

First School



Understanding families' beliefs and practices is the first step towards establishing meaningful home-school partnerships. At FirstSchool, we have created a list of useful strategies for exploring families' beliefs and practices.

Exploring Families' Beliefs and Practices

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IN ORDER TO PROMOTE EFFECTIVE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS, teachers need to learn about the families of the children they teach. This information will allow them to better understand children's background knowledge and experiences, as well as their behavior in the classroom. Sometimes educators are reluctant to actively seek information about families because they fear their attempts will be seen intrusive. However, the "development of relationships depends on an individual's capacity to understand the other person (Caspe, 2003, p. 1). Effective home-school partnerships cannot be developed if they are based on assumptions about both parties. Therefore, as long as explorations of families' beliefs and practices are done in a respectful, non-judgmental manner and grounded in empathy, families will probably be willing to share more aspects of their lives in order to help strengthen their children's schooling. After all, families are always interested in the well-being of their children.

In this document, we present a series of strategies to explore families' beliefs and practices. By no means is this an exhaustive list, but it can be used as a starting point for schools interested in finding out more about the families in their school community, and connecting that knowledge to their curriculum and instruction. In each section, we delineate the purpose of the strategy, procedural next steps and a list of recommended readings and online resources.

Recommended Readings on the Value of Learning about Families

1. Caspe, M. S. (2003). How teachers come to understand families. *School Community Journal*, 13(1), 115-31. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/how-teachers-come-to-understand-families> [This links to an online summary of the article.]
2. Knopf, H. T., & Swick, K. J. (2008). Using our understanding of families to strengthen family involvement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(5), 419-427.



Parent Focus Groups

Parent focus groups are designed to gather information about parents' beliefs and practices, so that the school can design home-school partnerships opportunities that are better aligned with families' values, beliefs and sociocultural practices. Unlike questionnaires, focus groups are designed to collect information from a small number of individuals (typically five to ten). Because of the small number of participants, focus groups allow for a more in depth examination of parents' beliefs that can help explain issues that might have surfaced within other sources of data. For example, after reviewing the parent attendance at school events, a school realized that few African American parents attended school events on Wednesday nights. In a focus group with African American mothers, the school found out that on these days many African American parents attended church. Furthermore, for some parents who might misunderstand or cannot read questionnaires, focus groups can be a valuable strategy for accessing their voice and opinions.

Procedure

1. Selection of Participants

Schools need to decide what information would be useful to find out and cannot be obtained through other strategies. Focus group participants are selected depending on the school's demographics and characteristics. In FirstSchool, we have found that a useful criterion for selecting participants is to choose those parents whom teachers and administrators know very little about because, for a variety of reasons, they do not frequently participate in activities in the school. For example, one of our schools asked FirstSchool to conduct a focus group with fathers who rarely participated in school events.

2. Recruitment of Parents

School teams should brainstorm different ways of contacting target parents. We have found that the most effective strategy for recruiting parents is to contact one parent with similar characteristics to the target group and ask him/her to help in the recruitment. Parents might be more likely to participate if the focus group sessions are conducted in another place other than a school such a church, community room, restaurant, etc. Schools can offer some incentives for the parents to participate such a meal, free babysitting, gift certificates, transportation, etc. Schools should attempt to recruit more parents than needed since parents often refuse or are unable to participate. See the sidebar on the following page for an example of a phone script used to invite parents to participate.

3. Preparation of Questions

Each school should begin by deciding on the topics to discuss in the focus groups. The team can brainstorm potential questions and choose a team leader to write the specific questions. It is important that the language used for the questions is appropriate for the audience, questions are clear and brief, and there is no jargon. We recommend showing the questions to volunteer reviewers, and before conducting the focus groups, piloting the questions with people with similar characteristics to the focus group participants. Possible topics to explore in the focus groups are parental ideas on children's learning and development, parents' goals for their children, attitudes towards the school, home-school communication, families' activities outside of school, communities resources or "funds of knowledge," etc. The articles

recommended below provide examples of questions used in focus group sessions.

