

School Practitioner Community of Practice
(A network for sharing & exchange)

December 13, 2017

**Topic: Parent-teacher conferences:
Strengthening or weakening school-home connections?**

Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

Featured Center Resources

>Strengthening school-home connections

- Note: Go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla> for links to other resources including**
- >Upcoming initiatives, conferences & workshops**
 - >Calls for grant proposals, presentations, and papers**
 - >Training and job opportunities**
 - >Upcoming webcasts & other professional development opportunities**

**This resource is from the
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA**

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Given shrinking education budgets, we have been asked to increase our outreach to make our free resources more available (e.g., for planning, professional development, etc.).

So please feel free to share with anyone you think might benefit (e.g., forward our resources to individuals and share on listservs and websites).

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

For previous postings of community of practice discussions, 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 is being sent to and forwarded by over 100,000 school and community stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of student and learning supports.

Topic for this week: **Parent-teacher conferences: Strengthening or weakening school-home connections?**

“Fall, and, of course, parent-teacher conferences. ... some educators are changing the way they approach these yearly meetings. No longer do they sit in classrooms with a plate of cookies, watching the minutes tick by, hoping at least a few parents show up. They’re taking matters into their own hands—and the capable hands of their students—to ensure meaningful contact.” (From the website of the National Education Association)

Parent-teacher conferences usually go well when teachers are in a position to tell parents how well their child is doing. Problems often arise when a student is not doing well. In such instances, it is especially important to consider new approaches.

In addition to providing information to parents, a teacher’s primary aim during all exchanges with parents is to enhance a collaborative working relationship that serves the best interests of the student and the school. With this in mind, it is essential to find ways to attract parents who are reluctant to engage with teachers and minimize interactions that weaken home-school connections.

If past parent-teacher contacts have been less than desirable, January provides a renewed opportunity for positively developing collaborative working relationships. Here are some ideas for teachers and student/learning support staff to strengthen home-school connections:

From the NEA website:
<http://www.nea.org/tools/71917.htm>

Following is a sample of teacher reports on their approaches to engaging parents:

(1) “I don’t like parent-teacher conferences. As a special education teacher, I spend a lot of time talking to parents all year long. I don’t wait for meetings, or for problems. Some parents I call every day. But, the regular check-ins that are swapped for the traditional sit down conference, must include positive news. I learned that when I was a general ed teacher and a student told me the only time I called her parents was when she did something wrong. So I got on the phone and called her dad in front of the class. The first thing he asked was what she did wrong. I said nothing, she had aced a test! I handed over the phone and the father spent 10 minutes telling his daughter how proud of her he was, and I decided from that day forward I’d start calling parents about the good news a lot more often.”

(2) Another teacher says she’s really proud of her middle school’s parent conferences because they’re not just for parents and teachers, but also for students. And they’re held during the school day as well as in the evening to offer more flexibility for everyone involved. Students lead the conferences to discuss curriculum, goals, progress, and struggles, and together they meet with all of the student’s teachers from math, science, English, history, and PE. “Parents spend about 30 to 45 minutes total,” she says. “We hold these meetings twice a year, and we have 85-88 percent participation.”

(3) A third teacher says he isn’t a fan of the traditional parent-teacher conference. He recommends fostering a deeper relationship between parents and the school so that they feel more ownership of the school. “To empower our parents, we must have a parent open door where parents are welcome to visit the classrooms all year round and at the same time get involved in school affairs.”

(4) A fourth teacher has an open meeting for parents of students in her ESOL department that works well for them. “We serve supper and have presentations by the students, then we’d be available for questions or side conferences. An administrator was always there, so the parents could get answers to those questions, too. It was fun, and it saved us from tedious and unproductive meetings.”

Comments from Center colleagues:

We asked several colleagues the following:

“Most schools have completed the first round of parent-teacher conferences. Do you have any thoughts about

>How to make conferences more collaborative, promote ongoing communication, and strengthen home-school connections?

>What are good Ideas on how secondary teachers with so many students on their roles make meaningful connections with families?”

