas (or concerns) to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured set of center resources

>Resources related to enhancing home/family engagement in schools

See our Quick Find on this topic at – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/homework.htm> for a gateway and links to resources from our Center and from others. Center resources include:

- >*Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling Self-study Survey*
- >*Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling*
- >*Enhancing Home Involvement to Address Barriers to Learning: A Collaborative Process*
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Families When a Student is Not Doing Well*
- >*About School, Home, and Community Connecting and Collaborating to Address Barriers to Learning*
- >*Engaging the Strengths of Families, Youth, and Communities in Rebuilding Learning Supports*
- >*Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families*

*For information about the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE BECOMES!

Send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences to ltaylor@ucla.edu

We post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm> and to *Facebook* (access from the Center’s home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)