

LEADERSHIP  
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# Cut Through the Noise & Embrace Parent Voice



Parent involvement? Wait a minute! Do we really want more parental involvement in our schools? Parents can be whiny, demanding, insulting and, well, simply wrong. They insist upon schedule changes, certain teachers for their child, more homework, less homework, different homework. They often remind us they turned out just fine, therefore there is no reason to change education. It can be so much noise.

Yet, parents and caregivers can also be inspiring, supportive, and collaborative. They want their children to be safe, happy, and successful. Parents and families provide unique perspectives about their children. They experience their child's fears, joys, excitements and disappointments on a daily and sometimes even hourly basis. As educators who advocate for School Voice work, we should welcome these insights into the life of our schools. The parent and family voice movement encourages educators to partner with parents to Listen, Learn, and Lead together in

order to help all children reach their aspirations. Educators cannot do it alone. Families must be involved.

Because parent voice is so important, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has codified that insight into law. ESSA Section 1010 requires all schools to have a parent and family engagement policy. Accordingly all schools should, indeed must, have more opportunities for parent and family voice.

## **Establish a Partnership**

Practicing voice is not the same as being loud and hoping the louder you are, the more you will be heard. Voice is not a letter writing campaign or barrage of emails to the principal. Such tactics are simply a monologue in which one person or a group talks and others pretend to listen. Turning up the volume on parental and family voice is a process that involves Listening, Learning, and Leading on the part of educators *and* families. It is a give and take dialogue – a two-way street. Voice is more than a one-time, town hall type event. Genuine voice results in cooperative action where all involved parties take on responsibilities. Voice nurtures space for different opinions, perspectives, and disagreements. Schools that foster and honor parental and family voice create safe opportunities, strategies, and time for disagreements to harmonize toward greater understanding and innovative solutions.

A healthy dialogue can involve administering a survey, following up with a focus group, and then implementing a joint action. According to the Quaglia Parent and Student Voice Surveys (2015) 99% of parents care about their child's education and 94% of students affirm they believe their parents care about their education. Equally as positive, 89% of parents agree with the statement, "I feel welcomed in my child's school." These results are promising. How do you think parents in your school community would respond to the above statements? What do you do to make parents and families feel welcomed in your school?

In order to prepare for meaningful parent, family, and community involvement, schools must reflect on their starting point. What is the current level of parental and family involvement? How do we *listen* to our parents and community members? How do we *learn* from parents? How do we collaborate and *lead* improved communication efforts and new action plans? Consider your school and whether parent and family engagement is merely a buzz phrase or something that is valued, celebrated, and welcomed. Does parent communication at your school mean newsletters and memos and phone calls *from* the school *to* the home? Or does it mean a genuine dialogue and back and forth conversations between the school and students' homes?

## **Invite – Listen Together**

We have a lot of expectations for students' families. We expect all parents to attend conferences. We expect all parents to know what is going on at school. We expect all parents to provide students with support and guidance. These expectations can be intimidating for parents and can lead to disappointment and frustration for educators. They can be unrealistic for myriad reasons including language barriers, transportation challenges, scheduling issues, and knowledge gaps. *There is no listening when schools simply hold the same expectations of everyone.* However, if we *invite* parents into our schools, the dynamics change. An invitation welcomes everyone. We need to invite parents to be partners and set goals together. An invitation encourages parents to come as they are – Bring your anxieties, your inadequacies, and

your insecurities. We will listen and accept you and learn from you and work with you to make our school the best it can be for your child and for all children.

## **Engage – Learn Together**

Parent attendance is a one-way opportunity. Parents are invited to attend open houses, meetings, school orientation, or other school events. Attendance does not demand working and learning together. On the other hand, engagement requires schools and families to collaborate, partner, and understand each other's perspectives and goals. *Families and educators must learn together.* Parents become engaged when they are valued and participate in meaningful work; when they know that educators are willing to learn from their contributions. Rather than asking how many parents attended a meeting or event, ask how many parents were engaged. What did you as an educator learn from parents and families? What did they learn from you?

## **Communicate – Lead Together**

Most schools are information rich, but communication poor. Parents and families are bombarded with information on flyers, websites, and school robocalls. While information is necessary, it is not communication. Information merely provides something that I want you to know. It does not welcome feedback, action, or respond to questions. On the other hand, communication *invites parents to discuss issues and lead together.* Communication takes planning and thoughtful action. How often does your school provide information *to* parents as compared to communicating *with* them?

Communication is personalized and meaningful to those who receive it. It also welcomes responses and comments. Communication is timely, thus parents should not have to wait a week for a returned phone call or email. Conversation that is timely and personalized is far more inviting than generic email blasts that may or may not apply to the parent receiving the email.

The challenge as well as potential for family engagement lies in creating opportunities for all parents and families to have meaningful and respected voices in their schools and to feel a sense of ownership in *their* schools. Voice is not something to avoid, but to embrace.