4. Focus Group Moderator

To facilitate open and candid participation from parents, we recommend asking someone outside of the school to conduct the focus groups when possible. Schools can ask graduate students from nearby universities with experience interviewing to conduct and analyze the focus groups. Members of the community can also be potential moderators. The moderators must speak the language of the participants, and being of the same ethnicity as the participants often facilitates establishing initial rapport.

5. Conducting the Focus Groups

The role of the focus group moderator is to create an environment in which the participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions and experiences. The moderator asks questions and probes to get more details. The moderator begins the session by introducing herself/himself and the note taker (if any). Focus group sessions need to be recorded to be analyzed later, so participants should sign consent forms agreeing to be taped. Audio-recording can be initially intimidating, but the moderator can assure the participants the information discussed will remain confidential. We have found that during the process of the focus groups, participants usually forget the presence of the tape-recorder. The best way to learn how to moderate is to observe an experienced moderator. In the online resource library section of our website (<http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/>), we have included a video of a focus group to get you started, which may give you some ideas

Hi! My name is _____.

Your phone number/name was given to me by your child's school. We are contacting you because we are planning to conduct a series of discussion groups to learn about mothers' ideas about young children's education and care. We are looking for parents like you who have children in ____grade in (name of the school). What we learn from these discussions will help your child's school partner with families to help their children succeed.

You will be one of 5-10 parents who will meet at [name of the school] up to three times from May to June from 5:30-7:30PM. Each discussion session will last for about 1½ hours. Before each meeting we will offer dinner for you and your children. We will also provide free child care. As a way of saying thanks for your participation, we will give you \$20.

Each discussion will be facilitated by me. I will ask a question to the group and each person will be encouraged to talk about their ideas. We'll record our discussion to help us remember.

Would you be interested in participating? [If no, say "Thanks for your time. Good bye!"] [If yes, continue] Great, thanks! The dates for our focus groups are the following:

[State the dates]

If you have any questions, please let me know.

Do you think you might have difficulties with transportation? _____

My phone number is _____. Thanks!

about how to structure your own group. It may also provide you with some examples of the types of questions that could be asked, and the types of valuable information that can be gleaned. Although this focus group was put together for demonstration purposes, following a similar structure with your own participants will help you gather data that is unique to your school setting. Another way to prepare to conduct a focus group is

to conduct a short practice focus group with volunteer participants who are willing to help facilitate a trial run.

6. Summarizing the Findings

Ideally, all focus group recordings should be transcribed for further analysis. However, this is costly and time consuming. Another, less intensive, possibility is to listen to the recordings of the focus groups and summarize the findings instead of capturing the conversation word for word. As a first step, organize the findings using the initial questions as a guide. Then read the overall summaries and make connections to other sources of information about the school.

7. Designing More Responsive Home-School Partnerships

The information obtained in the focus groups can be invaluable for understanding parents' ideas and practices at home and their community, and then designing practices that are more effective for promoting home-school partnerships. In one of our schools, parents indicated that there was no one in the school's office that spoke Spanish and therefore, when there was an emergency they had to wait until a Spanish-speaker was found in the school. As a result of this finding, the school decided to hire a full time Spanish-English interpreter that could be present at all times.

Recommended Readings

The readings below include questions used in parent focus groups and a summary of the findings from studies that utilized parent focus groups to gain information.

1. Gillanders, C., McKinney, M., & Ritchie, S. (2012). What kind of school would you like for your children? Exploring minority mothers' beliefs to promote home-school partnerships. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40(5), 285-294.
2. Gregg, K., Rugg, M., & Stoneman, Z. (2012). Building on the hopes and dreams of Latino families with young children: Findings from family member focus groups. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40(2), 87-96.
3. We have also posted a video of a mock focus group session in the online resource library section of our website, at <http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu>

School-Wide Parent Questionnaires

Parent questionnaires can be used in schools to obtain baseline data about home-school partnerships and then monitor, and assess strengths and areas of improvement. Depending on the response rate, parent questionnaires allow schools to obtain information from a large number of families. Through these questionnaires, schools can also gather information from different grade levels and make comparisons between responses depending on specific family characteristics (i.e., race and ethnicity, language, educational level, etc.). Unlike focus groups, which provide a more in-depth look into parents' beliefs and practices, questionnaires offer schools a way to get a general feel for families' perspectives towards home-school partnerships. Broad questionnaire data can be used as a first step to identify areas that need further investigation.