Here are a few of the responses received so far:

(1) Last year, we updated our high school parent teacher conferences to focus on Career and Academic Planning (CAPS Conferences) hosted by the student's seminar teacher. Parents and students have scheduled conferences focusing on their career pipeline portfolios, as well as a review of academic progress. Our conference attendance has gone from about 25% at the high school to over 60%.

At the middle school, we moved several years ago to a student-led conference with the student's advisory teacher as host. We have nearly a 100% attendance rate at the scheduled conferences. These also focus on academic performance and the career exploration process.

In both cases, we replaced the "shopping center" style of attendance where parents would wait for 3-5 minutes of dialogue with individual teachers. They still have that opportunity, but the scheduled conferences (20 minutes) that have a specific focus are the priority.

We have found that parents want an opportunity for meaningful, personalized information much like that they receive when students have a single teacher in the elementary school. We also schedule team conferences for parents and students who may benefit from it, also during the scheduled conference periods.

Finally, one of our district improvement goals this year is to better align all conferences with a focus on future's planning. We have found that our level of community poverty leads to feeling of hopelessness or lack of vision for possibilities. We think this is an area of parent education that we can impact through the conference process in a very individual manner.

(2) “I think a huge opportunity exists to use social networking to build home/school collaborations. Of course a social media/networking outlet starts as ‘one-way’ communication (rather than collaboration). But it’s important to note that some parents and families may be less inclined to be collaborative in a formal face-to-face scheduled meeting at school, but are more comfortable learning about the class and the teacher on-line in their own home. Such an e-strategy allows parents to “check-in” on coursework to the degree that they feel is most appropriate for their situation and allows them the opportunity to get a sense of what the class is like and what the teacher is like. They begin to build an awareness of teaching and learning on which a collaborative relationship can be built. Social media/networking allows teachers to reach hundreds of parents, step parents, grandparents and guardians and is an opportunity to invite them to contact the teacher directly (email, hours for phone calls, etc.) or get involved with the class in other ways.

Naturally, parameters must be set so that communications are professional, transparent and focused on student learning. Such a webpage should never include personal information on individuals, but should be built to share helpful information about coursework, exams, projects, and student achievements. When such a site is regularly updated and well-publicized, parents can begin to feel like they have a connection to the classroom and to the teacher, making it easier for them to initiate personal contact and set them up to feel more comfortable developing a collaborative relationship. No doubt such an option adds to a teacher’s day. But I have to believe that highlighting student successes in a public forum, sharing information about student learning and offering ideas

for positive home/school collaborations can only benefit students and families. I also believe that once a teacher sets up a schedule and outline for their site, it becomes more routine as time goes on. This doesn't really get to your point about on-going collaborative relationships, but that can be really difficult to establish and maintain meaningful connections with parents. On-line efforts could provide a connection on which collaborative efforts can be built. Besides, I think it could be fun for a teacher to build a 'positive-only' website that features the strengths of all their students. An instructor might also engage students in building and maintaining a site."

(3) "In my experience, I think the parent/school conference is one of those 'required' tasks into which we don't put much effort other than to check off that we did it. There are so many different goals and little to no consensus about what we are trying to accomplish. Everybody goes their own way and there is no way to measure whether goals were accomplished or not. The meetings rarely have food, childcare, and transportation, which is pretty much essential for getting lower-income folks there. Since the goals really aren't clear, people who have students not behaving or learning well may not want to attend for fear of the evening being nothing but 'your child is awful in every way'. Parents of students who are doing well may show up to show support, but they know that they won't get very many specific answers to their questions because 'your child is doing great in all areas.'

I suspect part of the problem is that schools typically plan what information they want to pass along to parents without first finding out what the parents want to receive. I'd like to see more emphasis in this area. We might find out we are asking parents to read to their young ones 15 minutes a night when the parents themselves can't read. (I know in my family, teachers advised parents to help their struggling student in math, but the math was at a level those parents had never achieved themselves.) We might find out who is homeless/couch surfing, who has food insecurity, what topics are of intense interest to the student that are not being covered in school, etc. Obviously, this will take more time than the usual 15 minutes allotted for conferences.

