Expanding schools’ capacity for Effective Two-way School/Home Communication

1/23/2015
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“Core principles of family engagement:

- First, family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development.
- Family engagement is also continuous across a child’s life and entails steadfast commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Finally, family engagement is about promoting children’s learning anywhere, anytime.

Effective family engagement cuts across the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in prekindergarten programs, at school, in afterschool programs, at faith-based institutions, and in the community.” - Harvard Family Research Project

“Public participation means involving those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process. It promotes sustainable decisions by providing participants with the information they need to be involved in a meaningful way, and it communicates to participants how their input affects the decision.” - International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

* Adapted from Parent and Family Involvement: A Guide to Effective Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in North Carolina Schools, State Board of Education
Why two-way communication?

Research has demonstrated and legislation acknowledges the positive impact of parent engagement on their child’s learning and development.

Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to:

- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- attend school regularly
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- graduate and go on to post-secondary education

A solid body of research* finds that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, support their children’s learning at home.

Families with more income and education, however, tend to be more engaged at school and have more resources to help their children at home. Good two-way communication will support all families to be more involved at school, better informed about what children are learning in class, and more capable of supporting their children’s learning.

Higher performing schools effectively involve families and the community. Schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds share three key practices:

- Focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships and two-way communications among teachers, families, and community members;
- Recognize, respect, and address families’ needs, as well as bridge class and cultural differences; and
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared and where families are effective advocates for their children.

*References
Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement (Austin TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).


Parent Involvement in the Appalachian Region: North Carolina (Charleston WV: Edvantia’s Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center, October, 2008.

Process for expanding schools’ capacity

The two-way communication improvement process is a cycle similar to the “Plan, Teach, Reflect & Adjust” teaching cycle, with a sequence of steps that lead to deeper, more consistent, more valuable interactions among staff, students, families and community partners.

From January 2015 until June 2015, the MMSD Communications team will work with schools and staff to document and refine a system for building schools’ capacity for effective two-way communication. Cherokee Middle School will be the first school to launch this process with the support of the Communications team.

Simultaneously, the Communications Department will collaborate with Family and Community Engagement, (FACE) Strategic Partnerships and Instructional Technology to analyze the outcomes of Cherokee Middle School’s two-way communications process in order to develop materials and other support systems for schools.

Using a case study approach, we will develop a seven-phase process for expanding schools’ capacity for effective two-way communication as follows:

1. Self-assessment What is working, what is not?
2. Intended outcomes What changes should result from our two-way communication?
3. Selection of tools What is the right platform for the interaction?
4. Sustainable workflow How can we make two-way communication a priority and part of our daily work?
5. Use of feedback How will we use what we learn?
6. Report back to families How will we demonstrate to families that their engagement has a positive impact?
7. Monitoring impact What metrics will tell us whether our strategies are working?
Action Items for 2014-15

School-based
January 2015
Work with Cherokee Middle School Learning Coordinator, Colleen Shapleigh, Cherokee principals, teachers, and parents:
- Convene a work group that is representative of the Cherokee community
- Identify what is working, and what is not
- Outline specific goals

February
- Introduce and evaluate available tools
- Test and evaluate new tools
- Launch new strategies

March
- Recommend a sustainable workflow
- Discuss with SBLT, stakeholder data collection, its use in SIP and school decision making
- Report back to families on outcomes
- Assess impact of various strategies
Action Items for 2014-15

District-wide
While working with Cherokee Middle School, the Communications team will meet with small groups of parents and staff members from across the district to test tools and reflect on what is being learned at Cherokee.

January
- Meet with a focus group of parents to identify communication preferences and areas for improvement, and test new tools
- Work with the Instructional Technology team to partner with schools, classrooms and teachers who are ready to use two-way communication tools and build a school-wide system.

March
- Work with FACE to hold a workshop for the External Communicators’ Professional Learning Community on best practices for currently available two-communication tools.

April
- Begin working with a “G1” school (first groups of schools to receive devices as part of the MMSD Technology Plan) on the communications improvement process using and expanding upon what was learned at Cherokee.

Communications will reach out to the following requesting time for a focus group discussion:

- Lincoln Parent Empowerment groups, Latino, Hmong, Nepali, African American
- Sennett Parent Action Team
- African American Parent Leadership Council
- Toki Community Dinner
- Eastside PTO Coalition
- Mocha Moms
Inventory of existing and new tools

One-way = Delivering a message from sender to receiver/s to inform, educate, or reinforce

Two-way = Message sender and receiver/s interact to discuss, gain understanding, gauge, reinforce or change perceptions, generate ideas and solutions

The following lists commonly used tools for communication. Some tools are best suited for one-to-one communication, others for small group communication, and still others for mass communication. Additional information and resources are available in the communications toolkit at mmsd.org/toolkit.

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Technology-assisted

- Phone calls
- Video chat
- Web forums
- Audio/video conferencing
- Phone conferencing
Tools currently in supported in the Madison schools

Information and training is available through the Communications Department. Click on links for examples or additional information.

One-way communication tools

Constant Contact e-news, email marketing
- Email marketing program that can be used to send electronic communications
- Can send unlimited number of communications to families and/or staff
- E-newsletters are media rich with photos and links to web resources
- There is a small fee for schools to set up their own account

Websites
- Support and training for robust school websites is available through the Communications Department.

Infinite Campus (IC)
- In addition to student information functions, Infinite Campus is a great place to post school notices. Messages can be designed in html to be visually engaging.

SchoolMessenger
- SchoolMessenger is the third-party software application used by the district for School/Home communication. It offers email, phone and text messaging to families from teachers, schools and the district and can be accessed through IC. With planning some functions of SchoolMessenger may be used interactively.