Procedure

1. Define the Questionnaire Objectives

What do you want to find out? How will you use this information? How will obtaining this information improve the home-school partnerships in your school? Some areas you might like to explore are parents' general attitudes towards the school, home-school communication, opportunities for parents to participate in the life of the school, learning experiences at home, funds of knowledge, etc. Funds of knowledge are families' knowledge and skills for running their households and for ensuring the well being of the family (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005).

Maximizing Return of Parent Questionnaires

It is important that all or almost all parents return the questionnaires. A high return rate ensures that the data are truly representative. It is preferable that one questionnaire goes home with each child (Pre-K through 3rd grade). Parents with more than one child in Pre-K through 3rd grade should receive one from each child's teacher. Those parents should complete one form for each child, thinking specifically of that child and his/her teacher and school experiences.

Some ideas for ways to remind families to return the questionnaires include:

- Via the school and/or classroom newsletter, the schools' website, an automated telephone reminder system, or a text message
- During drop-off, pick-up, family night, or other times when you see parents
- A sign in the classrooms (possibly with an example of the questionnaire)
- A reminder from community leaders indicating the importance of completing the questionnaires to families
- Giving a prize to the classrooms that return more than 80% of the questionnaires

Lastly, it is critical that once the questionnaires have been collected and analyzed, parents receive a summary of the most important findings and a description of how the school is going to address the issues raised in the questionnaires. That way, they will know that the time they spent providing their perspective has been worthwhile and that the school is recognizing and respecting their insights. People are less motivated to fill out such questionnaires when they feel like the data will disappear into a black hole!



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ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

What Parents Think about Our School

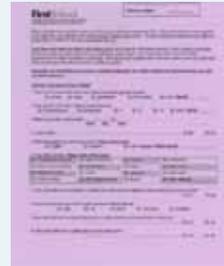
March 2011

FirstSchool is a PreK through 3rd grade initiative led by UNC-Chapel Hill to help schools become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse group of students. FirstSchool supports Springfield Elementary in improving children’s learning by using information from different sources and partnering with families. Through the three year partnership with FirstSchool, Springfield will effectively work with teachers, families, and communities to establish an environment of success for all students.

Learning from parents. One goal of the FirstSchool partnership with Springfield Elementary is to enhance home-school partnerships. In the spring of 2010, FirstSchool sent home a survey for parents. The purpose of this survey was to learn parents’ thoughts on the quality of the school, family involvement opportunities, the school’s efforts to communicate with parents, and homework. Teachers assisted in sending 274 surveys home with PreK through 3rd grade students

and 124 were returned to UNC (45% responded).

Your opinion matters. In spring 2011, PreK through 3rd grade students will bring home another



survey, and we hope you will complete it and return it to UNC in the addressed, stamped envelope provided. To learn what parents told us last year, turn this page over. →

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What Parents Think About Our School—This is an example of how schools can describe to parents the results of the questionnaire and how this information will be used for future efforts.

Highlights from 2010 Parent Survey Findings

Perspective from Families

Parents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with several statements about the school. Of the 124 parents who responded, everyone either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- this school is one of the best schools for students and families.
- the teachers care about their children.
- they felt welcome at the school.
- the school viewed them as important partners.

Parents as Partners at Home

Nearly all parents indicated they spend time helping their children with homework.

Many parents (69%) spend 1-30 minutes each day helping a child with homework.

27% of parents report they are not always able to help because they have trouble understanding the instructions or content.

While most parents indicate they can help their children with reading and math, a few indicate they are more comfortable with reading than math.

Most parents do not think their children need more homework.

To Learn More about FirstSchool, Visit:

<http://firstschool.us/>

Home-School Communication

Parents indicated the school does a good job communicating. More than 80% said the school “does well” on almost all the areas examined, such as inviting parents to school programs and sending home news about things happening at school.

Quite a few parents thought the school could do a better job including parents on committees and providing information on community services.

Some of This Year’s Efforts

Learning more about families.

This spring, all PreK-3 students will bring home a survey. We hope every parent will complete it—we need to hear from you!

FirstSchool will continue to conduct small discussion groups with a few parents to hear their ideas about young children’s learning, learn more about family life in our community, and get parents’ perspectives on our school.