If we all had clarity and agreement on what we were trying to accomplish, I suspect the way we organized the conferences and the amount of time set aside for them would change drastically. Several parents I've known just wanted to know whether their children were happy in school and had a least a couple of friends. You could totally skip all the high stakes test scores, the number of assignments missing, the number of days missed, the amount owed the school cafeteria, just so long you knew about the student's happiness and friends. Clearly, this is an area that has plenty of headroom for improvement!"

(4) "For high-needs schools, however a district defines that, one or two schools might pilot a new Parent -Teacher conference. Administrators should focus on how important a teacher's role is to that community, that the teacher is the conduit of communication to the parents about what is going on at the school to engage families, to connect families to resources both on campus and off campus, and most of all how the themes of 'whole child' relate to the parent. I would love to see a brochure that is made for parents at these meetings so parents get a snap shot of all that a school does. In our schools we don't have a way of really letting parents know about the whole child and that the schools are using SEL curriculums. We just had a consultant come and he mentioned that high-needs schools tend to do best when they focus on two initiatives – behavior and reading (literacy). ... Two things are easy to communicate to parents...."

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Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

What can you suggest for strengthening school-home connections, especially when those doing the parenting are reluctant to engage?

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured Center Resources

>Strengthening school-home connections

From an intervention perspective, it is evident that dealing with multiple, interrelated concerns, such as poverty, child development, education, violence, crime, safety, housing, and employment requires multiple and interrelated solutions. Interrelated solutions require various forms of collaboration. Thus, schools, homes, and communities must work together in pursuing shared goals related to the general well-being of the young and society.

Take a look at our online clearinghouse Quick Find on

>Parent/Home Involvement in Schools – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/homework.htm>

There you will see links to online resources from our Center and from others. Here is a sample of Center developed resources that can be freely accessed from this Quick Find:

- >Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling (Chapter in Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System)
- >Self-study Survey: Home Involvement, Engagement, and Re-engagement in Schooling
- >Enhancing Home Involvement to Address Barriers to Learning: A Collaborative Process
- >Connecting Schools, Families, and Communities
- >Fostering School, Family, and Community Involvement.
- >Parent and Home Involvement in Schools
- >Engaging and Re-engaging Families When a Student is Not Doing Well
- >Engaging the Strengths of Families, Youth, and Communities in Rebuilding Learning Supports
- >Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families

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Did you miss the quarterly ejournal for fall 2017? It had articles on:
EXPANDING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT UNDER ESSA

- >Revitalizing Local Control: Transforming Student/Learning Supports and Enhancing Equity of Opportunity
- >Escaping Old Ideas to More Effectively Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching
- >Saving Starfish Is Not Enough!

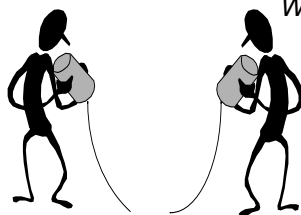
Did you miss the monthly ENEWS?

You can access both these resources and more from the Center's homepage

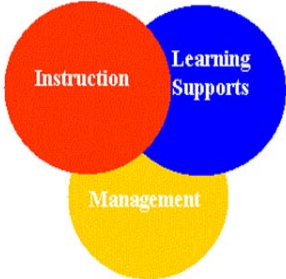
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

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I hear that some schools have better ways for parents and teachers to talk with each other.



What did you say? It's hard to hear you.



When it comes to improving student/learning supports, much more is needed than what is being touted as initiatives for “Integrated Student Support” (ISS). All such efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students need to be embedded into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports. See

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/dec8.pdf>

Also see the online information about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!
For new sign-ups – email Ltaylor@ucla.edu
Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.
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 on *Facebook* (access from the Center’s home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)

*Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
enabling equity of opportunity, promoting whole child development,
and enhancing school climate.*

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students“ But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.
Carnegie Task Force