

I-6: Respectfully inform, involve and invest students' influencers

Opportunities for “face time” with parents and other influencers

In attaining success with his kindergartners, Maurice Rabb (Los Angeles '99) went to great lengths to motivate his families to invest their children in the ambitious academic goals he had set for them. He waited at the front gate of the school each day, ready with his list of items to talk about with individual family members as they dropped off their children for the day. When a family member did not come with the student, he would seek them out at home. Knowing that he would need to rely on families to help instill a love of reading, he even held workshops in his classroom to show families strategies for reading to young children.

Given that lower rates of family involvement in schools in low-income communities are a function of differences in families' skill levels, resources, and connections, it is important for teachers in low-income communities to reach beyond traditional approaches for communicating with students' families and enlisting their support. While phone calls, letters, folders, email, and other communication methods will undoubtedly offer efficient and reliable ways to communicate with families, make an effort to meet face-to-face whenever possible. Families will appreciate the more personal and comfortable nature of in-person meetings (which also lessen the potential for miscommunication).

<p>Conferences at school</p>	<p>In the first two months of the school year, ask your students' families to come to your classroom for a conference. Even though you may visit them at home, in-school conferences are an additional and important opportunity to help families understand what you are doing in school and to demonstrate your accessibility to them.</p> <p>As with home visits, develop an agenda for the conference. This is an opportunity to show family members samples of their children's work, make them aware of areas that need improvement, and provide families with materials for helping address them. For example, you could say, "Antonio is excellent at adding and subtracting whole numbers, but he hasn't yet grasped adding and subtracting when using money. One strategy might be having him help you count the loose coins you have." You'll also want to ensure that students are part of the meeting, perhaps by asking them to choose something they have done that they especially want to share with their families.</p> <p>In talking with family members, be positive about their child. In communicating areas for improvement, provide specific examples and concrete ideas for addressing them. Reinforce the idea that you feel the student has the ability to excel, and that success will be a function of the child's effort.</p> <p>For tips on how to get the most out of school conferences, click on the appropriate link in the I-6 How To section.</p>
<p>Parent Workshops</p>	<p>Lead evening (or Saturday morning) programs designed especially for families. Possible topics include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to help your child to read • How to help your child learn to like math • How to best help your child with homework

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why we have a Big Goal and what you can do to help us achieve it • How to help your child track his/her progress • How to help your child navigate the college admissions process • How to navigate the college financial aid process • How to supplement your child's education • How to be an effective tutor <p>For topics that are not specific to your classroom, you may wish to collaborate with other teachers in your grade/school to potentially reach a wider audience.</p> <p><u>Example:</u> Atlanta teacher Dianna Ellsworth found that by educating parents alongside her students about the academic goals for the class, she created a motivating conversation between students and parents that vaulted her students' academic growth to new heights:</p> <p>Many parents knew that their students had to take a big fifth grade writing test, but fewer knew what scores meant . . . and fewer still had any idea what specifically it took to get a mystical "4," "5," or "6." Hosting a parent workshop gave my students an opportunity to show their parents that they not only knew what it took but also understood their areas of strength and those where they needed improvement, not only that they themselves cared about the test but also that it was within their reach to write the "Wow!" paper for which they were striving. I'd like to say I did it, but, no, my students invested their parents in the test and their progress toward an articulated goal. Their parents understood and genuinely celebrated the results when the school had the largest percentage of students scoring at the highest two levels of any inner-city school within Atlanta Public Schools.</p>
<p>Home Visits</p>	<p>Home visits offer many advantages. Of course, the downside of home visits is that they are extremely time-consuming. If you are a secondary teacher with 150 students, you might only choose to visit the homes of students whose families are otherwise more difficult to reach.</p> <p>When you conduct home visits for some or all of your students, tell families that you will be coming, and inform them of the general purpose of the visit through a note sent home with students or by phone call. Emphasize that you hope to learn from them. Be sensitive to some families' desire for privacy and to any cultural or personal differences that might make home visits less appropriate in some contexts. Think through an agenda for the meeting, which might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing your goals for the class • Sharing your view of the current achievement level of the child and of the importance of hard work • Asking what family members view as their child's strengths and weaknesses in school • Discussing what you'll be expecting of students • Discussing how the family can support what you're trying to accomplish

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining your systems for ongoing communication with families • Inviting/encouraging family involvement at school <p><u>Benefits of Home Visits</u> Home visits help to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a relationship that will result in regular communication between the family and the teacher. • Enable the teacher to learn more about the strengths and needs of the students they teach • Increase the likelihood that a family member will attend important annual review meetings (since a strong connection will have already been established). • Help teachers connect with families who might not otherwise have been comfortable or inclined to inspire their children to achieve academically. • Find out what influencers can (and would like to) add to your classroom • [For Special Education teachers:] Explain the technical paperwork involved in special education. This effort can increase the families' trust in your relationship and can increase the probability of their helping to inspire their children to achieve ambitious Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals. <p>"Before I did home visits, I used to get a 10-15% turnout at back to school night, and I rarely got to talk a family through a report card face-to-face. After I started doing home visits (and offering to make home visits with report cards), I got an 80-90% turnout at back to school night and was able to meet face-to-face with every family at report card time." —Bay Area teacher Emily Glasgow</p>
<p>During School Drop-Off/Pick-Up</p>	<p>Greet parents personally as they drop off or pick up their child at school. This may require you to come in a little early so that you are organized before students arrive. Communicating with parents in this informal manner helps increase the comfort level of two-way communication. It also reinforces the idea that parents and teachers know each other and are working together for the benefit of students. This is not a good time to discuss problems, but it may be an opportunity to set an appointment.</p>
<p>At School/Community Events</p>	<p>Attend school and community events as often as possible. Be visible. Live locally, shop locally, and attend community meetings. Frequent local movie theaters, concerts, and festivals. Go to baby showers or church dinners when invited, even if you do not normally attend these types of activities. Go to school sports and extra-curricular events and seize any and all opportunities to chat with your students' families. Be, in other words, a member of your students' community. The more school/community events you attend, the more likely you'll be to see your students' parents/guardians, and the more opportunity you'll have to check in with them about how their child is doing, about what's happening in the class, and about what's new in the family's life. Furthermore, the more your students' families see you integrated into their (and their children's) lives, the more inherent trust they will have towards you and the greater credibility you will enjoy.</p>

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Important Disclaimer:

Rather than teachers making a “house call” to *dispense* knowledge, home visit interviews of families leads teachers to be *learners* in their students' homes, asking questions during a visit in order to find out more about the skills, topics and interests shared and emphasized within the family.

Because family members' abilities may or may not be related to their current employment, teachers might invite a family member to share stories not only about their work, but also hobbies, previous jobs, or the skills for which relatives rely on them (which will help you determine the potential contributions each family member might make to your curriculum). A teacher might, for example, tap the “funds of knowledge” found within the households when making plans for curriculum units in social studies, math, science, language arts, and other subjects. These visits also have the effect of validating a family member's experiences and skills as valuable and participating teachers report that their students' families feel an increased sense of comfort with and connection to the school.