Applying what we learn.

In response to some parents’ concerns about homework, this year we have created more opportunities for family members to learn about what children are learning in school and how they can support their learning at home. We have also added extra opportunities for families to share the school experience with their children.

FirstSchool provides ongoing professional development for our staff. This spring teachers are working with FirstSchool staff to learn more about improving the school experiences of boys.

Page 2 of *What Parents Think About Our School*—This is an example of how schools can describe to parents the results of the questionnaire and how this information will be used for future efforts.

2. Write the Questions

Use simple language and avoid jargon when writing your questions. Make sure you do not use questions that ask the respondent to give one answer to two entirely different requests. For example, if parents are asked to respond “Yes” or “No” to a question that asks, “Would you prefer to come to Springfield Elementary to volunteer or to attend cultural events?”, the question’s structure does not allow them to express separate levels of interest in each of these activities. (See sidebar for recommendations for writing questions that will provide more accurate data).

We have provided examples of home-school partnerships questionnaires below that might help you write the questions for your own questionnaire. At this point, also consider if you are going to distribute the questionnaire using paper and pencil or an online alternative (i.e., Survey Monkey, Constant Contact, etc.). Many schools have found that the online alternative is a viable and practical way to distribute these questionnaires and automatically compile results, as opposed to teachers having to track down hard copies. If schools have some reason to believe that some parents might not be able to access the Internet and therefore cannot complete the questionnaire online, they can set up a computer solely for this purpose.

Writing Questions for a Survey

1. Write a short questionnaire.
2. Use simple language.
3. Avoid leading or biased questions.
For example: *Don't you agree that the school does a good job in involving parents?*
4. Avoid double-negatives or double barreled questions.
For example:
Double-Negative—*Should parents not help children with homework? Agree or disagree?*
Double-Barreled—*How useful are the Literacy workshops for parents and the parent-teacher conferences?*
5. Keep lists of choices short.
6. Avoid questions that might be difficult for parents to answer based on memory.
For example: *How many times did you visit the library last month?*
7. Pay attention to the order of the questions.

3. Analyzing the Data

One advantage of using an online survey service is that it also provides analysis of the data. Users need to set the parameters for the analysis, but the service provides graphs and tables that allow schools to summarize responses, interpret the data and inform practice. Schools might be interested in analyzing parents’ responses according to their children’s grade level, parents’ level of education, child’s ethnicity, etc. The sidebar on the following page shows an example of how a question can be analyzed:

4. Using the Data

Questionnaire data can be used to initiate conversations in schools about different strategies related to home-school practices.

Schools contact families in different ways.

Circle one choice if the school has done these things this year.

Contact me if my child does something well or improves.

	PreK	K	1	2	3	African American	White	Latino
Does not do	0%	3%	6%	32%	3%	22%	10%	2%
Could do better	25%	18%	18%	12%	24%	19%	14%	21%
Does well	75%	79%	76%	56%	73%	59%	76%	77%

This question comes from the Survey of Teachers in Elementary and Middle Grades, ©1993, Joyce L. Epstein and Karen Clark Salinas, Johns Hopkins University, Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Baltimore, Maryland.

Notice that an analysis of the responses to this question by child's grade level and child's ethnicity can generate a conversation in the school about how improvement is communicated to parents. What does it mean that 22% of the parents of African American children believe the school does not contact them when the child has done something well? What about the 2nd grade parents? Almost 80% of the parents in K believe the school is doing well. How are the kindergarten teachers communicating this information?

For example, parent reports about how much time children spend on homework can generate a discussion about the purpose of homework, homework practices in the different grade levels, using homework to learn more about children and families, etc. Other discussions might revolve about questionnaire data regarding home-school communication. Parents from particular cultural groups might have responded that often they do not understand school communications. School personnel might implement different strategies to communicate with families and then evaluate the effectiveness of these new approaches with another follow-up questionnaire.

