Turning Points

TRANSFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Creating Partnerships,
Bridging Worlds

*Family and Community
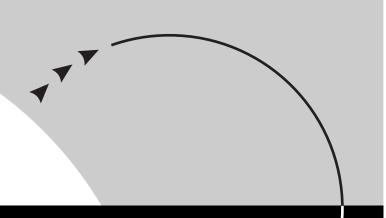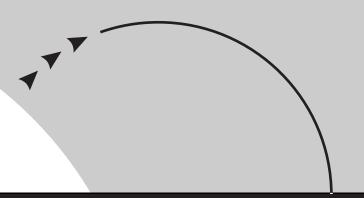Engagement*

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Introduction: A Framework for Family and Community Engagement

The staff of Adams Middle School spent a great deal of time talking about what they wanted Family and Community Engagement *to look like at their school. They adopted the slogan "Beyond the Bake Sale" and created a vision for family engagement that started with building strong teacher-family relationships. The first step, they agreed, was to make sure that every family member felt welcome, included, and respected in the school. When school began in September, each team hosted a morning of "Family Stories"— coauthored by family and child, each story shared an experience, tradition, or activity important to their family. Each child stood to read his or her family's story to a rapt audience of teachers, peers, and family members. Soon the printed stories and photographs of families would cover the walls outside the main office—a vivid montage and a reminder of the diverse strengths of the families in the school. Many other new practices would follow this opening one—early-morning curriculum meetings with families, Saturday workshops, parent representation on the leadership team, and frequent phone calls to touch base with families and hear their concerns. The school developed an approach aimed at surrounding families with attention and opportunities to engage in the life of the school. This approach began and ended with the goal of building relationships and with knowing who the families were.*

Why is Focusing on Family and Community Important?

It is hard to imagine an aspect of school reform that is more important yet more neglected than strengthening the involvement of families and communities in the life of their school. It is impossible to imagine an excellent school that does not engage families and community members in meaningful, productive ways.

Quite simply, families and communities are at the heart of students' identities and experiences. A school will not achieve equity and excellence for all of the students in its care if it does not acknowledge, understand, and include the families and communities of all its students.

At its core, strengthening family and community involvement—and creating *partnerships*—is about equity. Too often schools that serve poor students and students of color are isolated islands in which both teachers and families fear, mistrust, misunderstand, or disrespect each other. Students are in the middle—asked to move without difficulty between disconnected worlds. True equity of opportunity, access, and achievement cannot be realized in such an environment.

Now imagine a school in which family, community, and school personnel meet in the middle with the best interests of the child at heart. Schools can begin to make this happen by recognizing the strengths and opportunities inherent in a diverse community. Learning about the values, skills, and dreams of the students' families and home cultures, and identifying and reaching out to community resources will enable faculties to recognize resources and strengths where once they saw only deficits.

With this base of respect and understanding, schools, families, and communities can create productive partnerships in large and small ways. The following illustration from Amy Mednick (2002) offers an example of one school's journey from mistrust to dialogue and evolving partnership.

> *Teachers at the Bartlett Middle School, a Turning Points school, in Lowell, Massachusetts, were disheartened when they found out through informal conversations that many of their Cambodian students did not have access to books or read at home. After further inquiry,*

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*teachers found that traditionally, Cambodian parents
expect schools to take care of all the students' educational
needs. "They didn't know that as part of our culture,
we expect parent support," says Nancy O'Loughlin, an
instructional specialist. In response, the school developed
an outreach program that would help increase parent
involvement. Once each spring on a Sunday morning,
teachers, parents, and students invite local Buddhist
monks to the school. In a special ceremony, the monks
bless the relationship between the school and the home.
Each child leaves with several books donated by commu-
nity members. (*Mednick, *2002, pp. 3–4).*

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achievement in school.**

What Does the Research Say About Family and Community Engagement?

Thirty years of research confirms that family involvement is a power-
ful influence on children's achievement in school (Funkhouser and
Gonzales, 1997). The evidence is clear: When parents are actively
involved in their children's education, their children do better in
school (Epstein, 1996; Eccles and Harold, 1996, pp. 3–34; Epstein
and Dauber, 1991; Henderson and Berla, 1994; Griffith, 1996). In
analyzing and correlating more than 85 rigorous studies, Anne
Henderson and Nancy Berla (1994) concluded that the most accurate
predictor of a student's achievement in school is the extent to which
that student's family is able to:

1

Create a home environment that encourages learning;

2

Express high expectations for their children's achievement and
future careers; and

3

Become involved in their children's education at school and in
the community.

