

## 12 Conversation Starters on What Parents Want Teachers to Know

*From Joe Mazza's Blog*

Earlier this year, I came across an article by Eric Sheninger entitled, "[Seven Things Teachers Want You \(Parents\) to Know](#)." As I read through the article written from the lens of a teacher and school leader, I became curious as to how our parents would respond if given the opportunity to speak up about *what they want teachers to know*. I decided to put out a short, one-question survey to my school families, and below I'm sharing the results and how we as educators might listen and respond.

The following themes were those repeated most often in the 100+ replies this survey generated. Even though we are a K-6 elementary school, many K-12 families face similar challenges.

### Every Home Situation Is Different

*"My first grade daughter's father and I do not live together and have extremely different parenting styles."*

- **Conversation starter:** How do teachers and office staff work with split families to provide an equitable approach in the best interest of the child? Are we sending school communications to multiple addresses? Who do we call "first" when we communicate?

*"We are a one-car family, and one parent does not have a driver's license. The other works all day which makes making friends difficult and scheduling meetings even harder."*

- **Conversation starter:** For families without transportation, how might a home-school partnership infuse a support system that meets these needs and/or offers a hybrid approach? Are we streaming school events or making Skype and other tools available for conferences when face-to-face just isn't possible?

*"We're grandparents raising grandchildren."*

- **Conversation starter:** Today's "parent" might mean aunt, uncle, neighbor, grandparent, cousin or other relative or family friend. It's up to us educators to identify early who the caretakers are so that we can understand where we need to focus our efforts to engage them.

*"We relocated from Seattle just a week before school started, and our kids are in a transitional state of mind, making them a little nervous and timid, but excited at the same time."*

- **Conversation starter:** How are new families immersed into the overall culture of your school? Is there a new family night? Consider a family mentor program made up of volunteer families that "take new families in" to show them the ropes, introduce them to others, and are always there to help with a question.

*"I am a single mom. I am broke. I work three jobs so that I can put food on the table for my kids. I want school to be our first priority, but really it is third or fourth on the list. We do the best we can."*

- **Conversation starter:** It's hard for us educators to swallow, but for so many of our families who are living in poverty, attendance, school and homework not top priorities. Developing a strong relationship from the start with our families and asking, "What we can do to help out?" goes a long way in maintaining high expectations for all families, while differentiating where necessary.

### Please Plan for Us

*"We are working parents and wish there were more opportunities to volunteer at night or on weekends."*

- **Conversation starter:** The school calendar hasn't changed much over the years. Most of our events are held in the evening without much attention to religious groups that might make up a large population of our school families. When making the calendar for the upcoming year, consider bringing in a few local parent leaders to provide a varied approach with offerings in the morning, afternoon, evening and on weekends. This is where a home-school parent leadership group that represents your school families would really benefit the students and the partnership you are working to build.

*"We totally want to help out, be at school events, in the classroom, etc, but we need notice to take off work, on the order of months, not days to weeks. As much notice as you can give, the better."*

- **Conversation starter:** Be proactive and offer a structure to the way you integrate parent volunteers. Come together with your teaching team and create a calendar of possible volunteer opportunities for parents. For example, if you are doing something like "Kidwriting" and your schedule is constant through the end of the school year, provide a signup Google Document in advance. This way, parents can see where they are needed and can plan in advance for their work schedules. Having parents volunteer in the classroom (even if it is not in a classroom where their kids are) helps parents and teachers further the partnership and build capacity for the curriculum and needs of children of a given age.

## **Homework Must Be Meaningful -- If Given at All**

*"We are very busy at night -- ease up on the tremendous homework. Studies don't support the benefits of excessive homework."*

*"We are very busy! Two parents working full time, three kids, school, activities, etc. School is top priority, but kids are already in school/daycare 8+ hours per day. They need some downtime at home. So, please only homework that is relevant, not just busy."*

- **Conversation starter:** If you read any of [Alfie Kohn's work](#), you know that homework has little if any impact on student achievement until the students reach high school. Our families are now paying attention and are pushing back for good reason. With this in mind, it's extremely important to know that our parents want to support their children's education, but not to the point where they are sacrificing the little family time they have at night to watch their kid struggle through a worksheet when concepts haven't been mastered yet.

*"We've learned over the years that homework is not always reviewed by teachers. There are frequent times when I don't feel like the child is 'getting' the concept and I try to help, knowing that this problem will not be obvious to the teacher because the homework isn't being looked at."*

- **Conversation starter:** If you assign homework, how do you assess it, if at all? Is it the job of the parent to "teach" the concept to the child if he or she does not get it? How would you respond if parents called to ask you? As kids get older, parents often do not have the skills to help their children with the curriculum or the English skills to communicate back to the teacher. Does your current structure support these types of challenges? If you choose to grade homework, aren't you in fact grading the support system the child has at home?

## **How Can I Be an Advocate Without Being Overbearing?**

*"Sometimes it's hard for a parent to know where to draw the line between a 'pushy, helicopter parent' and an advocate for our child. We never wish to overstep a teacher's authority, but if teachers would encourage parents to communicate with them about their child, we'd really appreciate the offer."*

- **Conversation starter:** I've never been fond of any labels for parents. I strongly believe that all parents are doing the best they know how to support the needs of their children. I ask my teachers to teach as if the parents of their students were in the back of the room, and to work with parents as if the students were their own children. Seeing through the lens of the parent in varying situations is imperative to building a strong and open partnership between home and school.

## **We're Here for a Better Life**

*"We are a family of four in our household now. It is myself, my husband and our two sons. In order to educate our children in a better way and to give them a better life, we came all the way to USA from Bangladesh."*

- **Conversation starter:** Before we even engage with school parents, we must be mindful that some families have already made major life decisions just to be a part of our schools. Ask them to share their stories and details about the situation their children were a part of in the previous country. Use this information from the start to make decisions on how to meet these needs of the family and the student. Identify other families from similar locations and reach out to them about becoming a mentor family.

## **Meet Us Where We Are**

*"We like to stay involved and appreciate when the teachers communicate with us (via letters sent home, emails, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)."*

- **Conversation starter:** Does your school have a high- and low-tech menu of communications for families? In diverse schools like mine, the modes of communication our families use in daily life are a mile wide. We know this because we solicit information via a two-minute, hard copy technology survey every September at Back to School Night. Those families without access to technology at home or at work are known as HCPs (Hard Copy Parents). We make it a point to send them hard copies of our digital communications.

The beginning of the school year holds the greatest window of opportunity for getting to know our students and families. It is these relationships we build throughout the year, starting with a sustainable first impression that we will leverage in the best interests of our students. We must always be working toward a comprehensive and inclusive family and community engagement plan for our respective populations. This approach takes *more* listening to the needs of our families through their own unique and important lens, and *less* offering of one-size-fits-all solutions on our part as teachers and administrators. Working toward a strong home-school partnership is hard, and you should never feel like you've reached the summit. This work is ongoing.

Joe Mazza—a former public school teacher and administrator—serves as the Leadership Innovation Manager at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Joe also serves as a national family-community engagement advisor to the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. Joe's blog was originally created to share ways educators can use innovative tools to complement face to face communications between home and school, and do this in a transparent and collaborative way. It has evolved to serve all things teaching, learning & leadership, but as Joe says, "It's the relationships that matter."

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