Reference

1. González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Resources

1. Schueler, B. (2013, February). *A new tool for understanding family-school relationships: The Harvard Graduate School of Education preK-12 parent survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/a-new-tool-for-understanding-family-school-relationships-the-harvard-graduate-school-of-education-prek-12-parent-survey>
2. Accessing online survey creation tools: <http://blog.surveymonkey.com/blog/2011/07/13/create-a-great-survey/>
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/harvard-education-surveys/>
3. Example of a Parent-School Partnership Survey: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/ParentSchoolPartnership_305695_7.pdf
4. Epstein, J. L., & Salinas, K. C. (1993) *Surveys and summaries: Questionnaires for teachers and parents in the elementary and middle grades*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Retrieved from <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/survey.htm>

Home Visits

Home visits are used to gather information about children's home environments and establish a positive relationship with parents. They can facilitate the communication between home and school. Teachers often indicate that learning more about the child's home environment helps them better understand the child's behavior in school. Moreover, during home visits teachers can learn more about the families' routines and sociocultural practices, making it easier for the teacher to initiate conversations with children in school and incorporate sociocultural practices in their curriculum and instruction.

Procedure

1. Selecting Homes to Visit

Ideally teachers should visit the homes of all the children in their class. For some schools this is not feasible; therefore, schools should set criteria for selecting the homes to visit. One criterion could be to visit only those homes of children who the teacher has relatively less information about and wants to get to know more deeply. Some teachers choose the homes of those children that have a particular challenge (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, social, academic, etc.). The disadvantage of this approach is that both children and parents might view the visit as stigmatizing children or singling out only those children who are perceived as being "in trouble." To minimize this issue, it is preferable to visit both children who are facing challenges and those who are not.

2. Compensating Teachers

Teachers should be paid if they are conducting the home visits during non-school hours. Administrators can raise funds from different organizations to support this endeavor. Many schools have used their Title 1 funds assigned to parental engagement to pay teachers when they conduct home visits after hours.

3. Scheduling Visits

Since scheduling home visits can be time consuming, schools might ask volunteers to contact parents and set up appointments for home visits. Schools also might need the help of an interpreter to accompany teachers who do not speak the same language as the families they are visiting.

4. The Visit

Within this approach, home visits are designed to gather information from families, rather than to teach them specific strategies or techniques that the school would like them to adapt. Therefore, it is essential that teachers view the home visit as an opportunity to listen what parents have to say, and demonstrate respect for parents' expert knowledge of their children. Teachers can initiate the home visit by asking questions about the family and sharing some of their personal history. During this part of the home visit, it is important to establish a personal relationship with the families. The home visits can also be used to explore parents' goals for their children and to establish a way of communication between the school and the family. Home visits are usually 30 to 45 minutes long.

Recommended Readings

1. Ginsberg, M. B. (2007). Lessons at the kitchen table. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 56-61.
2. Stetson, R., Stetson, E., Sinclair, B., & Nix, K. (2012). Home visits: Teacher reflections about relationships, student behavior, and achievement. *Issues In Teacher Education*, 21(1), 21-37.

Online Resources

1. The Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project: <http://www.pthvp.org/index.php/home.html>

Community Visits

School personnel often reside in a different community than that of the students they teach. Knowledge of the community where children live can help teachers understand children's experiences outside of school. Furthermore, the community can be a fertile ground for connecting opportunities to develop children's skills and knowledge to real life scenarios.

Procedure

1. Some schools organize a tour of the community for their personnel at the beginning of the year. To get an initial sense of the community, some teachers choose to take one or two of the school bus routes along with their students. During these tours, school personnel can determine if there are places in the community that offer opportunities for bringing children's experiences outside of school into the curriculum and instruction. During these community visits, it is important to avoid making judgments about the communities and neighborhoods. The purpose of these visits is to identify resources in the community that can be used to enrich your instruction and use children's background knowledge to connect the curriculum to their lives.
2. To learn more about key aspects of the community, the school can also interview parents who have been long-time residents in the community and can provide insights about common gathering places, popular community activities, etc. Some questions that could be asked are:
 - Does the community have a specific gathering place? How does the community use this place?

- Are there community activities that children participate in? How do their families connect them to those opportunities?
- Are there specific places in the community that have historical value?
- Is there a central place that many members of the community frequently visit (e.g., store, plaza, service, etc.)?
- What are the activities of daily living that children and families participate in within the community (e.g., buying groceries in the store, going to the laundry mat, going to church, etc.)?