It is important to underscore that each of these three activities—
creating a home environment, expressing high expectations, and
becoming involved in children's education—can look very different
in different cultures (Trumbull et al., 2001). For example, in many
immigrant families from Southeast Asia, children in different age

For most schools, building partnerships entailed a transformation of the school's relationship with families, and required that the school take steps to create a more welcoming, inclusive environment.

groups do homework together—learning valuable group study skills. In many Latino families, parents see a clear distinction between their role and the role of the school, and believe families provide nurturance and moral teaching while schools instill knowledge (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995).

Though a high-quality education program is key, Henderson and Berla found student achievement increased directly with increased duration and intensity of parent involvement. The academic level of the parents, their socioeconomic level, and their ethnic or racial origin were not determining factors for academic success (Henderson and Berla, 1994). In addition, these studies reveal a relationship between parental involvement and enhanced student self-esteem, improved student behavior, and better student attendance (Mapp, 1997). The parents of successful students had a positive attitude regarding education, and exhibited a belief that their children could do well. For most schools, building partnerships entailed a transformation of the school's relationship with families, and required that the school take steps to create a more welcoming, inclusive environment.

When parents become involved, students, teachers, and the school all benefit. Family and community involvement has many positive consequences for the family, the school, and especially for the young adolescent. Schools are both reflections of the wider society and potential centers for change. By consciously working to develop stronger connections with the families and communities of students, schools may alleviate some of the alienation and isolation experienced by students, especially students of color and students from families with low incomes.

BENEFITS TO STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOLS

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Higher student achievement, grades, and test results

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More positive student attitudes and behavior

■

More successful academic programs

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Fewer placements in special education programs

■

Higher graduation rates

■

Improved teacher morale

■

More support from families

Families that have the chance to understand the school system better can participate more fully in their children's education. They too will benefit from their engagement with their children's school—discovering resources they can access, building new skills, and developing a deeper connection with their children. In schools with strong family partnerships, teachers understand students who come from other cultures more easily, and in fact, the school can become the natural extension of home, aiding in the preservation of families' cultures and values. As a result, rather than being left alone to bridge the disparate worlds of home and school, middle school students receive support from adults to confront the challenges of adolescence— particularly if these problems are exacerbated by the conflicting cultures of home, friends, and school.

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How Does Family and Community Engagement Fit in the Turning Points Design?

The Turning Points design places the young adolescent learner at the center and helps schools create strong collaborative learning communities where the unique needs of the young adolescent learner can be fully met. During middle school years, family engagement often drops off, perhaps partly because students claim greater independence, and partly because families and/or teachers believe they should pull back. In fact, the middle years of 10 to 14 are vulnerable times for children in every way—socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. There is probably no more critical time for strong family involvement in a child's education. Monitoring and supporting school work, being aware of peer and social dynamics, staying in touch with teachers' and administrators' goals and plans for the school—all of these strategies can be critical for the support of the young adolescent, especially if he or she is struggling academically or socially.

As a Turning Points school develops a strong vision and culture for teaching and learning that nurtures the young adolescent, it must also pave the way for productive family engagement. The school's role begins with learning about families, defining a variety of ways for families to support the school and their children's learning, and reaching out to the community to engage individuals and organizations.

Family and *community* are deceptively simple terms that have layers of meanings in today's complicated world. Turning Points schools acknowledge the many forms a family can take—two-parent and single-parent homes, grandparents raising grandchildren, adoptive and foster families, gay and lesbian parents, and more variations than we can list here. In today's world, families are also frequently changing shape—divorce, remarriage, and parents' career transitions all have an impact on the family, and mean that a school needs to be open and flexible in how it responds to each family.

Similarly, in times when students often travel long distances from diverse neighborhoods to come to school, what is *community*? We need to consider the multiple communities represented in a school, and define community broadly, to include individuals, organizations, agencies, and groups who have immediate ties to students as well as

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those with a particular interest in developing successful students and productive citizens. A school's community includes the immediate neighborhood surrounding the building, the home communities of all students, and potentially the entire town or city (Epstein, 2001, p. 470).

