Building bridges with the community

Fostering equity and academic success through parent engagement

By Kate Ford

Building a strong, empowered community is at the heart of any successful education institution and is transformative in the lives of students, educators and parents.

While teachers and students are key participants in achieving academic success, parents are the glue that holds everything together. Many parents in our communities work multiple jobs, with irregular schedules, making it challenging for even the best-intentioned parents to stay involved with their child’s academics.

Often these are the students who need support the most, so we are constantly striving to find effective ways to make it easier for parents to be part of the school community.

We believe we must engage families as partners in meaningful ways in our work. To do this, we spend considerable time establishing two-way communication with parents, and we rely heavily on their influence and support to ensure that college becomes a reality for their children. Administrators and educators may benefit from these strategies:

Use technology to your advantage

The way we communicate is rapidly changing. It’s difficult to keep up with the latest technology, let alone find new ways to incorporate it into everyday life. This trend is no different for schools, and it’s becoming increasingly important to make parents feel like they are present—even when they can’t be.

At Aspire Public Schools, we use a communication platform to streamline interactions between parents and the school, taking into consideration language translation and the devices parents use most often. Two-way communication is the key to successfully maintaining and building an active parent community—especially when parents don’t have time for regular school visits.

Our teachers and staff can engage in thoughtful communication with parents on the issues that directly affect their child’s education.

Create a window into the classroom

Teachers are frequently the main point of contact for many parents when they reach out to learn more about what happens in the classroom. We expect our teachers to spend time thinking about how they engage with parents.

Teachers see greater student success and larger response from parents when they post classroom materials and resources online. In doing so, they’re creating an information hub that gives parents the necessary resources to help students with homework. Parents also can discuss upcoming assessments with the teacher.

When we create a window into the classroom, we empower parents to continue academic conversations at home and reinforce their commitment to their child’s success.
Value collaboration

It’s essential to build a culture around collaboration and partnership. Families, educators and administrators need to be a part of a working, symbiotic relationship to address students’ overall needs.

Every family has a diverse background and an important story to share. As a school, we want to complement families’ cultural backgrounds and involve the parents on a much deeper and more personal level.

For example, when we discuss college applications, we invite parents to share their experiences with other families about how to make informed decisions about their child’s academic future.

Teachers and administrators can help by giving parents a starting point and resources to understand the big picture of what going to college means for students and their families.

Building bridges

As educators, we have the power and the responsibility to build a bridge between our schools and parents. Modern technology is changing the way we communicate with parents and allows us to be transparent about what happens daily in the classroom. We also can provide regular updates on student progress and receive feedback about our efforts.

By encouraging and ensuring open communication, we’re developing a strong partnership that builds trust in our teachers’ recommendations and academic success overall. And, ultimately, by engaging the parents this way, we are fostering a culture of equity and empowerment.

Kate Ford is the area superintendent in Los Angeles for Aspire Public Schools.

http://www.districtadministration.com/article/building-bridges-community