3. Children can also provide information about the community. Teachers can devise different strategies to ask children about their community. Some questions that teachers could ask are:

- Describe your community.
- What makes your community special or different from other communities?
- What do you like about your community? Are there things you dislike?
- What kinds of activities do you participate in outside of school?
- If you could invite someone from your community into your classroom, who would you bring and why?
- What do you learn at home that helps you be successful at school? What do you learn at school that helps you at home?
- What kinds of things do you wish you could learn about in school that you don't already? Who in the community could help teach those things?

(Sample questions are from the following resource: Johnson, A., Baker, A., & Bruer, L. (2007). Interdependence, Garbage Dumping, and Feral Dogs: Exploring Three Lifeworld Resources of Young Children in a Rural School. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(6), 371-377).

4. When visiting the community, take notes about ways in which people use mathematics, literacy and science in particular settings. For example, if you find a local food store, ask the store manager or attendants how they use mathematics and literacy in their work. You also can take photographs to use later when asking children about their experiences in these settings, or collect artifacts like menus or grocery store ads.

Recommended Readings

1. Carroll, R. (1985). Exploring the history of a neighborhood: A community project. *The Social Studies*, 76(4), 150-154.



La Tiendecita

Third grade teachers at Sullivan Elementary developed a lesson plan around the context of *La Tiendecita*. In their visit to the community they found out that this *tienda* was a frequent stop for many of the Latino families in their class. Through interviews with the owner of the store, parents and children, they found out how mathematics was used when families attended the store. A frequent practice was to have a shopping list and determine how much money was needed to buy all the products on the list. The teachers developed a lesson in which the children were given their *Abuela's* shopping list and had to figure out whether there would be enough money to cover the costs of all the products. To begin the lesson, the teachers asked their bilingual students to role play the situation of talking with their *Abuela* in Spanish about the shopping list and prices of the products. In this way, teachers made use of the children's linguistic resources to problem solve. The children also had to describe two different ways of finding the answer to the problem and explain their reasoning.

—Adapted from

Aguirre, J. M., Turner, E. E., Bartell, T. G., Kalinec-Craig, C., Foote, M. Q., McDuffie, A. R., & Drake, C. (2013). Making connections in practice: How prospective elementary teachers connect to children's mathematical thinking and community funds of knowledge in mathematics instruction. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(2), 178-192

El Día de los Niños

April 30th is a special day in Mexico. Children are given their own holiday, during which they receive the dedicated attention of adults who honor the special joy children bring to their lives. With fond remembrances of celebrating *El Día de los Niños* in Mexico, a preschool teacher from the Okeechobee



II Center of the East Coast Migrant Head Start Project explained to her families she wanted to share this experience with their children. Though she was familiar with the games, chants, rhymes and special foods from her childhood, she asked about any traditions unique to their experiences and their interest in partnering with her to create a celebration at school. Parents wrote special messages to their child, decorated a stage-like area in the classroom with a *butaca* (bench), made a *piñata* with the children, and cooked special foods for the children. On the day of the celebration, children cut fruit ‘the right way’ (lengthwise), drank *aguas frescas* sweetened with fruit, and played “*A la vibora de la mar*” (like London Bridge). The staff and the children were all deeply touched as parents sat on the *butaca* and read their special message to their child.

—As told by Clara Capiello, M.A.,
Training & Development Manager, East Coast Migrant Head Start Program



Nopales

Nopales ... a general name for cactus. When cooked, they are soft, green and taste like green beans. They are often a part of the diet of the children of migrant farmworkers who attend the Myakka Center of East Coast Migrant Head Start Project. With a donation of *nopales* from a parent, and the teacher’s appreciation of their cultural relevance, the journey of gathering cultural knowledge begun. She spoke with many families who shared that *nopales* are harvested with tongs or gloves, cleaned with paring knives to remove the spines, soaked to clean off the gel, and prepared in *cazuelas*— or terra cotta pots. It was time to imbed this new knowledge in the curriculum. When listening to a story where *nopales* were mentioned, the children enthusiastically reported they had eaten them and care is required to deal with the thorns. With the assistance of a parent who grew and sold them, the children made *nopales* salad. Their study was extended to create playdough® cacti and patterned sand art, and to learn about desert ecosystems and the cactus on the Mexican flag. *Nopales* ... they can be soft and fun!