Engaging families and engaging communities are really distinct activities with different goals and strategies. But they are inextricably linked in so many ways that they must be considered and planned for together. For this reason, *Turning Points 2000* combined two of the original Turning Points principles into one: "Involving parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development." Jackson and Davis write, "Families do not succeed without community support, and communities do not succeed without support from families" (2000, p. 26). This guide will both explore the connection between families and communities, and provide distinct strategies for engaging them.

What are the Challenges?

It wouldn't be fair to pose a framework for building family and community involvement without acknowledging the difficulty and challenges of the work. Almost any teacher could tell a discouraging tale of parents' nights with few in attendance, or of bruising conflicts with families over goals or decisions. Almost any parent or family member could tell a tale of an unproductive meeting, a poorly planned event, or a conversation with a teacher or principal that felt disrespectful or patronizing. It is difficult work to bridge the gap between our worlds, experiences, needs—even our schedules! The fact that we share concerns, goals, and dreams for the student must remain at the center of our attention and focus.

The challenges come in many shapes and sizes, but perhaps can be summarized in the following points:

■

Diversity: For all of the richness diversity brings to a community, it also brings conflict and gaps in understanding. When most teachers in a school differ in background from their students (e.g., White teachers in a mostly African-American and Hispanic community), they must assume the responsibility to learn about their students' home cultures. When multiple languages and cultures are present in a school community (as many as 30 in some schools), the difficulties

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Schools must acknowledge that there is an imbalance of power between educators and families, particularly when teachers represent one culture and class background and families have lower incomes and are from different cultures.

Within the school, different people will play different roles. Teacher teams may take the lead on parent communication about students and on involving parents in learning, while the principal and leadership team think through the larger structures of involvement.

of communication and the possibilities for cultural conflicts are dizzying.

■

Power: Schools must acknowledge that there is an imbalance of power between educators and families, particularly when teachers represent one culture and class background and families have lower incomes and are from different cultures. If parents and family members perceive the school as judgmental or condescending, they may feel unheard or intimidated. Most often, the expressions and perceptions of this imbalance of power are unconscious and unacknowledged, and can lead to misunderstanding and mistaken assumptions. (For example, a school may interpret a parent's lack of involvement in school activities as a sign of a lack of concern, when it may be that the parent feels unwelcome or intimidated by the school.)

■

History: Many families (and educators, for that matter) carry with them negative experiences with school and with attempts at involvement. Schools can help by acknowledging the possibility of past difficulties, identifying fears, and creating a welcoming environment.

■

Assumptions: Sometimes mistaken assumptions—such as "middle school students need to be more independent of parents," or "working class and low-income families don't value education"—can drive away involvement. Schools need to identify and name such assumptions, on the part of both teachers and families, and challenge them.

■

Time, Resources, and Logistics: It is difficult for many single parents and those in households where both parents work to find the time to be involved in their children's education. In addition, schools have a multitude of goals and important plans and not enough resources. Organizing and coordinating family involvement can be daunting. Schools can help by creating flexible schedules and forms of involvement, and by seeking community support and funding. Within the school, different people will play different roles. Teacher teams may take the lead on parent communication about students and on involving parents in learning, while the principal and leadership team think through the larger structures of involvement (family participation in

decision making, school-wide communication, etc.). Having a designated "family coordinator" who is part-or full-time can be crucial to getting the work done.

Schools can address these challenges by creating an environment (and explicit structures) for sharing and learning about home cultures, values, talents, and experiences, as well as for identifying and dealing productively with conflict. In many ways, building such an environment is the crux of all family and community engagement. All of the subsequent strategies can be viewed as contributing to creating a welcoming environment, valuing and learning about home and community, and negotiating differences and conflicts.

Developing a Framework for Family and Community Engagement in Turning Points Schools

Dr. Joyce Epstein (2002) and colleagues at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University have identified six major types of family and community involvement in schools. Each type includes a wide range of possible activities and strategies a school might employ to involve family and community members in actively supporting students' education and healthy development. The types of involvement identified are:

Parenting

Communicating

Volunteering

Learning at Home

Decision Making

Collaborating with the Community

The Turning Points design takes up each of these areas and considers how they are reflected in the middle school. As well, we broaden "Learning at Home" to consider multiple ways, in school and out, that families and community members can support student learning.

