Essential Question

- What are the crucial elements to consider for effective communication with the parents and guardians of students?

A Collaborative Team

Parents are the first teachers our students encounter. Having them on our side can make our jobs much easier; therefore, effective communication with parents is essential. The old saying about having one chance to make a first impression can work to our advantage when starting our communications with parents. If we take the time at the beginning of the year to send positive verbal and nonverbal messages, later, when we need parent help, we are much more likely to get it.

Some of the PEAK strategies might seem entirely different from the students’ and family members’ past experiences in school. While it is important to provide explanations and possibly reassurance, we don’t want to create unnecessary problems by conveying the wrong message. Overall, we want to send the message that we are committed to high standards and to holding students accountable for meeting those standards. Our philosophy actually matches theirs, and our methods are used to ensure that we can attain the same standards with their children as they do at home as parents.
Tips for Success with Parents

1. Function as if you are working for the parents and, therefore, are accountable to them. Parents send you the best children they have and deserve to be treated professionally.

2. Work to earn the respect and support of the parents. You can’t assume they respect you merely because you are a teacher.

3. Work to earn the respect and support of the students – this, too, can no longer just be expected.

4. Involve parents in efforts establishing curriculum.

5. Involve parents as outside experts to support learning in the classroom.

6. Involve parents as audiences for student performances. They can serve as members of assessment teams similar to the teams of judges used at the Olympics.

7. Engage parents in discussions at Open House as to what skills, abilities, and knowledge they depend on for their success. Solicit their support in teaching those along with the established content standards.

8. Avoid phrases that can terrify parents (and other community members) who want the most for their kids. For example saying, “Less is more,” doesn’t reassure parents who desire academic rigor. We know what we mean; it’s an excellent slogan and rallying call for us, but parents hear something very different than what is meant. To many of them, it sounds like their children will be learning less, but it will be called more. Instead try saying, “Learn more through higher standards.”

9. Remember, in the eyes of parents, they have evidence to say “schools worked for us.” If we try to explain our practices as “new” or “the latest thing,” we can lose parental support. No parent wants his or her child to be a “guinea pig” for a “new idea.” Focus on building on what’s been good, rather than tearing down the only thing parents have known. Our methods are tried and true rather than something experimental and new-fangled.

10. Focus on basic values of hard work, high standards, honesty, and integrity. They’ve become what many consider the basic values that have made us great.

11. Be successful in visibly increasing learning with their children—and prove it with measures parents understand and value.

12. Engage students in sharing their portfolios and other evidence of high-quality performance achievement and/or progress.

13. Whenever the decision will impact on anything the parents want or need, involve parents rather than simply informing them. Inform them of changes in the daily schedule, but involve them in changes in the reporting procedures. In the words of Doug Krug and Ed Oakley in their book Enlightened Leadership, “Ask– don’t tell.”

14. When making significant changes in anything important to the parents, even if a parent committee has developed and endorsed the change, maintain the old and the new until the new is working successfully in the eyes of the parents. For example, implementing an entire new grading philosophy will most likely lead to resistance because parents use student grades to help them determine their children’s progress.
15. Listen to parents and their concerns until you have really heard what they’re saying and can help them. Rather than trying to defend your position or explain your point of view, ask questions to clarify what they are trying to say. Let them know you care about their concerns. What they have to say is truly important.

16. Utilize best information regarding people and change. People’s reactions to change can be predictable. Understanding the different elements of the change process can help with parent communication.

17. Be able to clearly articulate the specific knowledge, skills, and content standards that are being addressed in performances, how they’re being addressed, and what convincing evidence proves those essentials are being learned.

18. Eliminate educational jargon from communication with parents. Jargon is essential for enabling precision in communication between experts. It is inappropriate for use with others. If you can’t say it in five minutes, or explain it on a sheet of note paper (in plain, everyday “street” language), it probably won’t work, anyway. Don’t try something until you can explain it in simple language and/or express it on a 3x5 card.

19. Every document going to parents needs to be done correctly. Proofread for one another – use spell and grammar checkers.

20. “Keep it simple, smarty!” Sometimes we let our level of sophistication get in the way. Ask the parents what their students need to learn and guarantee that in the parents’ language. Don’t bombard them with theory and fancy labels. Remember the guinea pig theory!
Parent Letters

At the beginning of the school year, send parents a separate letter for each different intended message. While it might seem like more work up front, the long term results are worth the effort. The very first letter you send should express your commitment to them, their child, and your methods that treat each child as an individual. This letter conveys your commitment to standards and explains the importance of students meeting standards both in and out of school. It pledges support and coaching from you until the standards are met. In addition, the letter conveys your commitment to working with the parents and solicits their questions, suggestions, and support. (Because this type of letter isn’t typically sent, we’ve included a sample version that you might choose to use or modify/edit.)

Later, use another letter to address any needs the students may have with respect to materials or school supplies. By putting this information in a second letter, you are conveying the message that the child is more important than your rules or class supplies.