District-wide Communications
- MMSD Homepage
- MMSD Facebook page
- MMSD Communications Toolkit
- MMSD Communications Homepage
- Biweekly Family Newsletter (sent electronically to all MMSD families - English and Spanish)
- Biweekly Staff Newsletter, “MMSD Connect” (sent electronically to all MMSD employees)

Got Good News?
Submit “good news” to the district’s family and/or staff newsletters, and social media

Got Gratitude?
Submit a “shout-out” to an individual or group of individuals in the MMSD community. The recipient(s) will receive an email with your words of appreciation and it will be posted on the shout-out page as well as our district and school Facebook pages.
Tools currently in supported in the Madison schools

Two-way communication tools

Blackboard
- Our current webinar meeting/learning platform. Provides audio/video and presentation functions that may be live or recorded for later viewing.

Google hang-outs
- An instant messaging and video chat platform

Phone conferencing
- Multiple line conference calls may be scheduled to support a small group conversation.

Polling
- SchoolMessenger and Constant Contact both offer simple polling functions for quick feedback or replies to an invitation, for example.

Social media
- Each school has a district-supported Facebook page. Some schools also have Twitter, Instagram and other accounts.

SurveyMonkey
- An online survey tool with many features that allow data collection and analysis. Also includes a simple polling feature.

Webforms
- Simple information collection forms can be created and embedded right into school websites

Web forums
- A web forum is a discussion board where the moderator posts questions and the community interacts by posting replies.

Videoconferencing
- Skype and similar tools are being used in the district for video/audio conversations.
Research on new tools for live, two-way, large group communication

The following are only a few of the products we have researched to support family and community engagement. Prices vary from free to thousands of dollars for an annual subscription. CommunityMatters.org provides a list of 50 such tools (See attached). One or more products such as these will be tested with MMSD schools. Click on the link for the company’s website.

**Digsite**
Designed especially for moderating online focus groups

**GoToMeeting**
A free, simple-to-use audio and/or videoconference cloud application. It requires an installed application on host computers. The installation of the app could be overcome by having GoToMeeting installed on every district computer or for the 1:1 devices in the G1 schools. GoToMeeting lacks a few control features for large group moderators which would be missed. It also does not record the conference.

**Mindmischer/My Sidewalk**
There is a paid and free version of this cloud application. My Sidewalk, the free version, is to public engagement what Facebook is to social interaction, or LinkedIn is to business interactions. Public entities can gather community input and invite participation. Individual participants can find opportunities to get involved in their community.

**Nextdoor**
Nextdoor is a private social media application for neighbors and neighborhood associations. Neighbors share news, tips and recommendations for services, (e.g. Do you know a good plumber?).

**ThoughtExchange**
An online tool for group collaboration, specifically designed for community engagement, described as a “group insight” platform.

**TeleTown Hall**
This is a large group phone/audio conferencing with robust functionality. Participants are invited to participate in a community-wide conversation by posing questions to a speaker, responding in real-time to polling questions without disrupting the flow of the event, and/or donate to a cause by being transferred to a LIVE operator, my like a live radio show on the phone.
List of community engagement tools from CommunityMatters.org

1. coUrbanize: List project information for development proposals and gather online feedback.
2. Citizen: Gathers feedback by integrating polling and social media sites.
4. Crowdbrute: Organizes comments for online brainstorming sessions and workshops.
5. EngagementHQ: Provides information and gathers feedback for decision-making.
6. MetroQuest: Incorporates scenario planning and visualizations for informing the public and collecting feedback.
7. SeeClickFix: For reporting and responding to neighborhood issues.
8. Neighborland: Forum that encourages community discussion and action at the neighborhood level.
10. MindMixer: Ideation platform for community projects.
11. NextDoor: Private social network and forum for neighborhoods.
13. CivicInsight: Platform for sharing progress on development of blighted properties.
14. i-Neighbors: Free community website and discussion forum.
15. Recovers: Engages the public in disaster preparedness and recovery.
17. Street Bump: Crowdsourcing application to improve public streets.
18. neighborly: Crowdfunding platform to promote local investment in improvement projects.
23. Open Town Hall: Online public comment forum for government.
25. Poll Everywhere: Collects audience responses in real time, live, or via the web.
26. Tidepools: Collaborative mobile mapping platform for gathering and sharing hyperlocal information.
27. Community PlanIt: Online game that makes planning playful, while collecting insight on community decisions.
30. Loomio: Online tool for collaborative decision-making.
31. PlaceSpeak: Location-based community consultation platform.
32. Citizen Budget: Involves residents in budgeting.
33. e-Deliberation: Collaborative platform for large group decision-making.
34. CrowdGauge: Open-source framework for building educational online games related to public priority setting.
35. Citizen Space: Manage, publicize, and archive all public feedback activity.
36. Ziildo: Host deliberative online forums and facilitated participatory meetings.
37. Weljit: Collaborative online decision-making, brainstorming, debating, prioritizing, and more.
39. Community Almanac: Contribute and collect stories about your community.
40. GitHub: Connecting government employees with the public to collaborate on code, data, and policy.
41. VividMaps: Engages citizens to map and promote local community assets.
42. OSCity: Search, visualize, and combine data to gain insight on spatial planning. (EU only.)
43. Civic Commons: Promoting conversations and connections that have the power to become informed, productive, collective civic action.
44. Crowdmap: Collaborative mapping.
45. Codigital: Get input on important issues.
46. All Our Ideas: Collect and prioritize ideas through a democratic, transparent, and efficient process.
47. NeighborHow: Create useful how-to guides for the community.
48. OurCommonPlace: A community web-platform for connecting neighbors.
49. Front Porch Forum: A free community forum, helping neighbors connect.
50. PrioritySpend: Prioritization tool based on valuing ideas and possible actions.