

Rethinking reporting and the parent-teacher interview

Research in New Zealand shows that parents and families are clearly interested in and concerned about their child's learning. Regular and timely feedback and information about children's achievement and progress are crucial to developing effective partnerships.

Improving reports

Research shows that, even when parents are presented with large amounts of information about their child's achievement and progress, they can feel confused, unclear, and ill-informed. For example, parents may struggle to interpret statements such as 'He now needs to adhere to the meanings within the text, reconstructing information and inferencing' in order to understand the knowledge and skills their child had achieved. Parents also find long narratives with large amounts of information difficult to decipher accurately. The use of technical language and multiple points of reference to assess an area such as reading also hinder parents' understanding. Here are some points to consider:

- Find out if school reports provide the information parents want. Experiment with ways of presenting student achievement that are more meaningful for families and get feedback from families.
- Present information clearly so that it will be easily understood. Find out whether the reports are comprehensible by arranging focus groups with families from different backgrounds.
- Use familiar language, be succinct, and provide illustrative examples or anecdotes. For example, 'please continue to read with her and ask her questions about the book where she needs to use her opinion to answer them'. Parents want and appreciate specific guidance in clear, plain language about how to help their child.
- Make comments personal and relevant to the student.
- Use graphs to make assessment results clearer to families with English as a second language (and add notes about how to read the graphs if necessary).
- Don't emphasise the positive aspects of a student's performance without identifying areas of low performance or need, as this may lead parents to view the information communicated as untrustworthy.
- Consider supplementing written reports with oral forms of communication wherever possible. Oral reporting and dialogue facilitate understanding more powerfully than written forms of communication and are more likely to support learning-focused partnerships than written reports. Allow time for parents to process the information in a written report and then ensure there is a follow-up contact in order to check parents' understanding and allow them to ask questions or make comments.

Improving parent-teacher interviews: Three-way conferences

Parent-teacher interviews, as they are traditionally conducted, may be thwarted by mismatched expectations, mutual incomprehension and defensive behaviours (in both teachers and parents). Parents often feel powerless in the exchange and some find these experiences frustrating and deeply distressing.

Three-way, family or whānau conferences, which include the teacher, parents and student, have been found to increase family participation to as much as 98%. When students are involved in parent-teacher conferences, parents are more fully engaged with their child's learning and gain a better understanding of learning expectations. Students can also facilitate the involvement of families by using home languages where necessary. In secondary school, a form teacher can collect information from other subject teachers, and families and students can meet with the form teacher for up to 30 minutes to discuss progress, assessment information and set goals, rather than attend lots of shorter interviews with different teachers.

The way in which interviews or conferences are conducted is important in helping to establish effective working relationships with families in the long term. Enact principles of partnership by encouraging active involvement, shared decision-making and two-way communication within the interview.

Increase active involvement

- **Create invitations to the student-parent-teacher conference.** Have students send home personal letters inviting their family to attend a conference at school, held at a time that suits the family. Some schools prepare personalised invitations by using a photo of the child on the invitation. Follow up with parents who do not respond to the invitation either by phoning them or visiting the home.
- **Explain the importance of the conference in the invitation,** in a friendly and non-threatening way, so that parents do not worry unnecessarily. While some families might prefer a formal structure and an indication of how the interview will proceed, other families might be more reassured to think of the interview as a conversation. One school has the principal cooking sausages on a barbeque while the parents and teachers meet, in order to promote a relaxed social setting, and to make families more likely to attend. Consider too whether you can make arrangements for younger siblings to play in a corner of the classroom, which can make it easier for families to attend.
- **Give families at least two weeks advance notification** of the interview/conference, where it will be held and the intended duration. Send home reminders, in the form of a written note, or a phone call, two or three days beforehand.
- **Find out families' interests in regard to learning about how their child is getting on at school.** Some research shows that parents' goals for parent-teacher meetings include discussing such topics as their child's progress and difficulties, their child's progress in comparison with other students in the class, and methods of teaching in school, while teachers are more concerned to find out from parents how their child is coping with school and identifying ways parents can help at home. These differences, if not addressed, might act as a barrier to effective partnership.
- **Do not assume that parents who do not come to parent-teacher meetings are not interested** in finding out about their child's progress. There are usually good reasons for their absence, such as logistical difficulties in arranging transport or a babysitter, work commitments, caring responsibilities, a lack of confidence, or heightened anxiety about coming into school and meeting with teachers. Some families can just feel overwhelmed by the demands of looking after their family. These are significant barriers, and it might be easier to find other ways of liaising with these parents, perhaps through home visits or regular phone calls.
- **Offer guidelines about how parents might prepare for the meeting.** This conveys the message that parental input is welcome and appreciated. Invite families to make a list of questions of concerns, checking with their child whether they have any concerns or questions. Explain that families are welcome to ask for clarification of unfamiliar terms too. Ask families to prepare to comment on children's activities, behaviour, and on family circumstances or factors that might affect or enhance their child's learning.