- Communicate “with” parents and not “to” parents. The most effective communication is valuing, respectful, and polite. It builds on common values and beliefs, shows commitment and requests shared support.
- Provide information regarding where and when you can be reached. Invite parents to contact you.
- Double- and triple-check your communications for correct spelling, grammar, formatting, and style.
- Be sure to submit all communication to your principal for reference and/or agreement before distributing to parents. Having administration included in the communication loop is essential, especially if you are trying something new.
- Finally, include a return slip for your records to ensure your communications actually make it home!
Sample Letter of Introduction

August 1, 2010

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am honored to have your student in my class this year, and I am looking forward to an exciting year of working with you and your student. I am committed to doing all I can to ensure he or she will be well prepared for the next steps after my class.

Every day in the world outside of school, employees are expected to perform their jobs at high levels of excellence – they are held accountable for meeting standards. We expect high standards of accuracy and precision from our doctors, pilots, telephone repair people, mail deliverers, accountants, mechanics, and grocery clerks. In addition, we expect all these people to do their work in a timely way.

By bringing this “outside-of-school” model into our classroom, I will be doing all I can to help prepare your child to reach high standards. Outside of school, when there are high standards in place, effective practice and coaching sessions are established to ensure the standards can and will be met. We as a class will be doing the same. After the lessons are taught, we will practice and work together until your student’s work is excellent. Just as people outside of school learn different things at different rates, so do students in school. Therefore, I will hold tight to the standards and my commitment to your child by providing extra time and support as needed.

My commitment is to work together with you and your student until the standards are met. Therefore, our lessons and units are designed with tried and true methods. Our approach is very similar to that used by parents teaching their children and to that used in many successful apprentice programs. All the enrolled students will be given ample opportunities to practice and work with the curriculum, and, when they are ready, they will receive an assessment (test) that is appropriate for what they are learning. When they do well, we can proceed with confidence. But if some do not do well, we will provide additional instruction and another opportunity for them to prove they have effectively learned what they need.

While this extra instruction is going on, we will also continue together as a class to make sure no one is held behind while we provide the extra support and accountability that some need. This commitment to excellence and standards is tough enough to manage at home when raising a few children or in an apprenticeship program with a few workers, but at school it is quite challenging for a teacher with 25 to 35 students at-a-time. Despite the challenge, we believe your student is worth the effort. Together we can prepare your student for the high standards that will be expected in the world outside of school.

Sincerely,

Your name

September 5, 2008

Share your commitment to the family using a friendly tone.

Convey a commitment to the standards students will encounter throughout their lives.

Share the message that we’re not done until the standards are met.

Convey the message that the teacher and parents are a collaborative team.

Notice … nothing about grading policies, school supplies or rules!
Sample Letter to Clarify the Assessment Process

To parents and students,

I am committed to your child’s success both in school and beyond. As such, I will go above and beyond what is required of me. I will be available before school and after school almost every day to help students. In order for me to more effectively support everyone, we will operate using the following guidelines:

All testing and retesting dates for a unit will be posted in the classroom by the date of the Form A assessment. In order for students to be eligible for Form A, Practice 1 must be completed according to our criteria-for-credit.

Practice 1 is a required assignment for all students. If Practice 1 is not completed by the beginning of class on test day, Practice 1 is to be completed while the other students are taking Form A. Any students in this situation will then be required to engage in the corrective loop for Form B.

For any objectives to be assessed on Form B, the matching Practice 2 objectives must be completed according to our criteria-for-credit. Also, all related missing assignments (including Practice 1) are to be completed and turned in before taking Form B at its scheduled time.

For students to be eligible to assess any of the Form C objectives, they are to follow the guidelines of number three above except for Form C.

Forms A, B, and C will be administered on their designated days only. If students have an excused absence on the day of the test, they may only take the test after school that day or before school on the day of their return. Failure to take a test on designated days will result in the loss of that test opportunity. Exceptions will be addressed on an individual basis and only for unusual and extreme circumstances such as extended illnesses or individual or family emergencies. Also, when these opportunities are lost, we will still work together to ensure that your student reaches the standards through alternative means.

Meeting deadlines is an important part of life, and meeting standards with appropriate coaching is also. As such, these guidelines and support systems are intended as support for all students as they work to master objectives of the course.

By working together, teachers, parents and students can effectively have a positive impact on student learning.

Thank you,

Your name

The language and tone of this letter is important. Notice that it never mentions “second chances.” The underlying message is “we’re not done until the standards are met” and “students must learn to meet standards.” The parents who will be most likely to voice concerns about parallel assessments are not the parents who believe in second chances. They want their children to have rigorous learning opportunities.

