Working with Parents: An Action Plan

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Submitted to:

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October 4, 2011

Introduction

Why is it important to establish positive relationships with the families of our students? Studies have found that increased family involvement in a child's education results in better grades, happier students, and students that are more likely to stay in school (Barnard, 2004; Lueder, 1998; McInerney et al., 1997). A study by McInerney et al. (1997), found that the most important influence for First Nation, Inuit and Metis (FNMI) students for motivation at school was family, followed by teachers and peers.

The families of our students all come to school with a variety of perceptions of how school relationships should function. These perceptions are based on several things such as: their previous experiences at school, how media portrays school, cultural beliefs and socioeconomic status (Lasky, 2000). This creates barriers to their participation at school based on psychological factors such as distrust in school; and, physical factors such as limited time and resources (Leuder, 1998). This is especially important in many Aboriginal communities, where many parents have a negative view of education as it was formally used as a method of assimilation (Bell, et al., 2004). It is up to us as educators to identify the perceptions and barriers that are preventing the families of our students from being involved, and provide them with assistance to help make these families feel welcome in our schools.

Literature Review

There are several different strategies recommended that work together to meaningfully involve parents in the education of their child, these include: atmosphere, early communication, written and verbal communication, school programs, parent-teacher interviews, and joint partnership. The following is a summary of the main concepts highlighted in the literature.

Atmosphere

Much of the literature recommends developing a welcoming atmosphere to the school to make the parents and families of students feel more comfortable. It is important to create a school environment that is open, empathetic and respectful (Olsen & Fuller, 2003). Lueder (1998) suggests using welcoming signs, rather than aggressive signs, such as "All visitors MUST report to the office." He suggests creating an area for families to go when they are visiting the school and highlighting a "Family of the Month" on a bulletin board. Lueder also suggests building collaborative relationships with the families by using families as volunteers for field trips or for in class activities, such as story-time. Teachers can provide parent handbooks to introduce parents to important information about the school that include the schools policies, mission statement, curriculum, parent and student rights, and volunteer opportunities (Lueder, 1998).

Early Communication

Much of the literature recommends establishing two way communication between the school and families early on in the year (NWT, 2011; Lueder 1998). Getting to know parents early is important for developing relationships before any conflicts arise (NWT, 2011). You can invite your student's families to the classroom for a meet and greet, or plan to visit families in their homes, if it is more comfortable for the family (NWT, 2011). It is also important to let families know that you have an open door policy, which welcomes their presence in the classroom and encourages them to come to you with any problems or concerns (Alberta Education, 2006).

Written and Verbal Communication

Written communication is a great way to initiate and stay in contact with student's families. Lueder (1998) recommends that when communicating in writing you should: use a

positive tone; avoid school jargon; and translate written communication if necessary. He recommends several different methods to communicate in writing such as sending home a welcome letter; giving positive notes about the student's behaviour throughout the year; using a Friday folder with the student's weekly work with a space for the parent to sign; newsletters; parent surveys; and, thank you notes. He also suggests establishing effective two way communication by using "Teachergrams" where half of the note is for the teacher to write a message and the other half is for the family to respond.

Luder (1998) notes that written letters may not be effective for families that are not connected to the school already. It is recommended that phone calls be used to welcome families that may have pre-existing barriers. Phone calls should be used to give good news and if there is a concern should be worded positively and should allow opportunity for parents to ask questions (NWT, 2011; Lueder, 1998). Another way of communicating information with your student's families is to use emails or a class website (NWT, 2011). A class website can be used to display information about homework, upcoming events, and even a little information about yourself. It is important to provide a variety of flexible communication options for parents who may not be familiar with the internet, or who don't want to come into the classroom, or who can't meet after school. When a variety of options are presented, parents are able choose the method that they are most comfortable with and are more likely to engage in communication (Olsen & Fuller, 2003).