—As told by Katherine Savage, M.A.,
Training Developer, East Coast Migrant Head Start Program

Classroom Questionnaires

Class questionnaires can be used for gathering information that is more specific to the children and families of a particular classroom. This is a quick and easy method for collecting information that for some parents might feel comfortable and non-threatening (Knopf & Swick, 2007). Teachers can find out information about children's interests and needs, comments that children make about school at home, families' funds of knowledge, parents' perceptions of children's progress in school, parents' perceptions of forms of communication with the school, etc. This information can be used as a conversation starter in parent-teacher conferences or during other face-to-face contacts with parents.

Procedure

To create these questionnaires, follow the same recommendations given within the section on parent questionnaires for the entire school. However, classroom questionnaires can be briefer and used for various purposes at different points during the year. On this page and the next, we present a couple of examples of questions used by teachers to find more information about the children in their class.

How Am I Doing?

One of the ways to build trust with families is to ask their opinion about the quality of the education their child is receiving in school (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller & Moore, 2002). It requires courage, since teachers are poised to be subject to criticism, but at the same time it conveys the message to families that teachers are making a genuine effort to provide the best possible experience for their children, and that the families' opinions are valued. Below we show an example of one of these questionnaires. To address the needs of non-English speaking parents, teachers need to ensure that translated copies of the survey are available. Also, for those parents that might not be able to complete a written survey, it might be necessary to conduct an interview rather than ask them to fill out a survey on their own.

Dear Families,

I am interested in finding out your opinions about your child's school year. Please complete the following questions so I may use this information to provide the best possible experience for your child. You may leave your name off or sign it. Thank you so much for your help.

1. Is your child having a good year?
Please explain why and why not.
2. Does your child like school?
What does your child like best about school?
3. Does your child talk about school at home?
If so, what do they talk about?
4. Do you see your child making progress academically?
5. Do you see your child developing socially?
6. How do you feel about the communication between school and home?
7. How do you feel about homework?
8. Any suggestions?

—Adapted from

Kyle, D. M., McIntyre, E., Miller, K. B., & Moore, G. H. (2002).
Reaching out: A K-8 resource for connecting families and schools.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Learning About Your Family and Your Child

At the beginning of the year, teachers can gain initial information about the children and the families of their classroom using a simple questionnaire as the one shown below. This can be used as a conversation starter for other teacher-parent encounters such as parent-teacher conferences or informal meetings.

Lincoln Elementary Parent Information Form

Child's full name: _____

Date of birth: _____

Boy: Girl

Name child will use in school: _____

Name child uses at home: _____

Child's address: _____

If applicable, child's other address: _____

Parent(s)' or Guardian(s)' name(s): _____

Names/ages of siblings: _____

Mother's country of origin: _____

Mother's occupation: _____

Father's country of origin: _____

Father's occupation: _____

What language(s) are spoken in the home? _____

What are your child's interests? _____

How does your child learn best? _____

Please complete the following information:

When my child is with a group of children, I would expect my child to:

When my child is with an adult that s/he doesn't know, I would expect my child to:

The most important thing my child can learn in class this year would be:

Is there something in particular you would like me to know about your family?

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Most schools conduct one or two parent-teacher conferences a year. Traditionally, parent-teacher conferences are used to inform parents about children's academic progress. Other important purposes of the parent-teacher conferences are to build trust between teachers and parents, to understand parents' beliefs about children's learning and development, and to learn about the child's interests and behavior at home. In this document, we emphasize the role of parent-teacher conferences for learning more about parents' views of children's learning.

Procedure

1. Inviting Parents to the Parent-Teacher Conferences

School administrators need to carefully consider when their school offers parent-teacher conferences. Times when parents are available should be an essential consideration. Also, if teachers need to meet with parents during out-of-school hours they should be compensated for their time, either monetarily or by providing free time during the work week for this purpose. When inviting parents to the parent-teacher conference, convey the message that you think it is very important to listen to their ideas and questions. Make sure that the translation of the invitation in a language other than English conveys the meaning of a "conversation" rather than a "presentation" made by teachers.

