TOWARD BETTER COMMUNICATION

A Report from MLA Jane Thornthwaite, Parliamentary Secretary for Student Support & Parent Engagement
We all want our children to be successful in their learning. Intuitively, we know when parents are interested and involved, children do better. We now know that research backs this up. Engaging parents starts with communication. As the education system continues to adapt to an ever-changing society, it's more important than ever to consider how we're communicating with one another. Effective communication is the foundation for parents to support their child's learning. Better communication, as many schools are realizing, contributes to a more trusting and positive relationship with parents that benefits the entire school community.

This document shares what I have heard from parents on issues and barriers to effective communication and suggestions to support parent engagement. I have heard a lot of ideas and a recurring theme highlighted in all these discussions is the importance of communication between parents and the school community.

While the ideas shared by parents often focus on communication between parents and their children's teachers, many of them also speak to improving communication with schools, districts and government.

I invite you to use this as a starting place for conversations in your school community about effective communication with parents.

Jane Thornthwaite, MLA
Parents often want to know more than they do about their child’s learning experience. While many parents feel comfortable asking questions and asking for information, countless others don’t know where to start or may feel intimidated or uncomfortable doing so for a variety of reasons. And so they quietly remain uninformed - or even worse, misinformed.

At the same time, teachers, principals and administrators recognize the value and potential of effective communication with parents. Many do a wonderful job of seizing that opportunity. But, like parents, many educators aren’t always sure about the best approach or struggle to find the time in their busy days to make it a priority.

So how can everyone in the school community work together to ensure effective communication for the benefit of students? Some ideas have emerged in my interactions with parents through discussions, focus groups, and from online forums.

**Listening to parents, two general categories of ideas emerge:**

1. **Culture:** adopting a more open culture in our school system can support communicating with parents about issues that matter to them, in language they’re familiar with and in a way that helps parents see how issues are relevant to their child’s learning.

2. **Practice:** considering how parents want to be connected is also important. More effective, flexible and accessible communication tools that reflect current technology and the needs of schools as well as parents can help foster that sense of connection and lead to positive contributions to the school community.
TOPIC:
There is a real desire among parents to be more directly involved in key decisions around their child’s education.

ISSUES:
Parents want to contribute to their child’s success but often don’t know how.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
· Provide clearer expectations from teachers of what parents can and should do to support their child at home.
· Parents and teachers can work together at the beginning of the school year to identify three key ideas to focus on with each child.
· Find out what parents want to know about their child’s progress, the school and the school system.
· Use social media and tools like online portfolios to personalize information and improve access to relevant information.
· Consider how parents could participate in co-constructed learning programs with students and teachers.
TOPIC: Immigrant families, who often come from locations with very different education systems, face challenges to participating in education.

ISSUES: Parents may be frustrated because they don’t understand or are not aware of B.C.’s cultural differences. As well, many parents come with different experiences and perspectives but may not feel their voices are being heard because of language and cultural barriers.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
- Proactively build greater awareness among parents of how the B.C. education system works and what to expect. A resource to support this would be especially useful for pre-Kindergarten families.
- More support for parents of English Language Learners in understanding the B.C. education system.
- Host school based multicultural clubs for families in high school.
- Provide translation of education information for immigrant parents.
- Consider having a resource person in the classroom to help manage interpretation — every school could have available staff who speak the primary language of the school’s families.
- Invite community volunteers in school districts to act as interpreters, particularly at meetings and public events.
TOPIC:
Parents want to feel included in their child’s education and school community.

ISSUES:
Many parents don’t feel they are welcome in their child’s school.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
• Set clear expectations regarding parent communication and engagement.
• Consider providing a dedicated space for parents at the school where they can meet with other parents or with teachers.
• School support staff and/or teachers could welcome both the student and parents in the morning and connect again at pick up time.
• Invite parents to be learners in the school community- this models learning at all levels and helps build strong relationships. Also ensuring parents have opportunities to be at school for positive reasons such as student-led conferences, concerts, presentations of learning.
• The legacy of residential schools is a profound barrier for some Aboriginal parents. Building trust is essential. Sharing opportunities such as information sessions, lunches, fundraisers, school community event and other family events can help ensure all parents and families feel welcome and included.
TOPIC: Parents want resources to help them navigate the system and to support their child’s learning.

ISSUES: Parents can feel isolated from learning that is taking place in the classroom and may feel ill-equipped to support their child with homework. They are also asking for support to help navigate the system and initiate difficult conversations.

IDEAS from PARENTS:

• Create print resources for parents with ideas on how they can help support their child with homework.
• Create on-line tools that highlight and encourage strong communication practices for parents and educators.
• Provide an on-line space for parents that has access to information about their child’s school and resources for supporting their child’s education.
TOPIC:
Parents want expanded engagement opportunities.

ISSUES:
Parents living in rural communities can be isolated and may have limited access to technology & resources. Similarly, many families are busy and may not be connected with the school community; even with a school’s best efforts, information is not reaching them.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
- Host free parent “Edcamps” and encourage conversations about issues and information that parents want to discuss.
- Partner with grocery and school supply stores and provide information in their flyers to help parents support their child’s learning.
- Create opportunities to market effective parent/school communication and engagement through bookmarks, bus ads, etc. Additional outreach could be done through public libraries, rec centres and museums.
- Open up school gyms and other school facilities during off hours so families can come in to participate in community events.
TOPIC: 
Create opportunities for parents to contribute to learning in the classroom.