School Programs

School programs are a wonderful way to increase the involvement of parents. It creates school-parent partnerships and involves parents in student based activities (Olsen & Fuller, 2003). Parents can be involved by planning social nights, providing funds for activities, or providing knowledge on career, hobbies or cultural experiences (Lasky, 2000; Lueder, 1998). Teachers can create social events, such as theme based meals, movie nights, grandparent day,

talent shows, and parent kid sport night, to encourage the participation of parents in school events (Leuder, 1998). These types of fun interactions make the school a more welcoming and less threatening environment.

<u>Parent-teacher Interviews</u>

In most schools parent-teacher interviews are the only time that parents have the opportunity to interact with their child's teachers. Walker and MacLure (1999) discovered that during parent-teacher interviews parents generally perceived that the teacher was in control, dominating the conversation and speaking only from their perceptive about the student. It was also found that fear and cultural beliefs prevented parents from asking questions during interviews (Berhard, 1999).

Olsen & Fuller (2003), suggest that it is important to create an environment that puts the parents on equal footing with the teacher. This can be done by positioning the parent next to you at your desk, rather than across from you; greeting the parent warmly at the door; initiating in small talk prior to the interview; beginning and ending with positive comments; listening empathetically; avoiding school jargon; allowing parents to bring others along if they choose; and, providing a translator if necessary.   Lueder, (1998) suggests many other techniques to make the parents feel comfortable such as: having the students prepare letters of invitation to the conferences for their parents; providing childcare and light refreshments; providing a list of sample questions for parents to ask; identifying concerns to parents prior to the interview so there are no surprises; and, after the interview send a card or call the parent to follow up on the interview.

Hackman (2007) suggests the use of student led conferences to improve parental involvement and student confidence. Students led the conference sharing their academic progress with their families and areas where improvements may be needed. The student led

conference creates a more positive atmosphere and one where the student is an active participant. After the conference is complete, both the parent and the student are requested to complete a survey on their satisfaction of the conference. At this point the teacher can identify if a follow up interview is required (Hackman et al. 1995).

<u>Joint Partnership</u>

Swap (1993) suggests creating a home-school partnership which includes a two way dialogue between parents and teachers where parent shares information about the student's needs, strengths and background and teachers share progress expectations, policies, and programs. From this initial communication it is recommended that parents and teachers set up a joint set of expectations. Decision making should be a joint process where parents participate in school councils and planing teams, at multiple levels (i.e. child, class, school and district). Both teachers and parents offer support to each other by responding to each other's needs (i.e. altered programing, volunteering, fundraising). Additionally, you can inform parents on how to reinforce classroom learning at home, for example parents and students can sign a contract regarding the completion of homework or home reading (Education Oasis, 2011). In making joint decisions the parents play an active role in their child's education and fully understand what is happening in the school environment.

Working with Parents Action Plan

In January 2012, I will be relocating to a small community Pond Inlet, Nunavut, where I hope to complete my PSIII. This action plan has been specifically developed with my potential practicum in Pond Inlet at Nasivvik High School, Grade 7-9, in mind. This plan will be approved by administration prior to use in accordance with school policy and culture.

Welcome Package

At the beginning of my practicum I will provide each student with a welcome package. The welcome package will include a variety of information for the parents and the students. A welcome letter (in English and Inuktitut) will be provided to introduce myself to the students and their families. The welcome letter will have my email address and phone number. The package will also include a simplified unit plan for the lessons that I will be teaching. This will include information regarding topics to be covered, materials needed from home, assignments to be completed with due dates, class expectations, and grading policies. The welcome package will also include an invitation to "Meet the Teacher" night discussed in the Parent Conferences section. There will be a note regarding the open door policy of my classroom which encourages discussion of any questions or concerns they may have at their convenience. A phone call will be made to each family to ensure they received the package and ask if they have any questions.

The welcome package will provide a medium for me to introduce myself to the families of my students early on in the semester (NWT, 2011). By providing a copy of the materials that will be covered, as well as school and classroom policies many of their questions can be answered up front. The phone call will ensure that any questions they have will be answered, and reassure them that they can contact me anytime by phone or in person at school (Lueder, 1998, Alberta Education, 2006).

