

Parent Engagement

Building trust between families and schools

by Lorna Costantini

Lorna Costantini has been involved in education for over 40 years as a former Family Studies teacher, School Board Trustee, Parent Reaching Out Project Facilitator and co-author of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education "Parent Tool Kit." She is also the moderator of EdTechTalk's Parents as Partners webcast series (<http://edtechtalk.com/ParentsasPartners>).

WHERE DO PARENTS fit in at school? There is abundant research that shows parent involvement has a positive impact on school and student achievement – yet all too often, parents and teachers struggle to work together.

Frustrations exist on both sides. From teachers, we may hear: "Some parents just don't care," or "Why do they think their child is the only one I teach?"

Parents may feel, "They really don't want me involved," or "I never know what is going on in school."

So how do we build the parent-school partnership and create the trust and communication that supports positive parent involvement in education? Through my work as a project facilitator and webcast show host I have seen many inspiring examples of what is possible, some of which I share in this article. But to me, the first and most important step is making the commitment. The number one way to engage parents is for you to personally believe it works and makes a difference in the learning of your students.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, founder and director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has spent over 25 years researching family and parent involvement. She is well known for the Epstein Model, a framework for developing school, family and community partnerships. The research-based model identifies and discusses six different types of parent involvement activities which schools can offer and support:

- **Parenting** Helping parents fulfill their role as parents, providing information on items such as health, nutrition, child development, etc.
- **Communicating** Effective ways to keep parents informed about student progress and happenings at school.
- **Volunteering** Includes examples of how parents can be volunteers even when they can't come to the school building.
- **Learning at Home** Involving families in homework and other home learning activities. The Teachers Invol-

ving Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) program is a great resource for encouraging learning at home. Parents are provided with activities that directly involve them with their child in classroom work. My favourite is an activity that uses liquids like ketchup, corn syrup and oil to learn about viscosity.

- **Decision Making** Ways to include families in school decision-making and governance. Schools normally establish annual goals and objectives and the framework suggests including parents in this process.
- **Collaborating with the Community** Describes how schools can build links among family, school and external groups and services.

For more details on how to use this helpful framework, I recommend the book *The School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your handbook for action*.¹

As host of the Parents as Partners webcast at EdTechtalk, I am fortunate to have met many great people who work hard on building trust. Below I share some of the lessons I have learned about working with parents, and some of the initiatives that put these tips into action.

Ask for input

I recently interviewed Aaron Puley, the Parent Engagement Facilitator for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, and that interview was a moment of enlightenment for me. I was lamenting how difficult it was to change the approaches used by schools when working with parents – there is lots of research and the programs are ready-waiting, but progress is slow. Aaron's advice was about ownership. He observed, "Often principals and teachers are given binders for programs that they are asked to implement, sometimes without indexes and very often without input from the end user." Ideally, input from both parents and schools is needed when developing activities for working with parents. That is the secret, not only to



PHOTO: COMSTOCK/THINKSTOCK

effective programs, but to willing implementation.

Sometimes just asking for input is all that is needed to build a solid relationship between parents and schools. Chris Wejr, principal at Kent Elementary School in Agassiz, B.C., shares his philosophy of building trust with parents in his school community on his blog, “The Wejr Board.” Wejr routinely invites two-way dialogue with parents. He encourages: replies to emails; face-to-face meetings focused on listening to parents; making parent phone calls; using websites and blogs that invite comments; Twitter announcements that encourage replies; Facebook and discussion boards that are open and moderated.

Be open and honest

You may be thinking, “But what do I do when I don’t feel I can implement a parent’s input or when a parent doesn’t like the answers given?” It may not be possible to satisfy all parent questions and concerns, but in my experience open and honest communications help clarify issues, and your thoughtful responses can allay fears. For responding to shared parent concerns, a public forum can be very helpful. Wejr demonstrated this when he responded to parent questions about split grades on the school’s Facebook page. The Facebook conversation led to an extensive blog post that all parents were able to read addressing the question: “Will my child be OK in a split grade?”

Recognize the limits parents have in interacting with schools

Work schedules and commitments can conflict with the timing of school events. Language and cultural differences can inhibit participation. Joe Mazza, Principal (he calls himself Lead Learner) at Knapp Elementary School, an inner-city school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has found ways to overcome these barriers. Mazza believes that you should never lose sight of the need for meaningful face-to-face interaction. It is the number-one best way to communicate with parents.

He told me about the time his home and school team visited the local mosque to talk about the school and to help parents understand how they could participate, and how that participation benefits students. Using the mosque’s Internet connection, the team later held a monthly Home & School meeting from that location to bring everyone together. These efforts aim to “meet parents where they are,” whether physically or virtually. Parents at the mosque have been so pleased with the school’s efforts that they have begun to visit the school more often, and even dropped off lunch for the staff earlier this school year. It’s this positive relationship that matters most.

As Lead Learner, Mazza has not held back when it comes to trying new ways to work with parents. He uses applications like YouTube to feature a tour of the school, Twitter

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EN BREF

De nombreuses recherches démontrent que la participation des parents favorise la réussite des écoles et des élèves. Pourtant, les parents et le personnel enseignant éprouvent trop souvent de la difficulté à collaborer.