Increase shared decision-making

- **Send home a written report prior to the meeting** which then serves as a discussion point within the conference. Invite families to ask questions about the report and to help set goals for their child's future learning. Consider having all participants (teachers, parents and students) prepare written lists of strengths, areas for improvement, goals and questions prior to the meeting.
- **Create an agenda of items to discuss,** running through the teacher's items and adding parents' items, before mutually agreeing a priority order for discussion. Discuss whether there is a need to take notes during the meeting, which can interfere with the building of rapport and make families feel uncomfortable. However, if notes are desired, explain the reasons, be sensitive about what you write and allow families to see what has been written. Offer families a copy of the notes as well as a chance to take their own notes.
- **Include the student as an active participant,** or even let the student lead the meeting, especially if parents, students and teachers have prepared written lists of comments for the meeting. Have the student begin by introducing all the participants, then moving through discussion of the lists (beginning with strengths, moving onto other areas). Students might also share some selected examples of their work to their parents. In some schools, the student runs the interview/conference entirely. If students are not present, follow up by explaining the outcomes of the meeting to the student and the impact of any recommendations for them.

Increase two-way communication

- **Give parents information about how to take a lead role at parent-teacher interviews**, or use posters and/or booklets that cue parents into the sorts of questions to ask students about their work.
- **Prepare an informal and comfortable setting.** Arrange chairs so there are no physical barriers such as tables between teachers and parents. Minimise distractions and enable as much privacy as possible. Spend time welcoming parents and putting them at ease. Thank them for coming, and encourage them to ask questions or make comments at any point during the meeting.
- **Allow plenty of time for each family.** Parents identify a lack of time for parent-teacher interviews and conferences as an area that could strengthen their experience of partnership. Remind families of the time allocated for meeting, as evidence suggests that time limits help reduce irrelevant discussion. If more time is needed, offer to make appointments for further meetings.
- **Ask open-ended questions, paraphrase and use active listening** to get families to open up and share their concerns and ideas.
- **Consider asking parents to complete a brief questionnaire to rate the parent-teacher conference**, to include their ratings of the suitability of the room, the amount of time allocated, the usefulness of the information conveyed, the appropriateness of the agenda, the quality of the teacher's listening and communication skills, and the helpfulness of the recommendations.

If you need to give negative or constructive feedback to parents, or if you need to engage in a problem-solving conversation with parents, see our guide to effective conversations with parents.

References & Further Reading

- Biddulph, F., Biddulph, C., & Biddulph, J. (2003). *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand: Best evidence synthesis*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.
- Bull, A., Brooking, K., & Campbell, R. (2008). *Successful home-school partnerships: Report to the Ministry of Education*. Wellington, NZ: New Zealand Council for Educational Research/Ministry of Education.
- Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Mutch, C., & Collins, S. (2012). Partners in learning: Schools' engagement with parents, families, and communities in New Zealand. *School Community Journal*, 22(1), 167-187.
- Pearson, R., Dixon, H., & Hawe, E. (2015). Can written reporting against New Zealand's National Standards fulfil the mandate of creating a robust, learning focused, home-school partnership? *Curriculum Matters*, 11, 155- 174. doi:10.18296/cm.0009