2. Planning the Conference

The parent-teacher conference is an excellent opportunity to learn about parents' expectations for children's behavior and learning. Plan your questions to parents in advance and avoid using educational language that the parents will not understand. For example, plan to ask questions that focus on parents' unique knowledge of their children, their views of learning, and their home life:

When Parents Speak a Language Other than English

When translating communications to families that speak a language other than English, schools should use professional translation and interpretation services. Another resource can be university students who are majoring in the particular languages. In addition to having proficiency in English and the other language, translators and interpreters need to know the language used for describing educational terms in a way that parents who are not familiar with the US educational system can understand. For example, it is common to see the phrase "parent-teacher conferences" literally translated into Spanish as "conferencias de padres y maestros." In Spanish the word "conferencia" denotes a "formal presentation." Therefore, parents might believe that schools are asking them to attend a presentation.

- What does your child talk about school when he/she is at home?
- How does his/her work at school compare to his/her work at home?
- What are his/her interests and hobbies?
- What seems to excite him/her in school?
- What kind of activities do you do together?
- What do you think about his/her work in school?
- What would you like him/her to learn?
- Who are his/her friends?

Recommended Readings

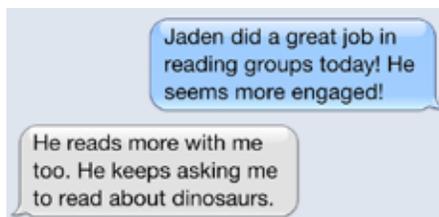
1. Fredericks, A. D., & Rasinski, T. V. (1990) Working with parents: Conferencing with parents: Successful Approaches. *The Reading Teacher*, 44(2), 174-176
2. Stevens, B. A., & Tollafield, A. (2003). Creating comfortable and productive partner/teacher conferences. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(7), 521-24.

Online Resources

1. Parent-Teacher Conference Tip Sheets for Principals, Teachers, and Parents (*Hojas de Consejos Para Las Reuniones de Padres y Maestros*) (available in English and in Spanish) <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/parent-teacher-conference-tip-sheets-hojas-de-consejos-para-las-reuniones-de-padres-y-maestros>

Phone Calls, eMails and Text Messaging

Phone calls, emails and text messages are means to gather information in a more frequent basis since they do not require that parents or teachers meet in person. Phone calls can be used to establish a positive relationship with families. Teachers can gather information about children's transition to school at the beginning of the year, reasons for being absent, children's comments about school, or ask parents about particular behaviors. Emails are less personal but also can be a quick strategy to gather specific information. Finally, text messages can also be used for asking parents to photograph children in particular settings or doing activities that might be related in some way with the curriculum and children's experiences in school. Teachers have also used text messaging to take pictures of children's work and send it to parents. Parents' responses to children's work help teachers understand parents' expectations towards children's achievement in school.



Procedure

1. Define a Schedule for Phone Calls

Considering all their competing demands, teachers often do not find the time to make phone calls to families. Teachers who have found a way to include phone calls to families in their schedule, indicate that they set themselves the goal of calling every students' families in their class at least once a year. Teachers might decide to call two or three calls per week so by the end of each quarter they are able to contact all families in their classroom.

2. Happy Calls

It is often the case that teachers and administrators make phone calls to families when children are in "trouble." When families receive a phone call from school it is usually considered a "bad omen." It is more likely that teachers can learn more about the families if the phone calls are used sometimes for just saying hello or for important events in children's life such as sports or artistic event, or a difficult time in the family. Families will be more open to communicate to teachers if conversations over the phone are not exclusively the means for bringing bad news.

3. When Parents Do Not Speak English

English-speaking teachers sometimes are reluctant to call families who do not speak English because getting the message across over the phone is more difficult when there are no visual cues that can support communication. Schools should consider using interpreters for these circumstances. Also some teachers ask older siblings to serve as interpreters during the phone call if the topic is appropriate for younger ears. When no interpreters are available, communication in these situations is certainly more challenging. However, although teachers and parents who do not speak English might not engage in depth conversation during these calls, parents will probably interpret teachers' intent to call as a genuine interest in their children's welfare facilitating a positive relationship between teachers and families.

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