

Effective Parent Communication Strategies

Effective and ongoing communication with parents is one of the most important factors impacting strong school retention. If parents feel “out of the loop,” and disengaged, it is easier for them to begin to look elsewhere for their children’s educational options. Here are some great tips to improve the school’s interaction with the school community.

In a recent webinar presented by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), Andrea Kopp and Annette Jones offered recommended parent communication strategies for teachers and administrators. They stressed that communication is the foundation of all relationships and that the focal point of parent communication should *always* be the students. At times, communication can be a challenge for educators who, while they love working with children, are not always well-trained in communications. For that reason, a communication plan established by the administration can help to maintain positive interaction with parents while avoiding information overload.

The first step in creating the communication plan is to develop standards for communication: what is the particular message, who should write that message, who approves the message, and what mode of communication should be used to disperse it. These standards should be shared with all staff and faculty. In addition, it is critical that a signed media release form be obtained from parents for each student to ensure that news or photos are distributed *only* for those students whose parents have given permission. Teachers are also encouraged to develop a communication plan for the classroom with rules for students and parents. In general, communication should be consistent throughout the school and the messages should be delivered in a timely way, clearly, concisely, and always in a courteous and professional manner.

There are multiple methods of delivering messages:

- **School website** – should be inviting, colorful, current/updated, user-friendly, easy to navigate, and include contact information, calendar, mission statement, Catholic Identity, curriculum standards/academic excellence, governance/leadership, operational vitality, and pertinent information for both current and prospective parents.
- **Teacher website** – should be accessed from the school website and should reflect the classroom personality. It must be updated regularly and include homework, resources, upcoming events, social events, clubs, and permission for photos.
- **Email** – never include confidential information (consider it public communication) or write/send an email when angry. Keep a log of parent communication and be professional in all the content of emails.
- **Social Media** – remember that in reality, privacy does not exist in the world of social media, so make sure that all posts (or messages) are professional and positive. Never post news or photos of students whose parents have not approved their release.

- **Written communication** (notes, newsletters, thank-you notes, report card comments) – the language should be professional, in Standard English and with correct grammar. Never send without proofreading!
- **Phone communication** – don't forget to listen, be considerate, and always start and end the conversation on a positive note. Keep a log and document all conversations.
- **In-Person Communication** (conferences) – consider who will attend the meeting and set goals and an agenda. Consider possible outcomes, seating arrangements, and who will lead the meeting and who will take notes. Keep in mind body language, tone of voice, eye contact, and most importantly, once again, *listen*. End the meeting with an action plan. A documentation form, including student's name, date, attendance, areas of concern, discussion, student input, and signatures, should be kept in the student's file.
- **Group settings** – begin with a prayer, have an agenda, and consider the delivery (panel of speakers, power point presentation). Have marketing materials available on a table.

Some communication may be difficult. In the case of these conversations, plan to meet with parents face-to-face, let the parent talk first, and offer and ask for possible solutions. Try to end the discussion on a positive note. Communication can also be unplanned, such as chats with a parent in the parking lot. Consider your surroundings and the confidential nature of the conversation, and ask to make an appointment if more privacy is required. If the parent is upset, request that a private conversation be conducted later.

When communicating in print, digital or personal form, it is important to concentrate on the positive perspective, keeping students as the primary focus, in order to more successfully engage their parents and create a strong school community. This is one of the most vital elements supporting robust school retention. Remember, the decision to register is made not just once, but *every year*, and only satisfied, informed parents will re-enroll their children!