1

Parenting — Strong families provide for the health and safety of children, and maintain a home environment that encourages learning and positive participation in school community life. Turning Points

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schools reciprocate by learning about families—their cultures, goals, talents, and needs. Schools become friendlier, more open places that embrace the cultures represented among their students. Schools can also provide valuable training and information to help families understand their children's development and how to support the challenges and developmental changes middle school students face. Examples of specific strategies or activities include establishing a parent center with reading material and resources, conducting home visits, and school or community-based workshops.

2

Communicating — Turning Points schools use a variety of methods to stay in touch with families about school programs and student progress—not just academic or discipline problems. Effective communication helps families understand how to participate in the life of the school. Two-way communication is invited and encouraged, with educators paying attention to the needs and concerns of families. Two-way communication involves an exchange of ideas, responses, feedback, and questions. It is a conversation. Rather than avoiding families, schools have an expectation that families will have opinions to express, and these opinions are welcome. Care is taken to ensure that information sent home is understandable and presented in language accessible and welcoming to families, and that it goes out to all households in which the student lives.

3

Volunteering — Turning Points schools consider all of the ways family members can participate in supporting student and school programs in Turning Points schools. Examples include mentoring, tutoring, chaperoning, viewing student work and performance, assisting with school administration tasks, and helping with school maintenance or beautification. It is important to consider a wide range of large and small ways families can be involved, both during the school day and after hours. The school focuses on effective recruitment, training, support, and scheduling for family volunteers to increase participation from more members of the community.

4

Supporting Student Learning — Building on the notion of family involvement in learning at home, Turning Points schools consider a variety of ways to connect families and community members with

student learning. Examples include developing effective homework assignments that elicit family input and support, undertaking curriculum projects that draw upon community resources, holding student-led conferences about their work, and inviting participation in portfolio reviews or exhibitions of student work.
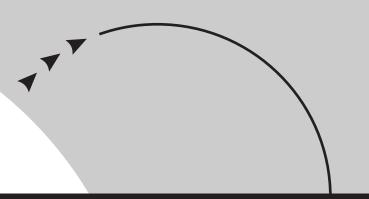
5

Decision Making — Turning Points schools give families meaningful roles in the school's collaborative decision-making process, and provide training and information to support and encourage participation. Forums for involvement may include a parent advisory group, the school's leadership team, serving as an advisor to teacher teams, and the like. Flexibility is a key principle, with multiple avenues for family input and involvement available so that all members of the community can be involved, not just those with the most time and energy.

6

Collaborating with the Community — Turning Points schools look for multiple ways to engage community members—groups, individuals, and organizations—in the life of the school through supporting student learning and development. Community members can volunteer as mentors and tutors, host internships and field trips, and offer financial or material support. They also help strengthen family connections and access to community resources, and become strong advocates for the school. Finally, Turning Points schools help young people learn to participate in the wider community and make a contribution through service projects such as creating a community garden, conducting a food and clothing drive, preparing and serving meals for homeless people, or being a reading buddy for a younger child.

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Ideas for Action: Strategies for Building Effective Family and Community Partnerships

Every Turning Points school must come to understand its own local context and community and create a realistic plan for strengthening family and community engagement. There is no specific formula or set approach. The purpose of this guide is to illuminate the range of possibilities, help schools find a direction, and point to other resources. We ask every school to look through the lenses of equity and excellence. How will this plan, strategy, or activity make us a more equitable school? How will it bring us closer to meeting our learning goals for every student?

The following broad guidelines[1] form the basis for more specific strategies:

■

Place a high priority on learning about the community surrounding the school and about the families of students. Include students as allies in building bridges between school and families and communities.

■

Reach out through groups where parents are already organized to find interested parents (e.g., churches, community groups, neighborhood associations).

> **We ask every school to look through the lenses of equity and excellence. How will this plan, strategy, or activity make us a more equitable school? How will it bring us closer to meeting our learning goals for every student?**

1. These processes, actions, activities, and strategies are adapted from a variety of sources including Ballen and Moles, 1994; Bamber, Berla, and Anderson, 1996; Christenson and Sheridan, 2001; Dianda and McLaren, 1996; Davis, 2000; Epstein, 2002; Funkhouser and Gonzales, 1997; Swap, 1987.