Parent Conferences

Parent Conferences are a great way to get to know the families of the students. During my PSIII internship in Pond Inlet I plan to host several parent conferences. Initially I would host a "Meet the Teacher" night to introduce myself to the families. I will make this event casual in nature where tea and light snacks are provided. As the school year progresses additional parent conferences would be hosted. Parent conferences will be student directed. During class time students will be guided on how to lead the conference and will select artifacts that demonstrate their progress. Students will prepare invitations to their parent or guardian inviting them to a night to showcase their work. The classroom will be set up so that student's are responsible for guiding their parents to several stations which highlight their projects and progress during the year. Parents and students will select a time slot for their parent conference to allow for adequate time for each parent and student to meet with me the teacher. Once in the classroom, the student will collect completed projects as they circulated through the stations, so that at the end of the stations the student will have a complete portfolio of completed work. The final station will be set up so that both the parents and I are sitting facing the student who is answering questions about their progress, (i.e. what am I most proud of this semester, where did I show the most growth, what do I think I need more help with?). This places the parent and I on equal footing during the interview. The parent will have an opportunity to ask questions once the student is finished their presentation. Light refreshments will be provided and a translator will be available if necessary. After the conference parents and students will be asked to complete of survey of how effectiveness of the student led conference, with space request a follow up meeting.

Schools that have used student led conferences have found increased parent attendance and increased parent-teacher bonds making the parent more likely to sustain contact with the

teacher throughout the remainder of the year (Hackman, 1997). Student led conferences place

both the teacher and the parent on equal footing, making the parent more comfortable to ask

questions (Olsen & Fuller, 2003). By having the student prepare invitations and providing light

refreshments the atmosphere of the interview becomes more welcoming to the parents (Lueder,

1998). The primary language in Pond Inlet is Inuktitut, and many parents may have difficulty or

may feel more comfortable communicating in Inuktitut. For this reason I will request a translator

be present during the student led conferences to make parents feel more comfortable (Olsen &

Fuller, 2003). The survey will evaluate the effectiveness of the conference and allow the parents

to indicate if they would like a follow up meeting to discuss their child's progress further

(Lueder, 1998).

Friday Folder/ Class website

A great way to keep in touch with parents throughout the year is to use a classroom

website used by many teachers in southern Canada. However, in the North, many people do not

have access to the internet, and if they do it is often slow and unreliable. I would like to use a

Friday folder in place of the class website. The folder would contain similar information found

on the internet but displayed in a take home folder. The folder would contain information on

how to use the folder, completed assignments from the week, a list of up coming assignments, a

note about what we did that week, and what we will be working on in the upcoming week. There

will also be a space for personal note to the student and the family and a space for the family to

respond to the note. This will be an area where positive comments and room for improvement

comments can be listed. Students will be responsible for collecting contents of the folder on

Friday afternoon, bringing it home to be signed by a parent or guardian, and returned to class on

Monday. If the folder is consistently not signed, I will phone home to the family to discuss.

The Friday Folder provides a consistent method of communication with students' families. The folder will provide a method for two way communication and keep the parents updated with activities occurring in the classroom (Lueder, 1998). The folder gives an alternative method of communicating with the teacher if parents are uncomfortable coming into the school or are unable due to work schedules (Olsen & Fuller, 2003).

<u>Event Theme Nights</u>

The community of Pond Inlet is a small community of less than 2000 people. As a results there are not no malls, no movie theaters and few restaurants to provide opportunities for social engagement. To improve relationships with students and their families I would like to host a monthly event night at the school. Event nights will range from movie nights, student-parent book clubs, and student-parent sports nights. At movie nights popcorn and drinks will be provided, with proceeds going to the school fundraising committee. As event nights become more established parents may want to become involved in the planning and organizing of the events. Parents may want to host traditional sewing or cooking nights that can encourage the youth to better understand their culture.

Social events are a great way to get to know the families of the students in a non academic setting (Lueder, 1998). By hosting the activities at the school it creates a more warm and inviting atmosphere for the school and may entice those who do not feel comfortable in a school environment to come into the school (Olsen & Fuller, 2003). Involving parents in the planning of the events helps to strengthen their participation and their sense of belonging in the school (Lasky, 2000; Lueder, 1998).

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