L'article indique que les écoles peuvent trouver des solutions pratiques pour développer des liens de travail positifs avec les parents, citant le fructueux modèle de participation des parents mis en œuvre par Joyce Epstein. L'auteure résume comment ce modèle engendre des partenariats entre l'école, les familles et la collectivité. Elle décrit également des pratiques suggérées par des invités de ses webémissions *Parents as Partners*. Ces innovateurs en établissement de liens entre les parents et l'école recourent à des moyens comme Twitter, des blogues, des webémissions et YouTube pour échanger avec les parents pour demander des commentaires, leur fournir des renseignements et les rencontrer en ligne.

Les approches que proposent ces éducateurs pour obtenir la participation des parents contribuent à surmonter les obstacles du temps, des occasions, de la culture et de la distance confrontant de nombreux milieux scolaires. Leurs exemples d'innovation s'adaptent aisément aux besoins de tout milieu scolaire.

and Facebook to post information and activities and free streaming applications like Ustream and AnyMeeting to host concurrent face-to-face and online PTA meetings. He uses Poll Everywhere to collect responses from parents at home. Joe is so convinced that these tools work that he developed a Knapp Elementary mobile app, so parents can use their mobile phone to connect with the school.

How does Mazza find the time to tweet all day? He says it's easy. "I walk around the school with my cell phone and I tweet out good news about what is happening in school. Not only is it good to send out information to parents about what their students are doing in class, but it also lets my teachers hear what other teachers are doing at school and how much they are appreciated."

Parents and educators all over the world participated in the Knapp Elementary Twitter Hall meeting, held to teach parents how to use Twitter to interact with the school and each other. PTA President Gwen Pescatore, once new to Twitter, now connects with parents and teachers globally as an active participant in the #Ptchat that Joe hosts on Twitter every Wednesday night.

The results are telling. More parents are now present at Knapp Elementary school events and parents are accessing the online meetings from their own homes. The numbers have grown from an average of 12 parents in attendance to an average of 52.

Help parents understand

Some parents say it seems like teachers speak a different language. Terms like rubrics, curriculum, pedagogy - the language of teachers - can create confusion and apprehension in parents, and they can feel humiliated or even guilty for not knowing what they mean. At the same time, "eduspeak" often doesn't convey the main thing parents want to know, which is simply what their child is doing in school.

Aviva Dunsiger, a classroom teacher with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, uses classroom blogs so that her students can demonstrate their work online and engage parents with an invitation to comment on their child's work. One appreciative parent gave this feedback to Dunsiger: "It was wonderful to see what my child was learning as well as how you taught, because I was able to use some of the same language you use to reinforce at home what my child was learning." Blogs are an effective way to translate "teacherese" into parent understanding of student work.

Dunsiger also set up a class Twitter account; her students created a daily message together announcing what they had learned that day. Students were also able to tweet from home with their parents, to answer questions posed during the school day. For a busy parent unable to attend meetings at school or volunteer for class outings, these practices make a big difference in how they see the school.

Let parent leaders build bridges with you

Parents understand how and what other parents think and their volunteer efforts can make the connections between home and school more successful. Tracy Bachellier, past chair of the Avon-Maitland (Ont.) District School Board Parent Involvement Committee, is a parent who helped spearhead "Ignite Parents," an event inspired by the Ignite Show. Twelve educators were challenged to present to parents their passions in education and how their students benefit. Each presenter had five minutes to present with 20 slides. The event was fast-paced, meaningful - and well attended. All the presentations are available at www.igniteparents.ca.

Use parents as inspiration

Heidi Hass Gable is an Ed Tech Consultant and the president of the District Parent Advisory Council in Coquitlam, B.C. Her YouTube video, "What I Want for my Children: Creating great schools together" has been enjoyed by over 38,000 viewers. This motivating and inspirational message for parents and teachers is well worth sharing with your school community.

I'd like to share some of her advice. Hass Gable would tell you to believe in parents' desire to do the best for their kids, and to believe in yourself as an educator as well.

Communicate often

We need to be respectful of each other's limitations and refrain from making assumptions. One reason relationships between parents and schools fail is poor communication. So communicate often and in different formats, to make sure your directions and questions are received and acted upon.

It's worth the effort: Students do better in school when teachers and parents are on the same page. **EC**

RESOURCES

Below are URLs for people and programs mentioned in the article:

- **Lorna Costantini** - Parents as Partners at Edtechtalk, www.ourschool.ca
- **Aviva Dunsiger** - Living Avivaloca, www.adunsiger.com
- **Heidi Hass Gable** - "What I Want for my Children: Creating great schools together," <http://bit.ly/blCSm5>. Blog: I was thinking, www.iwasthinking.ca
- **Ignite Parents** - www.igniteparents.ca
- **Joe Mazza** - Electronic Family and Community Engagement, www.efacetoday.blogspot.com
- **National Network of Partnership Schools** at Johns Hopkins University - www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000
- **Aaron Puley** - www.bloggucation.learninghood.ca
- **TIPS** (Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork) resources - www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/index.htm
- **Chris Weir** - The Wejr Board, www.chriswejr.com

NOTES

- 1 Joyce L. Epstein, M. G. Sanders, S. B. Sheldon, B. S. Simon, K. Clark Salinas, N. Rodriguez Jansorn, F. L. Van Voorhis, C. S. Martin, B. G. Thomas, M. D. Greenfield, D. J. Hutchins, and K. J. Williams, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your handbook for action*, 3rd Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA, Corwin Press: 2002).

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