■

Stay flexible and consider multiple approaches, times, and locations for involving families and communities.

■

Create a family liaison role at the school, and ensure that the work of the liaison addresses family, school, and community concerns and needs.

■

Conduct ongoing collaborative reviews of roles, responsibilities, and resources to support student learning and positive development for all students. Identify specific roles in building family and community engagement for different members of the faculty—principal, teachers, leadership team, other administrators. Tackling family and community involvement cannot be seen as solely the role of individual teachers or teacher teams.

Within each of the six areas there are probably thousands of possible activities, both large and small, that might strengthen family and community partnerships. It is no small feat to assess the context and needs for family and community involvement and determine the right course. In the following section of this guide, we provide an overview of possible activities, as well as more detailed descriptions. In the final section, we discuss an approach to planning, getting started, and assessing progress.

FRAMEWORK OF FOCUS AREAS FOR INVOLVEMENT AND SAMPLE PRACTICES

FOCUS AREA	PARENTING	COMMUNICATING	VOLUNTEERING
Type of Involvement	*Assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills; and schools with understanding families*	*Developing effective communication from home-to-school and school-to-home*	*Creating ways that families can be involved in the school and effective methods of recruitment*
Sample Practices	Make personal contact through parent-teacher conferences, home visits, and parent liaisons. Conduct tours and interviews in the communities where students live to learn about different cultures, strengths, resources, and needs. Create a parent center with comfortable furniture, phone, coffeepot, bulletin board with announcements, and resource materials. Create opportunities for families and community members to visit the school—open houses, classroom observations, class parties, etc. Help parents understand their roles in the school/family/community partnership: getting to know their child's teacher, asking questions, participating in school activities, and monitoring homework. Conduct workshops for parents on school and parenting issues such as how to make the most of a parent-teacher conference, how to increase a child's motivation to learn, and how to encourage reading in the home. Foster parent involvement through strategies including informal school-family gatherings, workshops, and special events. Link parents to community resources such as youth organizations, nutrition programs, and counseling agencies.	Make parents and community members feel welcome in the school with prominent welcome signs, friendly staff, orientations/open houses, and "user-friendly" school directories and maps (in home languages of students). Introduce school policies and programs at the beginning of the year with welcome letters, information packets, school calendars, and information sessions that are manageable and family friendly. Celebrate student work through various school displays and programs. Offer conference opportunities on improving grades when parent/student picks up report card. Establish two-way communication methods such as parent-teacher contracts, note writing for keeping in touch, telephone conversations, email, classroom newsletters, and letters from home for parents to provide information to educators about their child. Develop ways to communicate with parents whose first language is not English, involving staff and school volunteers of diverse backgrounds to make families comfortable. Use cassette tapes to provide information to parents with low literacy skills.	Poll parents and community members about their special skills, talents, and experiences so they can share them with students as part of classroom activities. Set up this information in a volunteer database and distribute to staff for easy access. Encourage parents to sign up early in the year for specific activities to help with at the school. Enlist family and community members as audience members and evaluators of student performances and exhibitions. Create opportunities for families to participate in classrooms as experts on topics or as teacher's aides. Provide volunteers with adequate training. Recognize volunteers' contributions via mention in newsletters, ceremonies, and with certificates of appreciation. Create parent patrols or other activities to enhance safety and the smooth operation of school programs.

FRAMEWORK OF FOCUS AREAS FOR INVOLVEMENT AND SAMPLE PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

FOCUS AREA	STUDENT LEARNING	COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING	COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY
Type of Involvement	*Linking families with their children's curriculum through learning activities that can be done at home, as well as through homework*	*Including families as decision makers, advocates, members of schools councils, and committees*	*Coordinating services in the community with family needs, and providing services to the community*
Sample Practices	Share information with families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade. Share information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home. Share information on how to assist students with improving skills on various class and school assessments. Enlist family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work. Create a regular schedule of homework that requires students to discuss and interact with families on what they are learning in class. Develop calendars with activities for parents and students to do at home. Hold family math, science, and reading activities at school. Create summer learning packets or activities. Establish a mentoring program that draws on family, community, and school participants.	Promote active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees (e.g., curriculum, safety, personnel) to encourage parent leadership and participation. Establish independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements. Educate parents and community members about the roles and responsibilities of school committees, superintendents, principals, and school councils. Encourage parent and community participation at the school, district, state, and national levels to address issues that affect student learning.	Provide students and families with information on community health, cultural, recreational, and social support programs, and other services. Provide information on community activities that dovetail with learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students. Offer service integration through partnerships involving the school, businesses, and civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations. Provide service to the community through the participation of students, families, and the school in programs such as recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities.

