

How to Share Data with Families

Help families support student learning by inviting them into the data conversation

By Lorette McWilliams and Christine Patton

If you're reading this on your computer, tablet, or smartphone, you're generating data right now; technology has recorded what websites you have visited and when, how long you stayed on each site, and what you downloaded.

Schools, too, have amassed enormous amounts of data about students, from homework completion and attendance records to classroom assessments and standardized test scores. So what do we do with all these data? How can we work with families so we can understand the data together?

Regularly sharing data with families contributes to student performance. A recent study found that students in a summer credit-recovery course whose parents received weekly, individualized communication were 41 percent less likely to fail the course (Kraft & Rogers, 2014). In particular, students whose parents received personalized messages with specific information about how the student could improve were more likely to earn course credit. The study suggests that educators can leverage new technologies, like text messaging, to communicate regularly with families.

The Data-Sharing Partnership

When educators share data with families meaningfully, they form a powerful partnership that benefits students. Here at the Harvard Family Research Project, we've found that effective data-sharing programs have these three attributes (Patton, 2013):

1. They promote connections among and between people, ideas, and settings.

By presenting families with the results of their child's classroom activities, tests, and other assessment measures, teachers can help families understand their child's strengths and needs. Likewise, families can share their observations of the child outside school, such as during after-school hours, in the home, or out in the community. By sharing data, all parties have a more complete picture of the student.

With complete data in hand, educators and families can identify learning opportunities in their communities and develop goals for the student. These goals might focus on school-based activities, such as improving attendance or academic performance, or on skills for lifelong learning beyond school, such as maintaining focus, exploring new interests, and paying attention to tasks.

2. They put data in context.

Educators have a responsibility to place data in a developmental context to help families make sense of how their child is playing, behaving, socializing, moving, speaking, learning, and thinking. Doing so requires an understanding of child development and grade-level expectations: Should he be able to use similes and metaphors yet? Should he be able to independently write five paragraphs? Families can help educators understand how a student functions in other settings: Will she listen to a story during story time at the library? Will she sit still at mealtime at home?

3. They approach data-sharing as an ongoing process.

Parent-teacher conferences and curriculum nights offer opportunities for families and teachers to talk about student progress. Channels for more frequent communication should also be identified and offered so that families can act quickly on the data they receive to better support their child's learning.

Apponequet Regional High School in Lakeville, Massachusetts, is moving to a system in which teachers will share updated progress reports on a web-based platform 16 times during the school year. These updates will give families a more informed understanding of all the elements that affect their child's grade for each class, such as attendance, homework completion, participation, and so on. Principal Barbara Starkie says that "it's very important for parents to know averages in classes, but what I think is more important is that they know how those averages are calculated and what contributes to that and ... how they support kids around those grades" (personal communication, June 2, 2015).

Tips for Sharing Data with Families

Here are some suggestions for sharing data with families in ways that fortify the family-school partnership. (For a more comprehensive series of tip sheets, see Harvard Family Research Project, 2013.)

1. Recognize that data and data-sharing require responsible discretion.

The data a school collects represent an actual child—her behaviors, interests, strengths, needs, and the areas in which she struggles. Education data sometimes contain sensitive information about a child, a child's family, learning difficulties, or other special needs.

Everybody accessing and sharing data has a responsibility to handle the data appropriately and guard against misuse. This means ensuring that student—and family—privacy is protected, particularly when data are being placed in online systems or being exchanged between settings or organizations. Additionally, take care that families have privacy and a safe and trusting environment for discussing their child.

2. Make data accessible, understandable, and actionable.

Families are best able to engage with and act on data when they know how to access the information they want, when the information makes sense, and when they know what to do with the information.

A number in isolation can be confusing. Thus, it is often helpful to report data in multiple ways. For example, a report might show how a student is doing in relation to peers of the same age and grade level and in relation to where he was earlier in the school year. Poway Unified School District in California uses the analogy of a ladder to illustrate the different contexts of student growth (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). Did the student who progressed just a few steps on the ladder, but remained at the top of the class, have a better or worse year than the student who ascended multiple rungs but ended up a step below the top?

Additionally, too much information can be overwhelming. To guard against data overload, D'Lisa Crain, administrator for Family-School Partnerships at Washoe County School District in Nevada, suggests sharing one or two of the most relevant, crucial pieces of data, then letting families' questions lead the conversation.

3. Build professional capacity.

Educators likely need training and professional development to expand their facility with data. Having educators learn with and from other educators can be especially beneficial. For example, an early childhood program in Minnesota has monthly meetings for teachers to review programwide, classroom, and individual student data. Teachers are asked to evaluate the data with their peers, asking questions like these: *What trends do you see? What associations or connections can you make? What data can I impact or change? Any aha moments for you?* Teachers can also network with their peers to share best practices in data sharing, such as what information is best shared over the phone versus by e-mail or text and how best to share information with families who are not native English speakers.

4. Give families access and training.

Access to student data is important. Many districts have Student Information Systems (SIS), software programs that collect and manage student data. Families need training on how to use their district's SIS, including how to log in. To facilitate family access, some districts have computers available for families on the school grounds. In the Washoe County School District, the district also makes available computers located in community facilities, such as the public library and Boys and Girls Clubs.

Access alone, however, is not enough. Families also need training to understand the data. Group trainings for families can be efficient and effective. One promising model is the Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) model, which convenes an entire classroom's families, teacher, and a parent liaison several times a year to analyze data as a team in addition to having individual parent-teacher conferences (Paredes, 2010). Group trainings like this are also an opportunity for families to network with other families, compare and exchange strategies and resources, and get a sense of how their child behaves and performs in relation to peers.

5. Address families' unique needs.

Language, culture, access, and comfort with technology are frequently cited challenges when sharing data with families. Anticipating and addressing these barriers will go a long way in making data accessible, understandable, and actionable.

At Washoe County School District, training for families begins with providing basic information, such as the meaning of letter grades and course credits. After the group training on parental access to the data system, three to four facilitators, many of whom are bilingual, consult with the individual families to answer specific questions. Identifying and accessing resources to address learning goals also requires attention to the individual family. D'Lisa Crain of Washoe County says, "It's one thing to share data, but you have to share the help, too, so the parent feels empowered" (personal communication, June 4, 2015).

Successful data-sharing includes discussions about how to access identified resources. Additionally, new technologies allow for greater choice in communicating with families; some families prefer hard copies sent home, and others prefer e-mails, telephone calls, or text messages. Ask families what they prefer, and accommodate their preferences when you can.

Becoming a Team

Sharing data is a vital component to a strong home-school partnership. Students whose parents receive regular and personalized messages with actionable information from teachers are more likely to succeed in school. Data-sharing is a shared responsibility and an ongoing process that requires context for optimal understanding. Today's data-rich environment necessitates responsible discretion for all parties, and both educators and families often need training to ensure access as well as an understanding of what the data mean.

When data are accessible, understandable, and actionable, families are empowered. By together creating learning goals and identifying resources specific to the student and family, educators and families become a team, and the home-school partnership is strengthened.

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<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov15/vol73/num03/How-to-Share-Data-with-Families.aspx>