ISSUES: 
Many parents are interested in sharing their expertise. They also want to support their child’s learning at home.

IDEAS from PARENTS: 
- Invite parents with expertise to participate in sharing their knowledge with students in the classroom or school.
- Host professional development with parents and teachers on increasing parent involvement in schools, and at home.
TOPIC:
Parents want more frequent updates and discussion about their child’s learning.

ISSUES:
Traditional report cards are a snapshot into the past. Too often, parents find report cards difficult to understand and reporting inconsistent.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
- Many parents have asked if districts could introduce online portfolios, as is already happening in some schools. This could provide parents with more insight into their child’s learning and a better understanding of what their child is working on — in real time.
- Create more flexible face-to-face options for parents to meet with teachers about their child’s learning — informal and on-going not just during report card time.
TOPIC:
Parents need to clearly understand how the education system works. Information about education needs to be in plain language, and free from government and education jargon.

ISSUES:
Many parents are unclear about the various roles and responsibilities within the education system, such as the co-governance model between the Ministry of Education and locally-elected Boards of Education. While these roles are set out in the School Act, they need to be clearly and simply communicated.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
• Simplify and use plain language in documents, signage and other written materials.
• Provide clear and concise on-line information, free of government jargon, on the education system.
• Parents new to B.C. not only require plain language descriptions of education information, there is also a need to explain how B.C.’s system works compared to where they come from. In particular, how to approach and communicate with their child’s teacher.
TOPIC:
Parents want communication channels that reach across the education system between parents, students, and teachers. And they would like to make sure schools, districts and government are all part of that communication.

ISSUES:
Information about a child’s learning should be available to parents through a variety of tools and channels. Communication that involves parent, teacher, and student is the ideal.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
- The Ministry could provide general education information on-line – like how to support their child’s learning; nutrition tips; environment in the home; preparing students for jobs.
- Provide a variety of tools to help connect parents with schools. This could include email, websites, newsletters, face to face meetings, parent information sessions and RSS Feeds.
- Explore using a tool like Parent Connect - a communication tool in early implementation in some districts.
- Provide a one-stop web site with two purposes: a place where a parent, student or teacher can go to access information from government, the school district and the school and, at the same time, be an entry point to a portfolio of the student’s learning.
- Use social media tools as they can be an effective way to share information.
TOPIC:
Parent Advisory Councils should be able to access parent e-mail addresses as a channel for parents receiving information.

ISSUES:
Many districts, with parental consent, provide Parent Advisory Councils with parent’s email addresses. This can be an effective channel for sharing school level information with parents.

IDEAS from PARENTS:

- Move the phone tree to an email tree.
- Review district policies on access to parent email addresses (with parent consent) by Parent Advisory Councils.
TOPIC:
Parents desire communication with their child’s teacher in ways and times that work for them.

ISSUES:
Parents schedules often don’t allow for regular communication with their child’s teacher during the school day.

IDEAS from PARENTS:
- Many teachers are effectively using social media and other tools to communicate with parents – such as a teacher blog to give regular updates on what the class is doing (i.e. weekly). Encourage teachers to utilize technology for parent engagement.
- Consider teacher pro-D sessions dedicated to effectively communicating with parents both face-to-face and online.
- Create an opportunity at the start of the school year to jointly determine which method of communication works best for the parent and teacher.
I know that many of these ideas are already happening in many schools and districts across the province. I also know that moving toward better communication is a shared responsibility of parents, educators, the school district and the government. What is clear is that many parents and educators see the value of improved communication and want to ensure it is as effective as possible for all involved, especially the students.

The first step is understanding the issues, and I hope this summary of my interactions with parents helps provide some insight. Many of you will already be doing the activities suggested as ideas. I can say that improving parent communication and engagement is something the Ministry of Education is also exploring at the provincial level.

My thanks to all the parents who have informed these discussions. I look forward to seeing students benefit from improved communication with parents across our public education system.
Parents can have a direct effect on the quality of education their child will experience.

Parents have a BIGGER part to play in their child’s education.

Parents play a key role in their child’s education by providing the encouragement and support needed to succeed. When schools and families work together to support learning, children usually do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.

Parents have a BIGGER voice.

Families today have more opportunities than ever before to get involved in their children’s education: participation in parent organizations at the school and district level, involvement with class and school activities, and communication with teachers and the school.

MORE WAYS FOR PARENTS TO GET INVOLVED:

- Build trusting relationships with teachers - share what you know about your child, family, and neighbourhood
- Communicate with the school, about your child’s attendance, behaviour and progress
- Talk to your child about their day at school
- Communicate regularly with your child’s teacher and school
- Get involved with your Parent Advisory Council (PAC) or District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC)
- Volunteer to help with field trips and school activities
- Support your child with homework and learning outside of school
- Attend a school event with your child
- Become part of the school Planning Council

Parents’ engagement in their children’s learning makes a difference to their child and their children’s success in school and life. Working together can make a difference to educators and to the landscape of a school - by creating a shared community.
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