SAMPLE PARENTING WORKSHOP AND DISCUSSION IDEAS

Supporting Your Child's Learning Ask parents and caregivers to share stories of their own schooling and/or powerful learning experiences. How do these stories inform our understanding of our children's learning? A workshop that starts here might explore definitions of curriculum and assessment, generate questions for family members to ask students and teachers, and examine different roles a parent can play in supporting learning.

Who Is the Young Adolescent Learner? After reading short passages from *At the Turning Point: The Young Adolescent Learner*, parents and caregivers share questions, concerns, hopes, and dreams for their own young adolescent. A round-table discussion or ongoing support group on this topic will provide insight and an understanding that the behaviors they are seeing are part of a natural developmental process.

What Do You Want to Learn? A school's family center becomes a place of learning for adult family members by supplying resource packets, books, videos and occasional workshops led by other parents and/or outside resources. Possible workshop topics or themes:

- ESL and adult literacy

- Talking with your child about difficult issues (sex, drug use, peer group issues)

- Computer skills

- Book discussion group

- Spanish language

- Social and emotional development of young adolescents

GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

In a student-led conference, the student is in charge of presenting his or her work and progress to parents. The teacher acts as facilitator, and offers clear written guidelines to parents about the purpose and structure of student-led conferences.

1. Preparation: Be sure to allow ample time to help students prepare for the conference by engaging in these steps:

■

Gathering and reflecting on examples of their work and evidence of their progress.

■

Learning how to lead the conference — including how to explain and interpret their work and information about what they are learning.

■

Practicing the presentations through role-play.

2. The Conference: Some schools schedule several conferences simultaneously, with the teacher available to answer questions. Others structure them so the teacher will be present for the entire conference, but participate only when necessary. When a team of teachers works with a student, one teacher can represent the team.

■

Focus the conference on discussing evidence of learning (through an ongoing portfolio of work or artifacts gathered specifically for the conference) and goals for the future. Grades should be a secondary focus.

■

Encourage a balance of intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of learning.

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Rather than getting stuck on past failures, students and parents should be encouraged to engage in problem solving and goal setting. A written action plan signed by the student and parent(s) is often helpful.

■

Allow 20 to 30 minutes for each conference.

3. Evaluation: Allow time at the end of each conference, or soon after, for students, parents, and teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of the conference—from the standpoint of both the student-led format and the student's individual conference. A brief evaluation form can be helpful.

Guidelines are adapted from Hackmann, Donald. 1997. Student-led conferences at the middle level. ERIC, ED407171.

PRODUCTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES AND CONVERSATIONS—A FEW THOUGHTS AND GUIDELINES

Why are parent-teacher conferences often so tense? If there are difficult issues to be discussed, participants often wind up feeling awkward, strained, or defensive. For parents and caregivers, nothing matters more than the well-being and success of their child. If a child is struggling, parents often take it to heart as their own failure in parenting. For teachers, a child's difficulties or failures are often felt—or taken—as their own failure in teaching. No wonder having an honest, productive conversation is so difficult!

When planning conferences, it is important to consider whether or not all members of a team should be present. While it is powerful to receive different teachers' perspectives, it can also be very intimidating for a parent to meet with so many people at once. Thoughtfulness about the context, purpose, and background of the conference can help make it productive for all.

As the facilitators of such conversations, teachers need to prepare for parent-teacher conferences, and should consider the following guidelines about listening, and giving and receiving feedback.

WELCOMING AND FRAMING

1. Begin the conference by welcoming the parent(s)/caregiver. Review your goals and agenda for the conference. Ask for their goals. If the student is present he or she should be asked to offer a goal or wish for the conference.

OFFERING YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON THE STUDENT/GIVING FEEDBACK

2. Begin with an assessment of the student's strengths and unique positive qualities.

3. Focus your assessment of the student's needs/challenges:

> **Give feedback with care —** To be useful, feedback needs to be given in the spirit of wanting to help the student.

> **Be specific —** Feedback is most useful when it is concrete and refers to specific evidence (events, behaviors, examples of work, etc.).

> **Speak for yourself, and include feelings —** Use "I" statements when talking. Discuss only things you have witnessed, not what others may have told you. Personalize your comments and be empathetic.

> **Avoid evaluative labels and judgments —** In general, feedback is most useful if it is specific and does not include general labels such as "good," "bad," "irresponsible," "lazy," and the like.

> **Focus on what is actionable —** Ideally, feedback in a parent-teacher conference should focus on what all parties (parent, student, teacher) can change. Agreeing on concrete follow-up steps is often the best way to close a conference.

PRODUCTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES AND CONVERSATIONS — A FEW THOUGHTS AND GUIDELINES (CONTINUED)

HEARING THE FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE/LISTENING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

4. Ask for the parent(s) or caregiver's assessment of the student. What do they see as the child's unique strengths and needs? What are their concerns? How do they respond to what the teacher presented? If the student is present, he or she must be given a chance to speak first.

5. If there are strong feelings voiced that are uncomfortable to listen to, remember the following guidelines:

> **Breathe —** Remembering this simple act can make a difference and help you relax and focus.

> **Listen carefully —** Don't interrupt the parent(s) to defend or justify. Give ample time for them to fully explain their thoughts. Indicate with body language (nods, eye contact, etc.) that you are fully present.

> **Ask questions** to clarify your understanding of the concerns.

> **Summarize or paraphrase** what you heard in your own words.

> **Take time to sort out what you heard —** You may need time to think about an issue and get back to the parent, but be sure that you do follow up.

6. Always close a conference with concrete next steps, and with appreciation for parents' time, perspectives, and concerns. Give parents and the student (if present) the opportunity to offer their closing thoughts and plans.

These guidelines are adapted from Dunne, Faith. 1996. Principles of giving feedback. National School Reform Faculty.

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR ONE-DAY COMMUNITY EXPLORATION

PARTICIPANTS

Teachers, administrators, students, parents

GOALS

- To strengthen faculty understanding and knowledge of the community surrounding the school and/or the communities in which students live.

- To build trust and collaboration among teachers, students, and families.

- To lay a foundation for future community partnerships that support curriculum and instruction and student development.

OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE DAY

- An organizing team or committee determines ahead of time who will participate and forms small groups of 5 to 6 (ideally a mix of students, teachers, and parents).

- The organizing team should conduct its own preliminary exploration to survey the area and determine what information and resources to provide to participants. You may want to assign each group a different quadrant on the map.

- Provide a set of common resources: map, preliminary list of community organizations, journal, and the like, without overly dictating the flow of the day. You want to allow for individual and group discoveries and surprises.

- Begin the day with a large group framing activity, and end the day with a sharing of discoveries.

- Collect and document the community resources—people, organizations, places—"discovered" by the small groups.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

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People may be nervous. In the large group in the morning, do a couple of fun icebreaker activities and a pair-share about goals and concerns. (There are many sources of icebreaker activities. The books of games and activities published by Project Adventure are one good source at www.pa.org/publications.asp)

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Arrange a certain number of interviews and/or site visits ahead of time, but leave each group with plenty of room to explore.

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Open-ended anchor activities are a good way to structure the day:

Stop and interview at least three passersby. A sample question might be: "What do you know about _____ Middle School?" "What do you think middle school students most need?"

Give each group of 5 to 6 people a limited amount of money for lunch (ask them not to supplement). Ask them to be creative and find lunch for the whole group within their budget.

Provide small journals and ask the participants to stop several times during the day and reflect on their learning. Sample journal prompts might include:

What is community?

List as many sights, sounds, smells as you can in five minutes.

Conduct an inventory of one or two blocks—list all of the buildings and organize them into categories (e.g., residences, stores) by type or by organization.

What are you finding most surprising about this exploration?

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At the end of the day, provide each small group with newsprint, markers, and other art materials and ask them to create a visual "map" of their exploration. Explain that maps can represent more than physical landmarks and ask them to be creative. A final gallery walk will allow participants to share the results and the feelings from the day. Discussion should focus on what was learned about the students' community and the implications of that learning for the school.