As with the previous letter convey the message that the teacher and parents are a collaborative team.
Communicating Commitments and Expectations

A powerful way to communicate expectations is to submit them in writing. This accomplishes several important steps:

- It provides a written platform to facilitate discussions with your administration to ensure that you are all on the same page.
- It quickly establishes expectations, rights and responsibilities with students.
- It provides a written reference for you and your students as the year progresses.

To communicate commitments and expectations in writing, consider a letter or memo format. Make sure it is not overly controlling and presented to the students at the beginning of the year with care. Follow up with discussions over time to match the developmental level of your students. (With young children, the communication is similar but between parents and the teacher instead of between students and the teacher. The contents are discussed with students in appropriate ways and with appropriate pacing.)

(Sample memo appears on the following pages.)
Memo

To: My Students

Subject: What you can expect this year

Date: Fall, 20??

As a student, it is helpful to know in advance exactly what to expect. The purpose of this memo is to share my personal commitment to each of you and to outline what you can expect in this class regarding rules, procedures, homework, grading, and other important issues. These pages can be summarized in one simple statement: “I will do all that I can to ensure your success in meeting the standards for this class.” To me, you are worth whatever it takes!

My commitment to each of you

I chose to become a teacher because I am committed to doing all that I can to positively contribute to the lives of young people. Therefore, I promise to do all that I can to:

Value you and treat you with the highest respect deserved by all human beings.

Consistently monitor the expectations you will encounter after this year and adjust what I do to ensure that you are excellently prepared for your next educational steps.

Maintain a physical environment for you that is consistent with research for supporting your learning success.

Protect you from physical and emotional harm.

Hold the highest standards for you and myself educationally. I will consistently upgrade my knowledge and skills so that I can be all that I can be as your teacher.

Ensure that you meet the objectives and standards for what I am teaching and the standards of behavior established for our school.

Fairly and consistently enforce our established standards for behavior and learning through a system of known consequences for our actions.

Seek your counsel for ways to best support you in reaching the standards established for us.

Recognize and support your parents’ or guardians’ roles, responsibilities and rights. I will consistently inform them of our progress, successes, and hurdles, and I will seek their counsel as appropriate to ensure your success in my class.

Admit when I am wrong and gracefully apologize, accept my consequences, and hope for forgiveness.

Expect others with whom I am working to admit when they are wrong and gracefully apologize, accept their consequences, and seek forgiveness.

Maintain a fair system for ensuring that your grades accurately reflect your achievement and the knowledge and skills that you will be taking with you.
Work hard and be flexible on your behalf.
Expect you to work hard and be flexible in reaching the standards.
Reflect over my teaching and be a better teacher each time I teach.
Hold honesty, integrity, respect, sound judgment, my commitments to you, and our American way of life as utmost values for myself.

Food and Water in Class

Good nutrition is important to learning. There is a water cooler in the classroom for your use. In addition, please feel free to eat nutritious food in the classroom as you choose. It is important, however, that we work together to make sure that all spills and wrappers are properly and immediately taken care of to maintain a healthy and safe classroom.

Rules and Consequences

We will follow a set of fair, appropriate, and known-in-advance consequences for any violation of our classroom and school rules. These rules and consequences will be clearly displayed in the classroom.

Restroom Privileges

If you need to use the restroom, please politely get the restroom pass and sign out. As long as you use this privilege responsibly, there will not be a problem. I will not dictate to anyone when they may use the restroom as long as they are making responsible decisions and following the school rules for behavior in and outside of the classroom.

Instruction

Learning occurs best when people have the opportunity to do things themselves and talk with others about what they are learning – especially if the learning environment is a fun and enjoyable place to be. You can expect to be talking with classmates and moving throughout our classroom as you share what you are thinking and work through questions, problems, and issues. In addition, we will use music, stories, and metaphors on a regular basis to facilitate your learning.

Since your active engagement in lessons will dramatically impact your learning, I expect you to be fully engaged throughout each lesson. I will do all I can to keep the lessons engaging, fast-paced, safe, and conducted with effective strategies and techniques to facilitate your engagement, but if my approach to lessons is not effective for you, I am open to your suggestions. There is a suggestion box by the door; please leave any suggestions you have for improving the instruction.

Learning Expectations

Mastery of each course objective is a requirement for completion of this course. Since we each learn in different ways and at different rates, throughout our time together, you will be supported in ways that will work for you to ensure your success. I will never expect everyone
to learn an objective by the same date, so there will be multiple assessment opportunities for you mixed with extra instruction to accommodate your learning needs.

Quality Expectations

Just as in family obligations and on-the-job assignments, there will be standards established for the successful completion of tasks in this course. Projects, tests, papers, reports, and other demonstrations of learning are to be done to at least a “B” level for completion, and just like in the world of work, if they do not meet the standard when they are submitted, you will be expected to modify them until they do.

In addition to the required “B” level of performance, just as in the world of work, there will be standards for the presentation and preparation of what you submit for it to be accepted for scoring. These generic standards are referred to as “Criteria-for-Credit,” which is explained later in this memo. If the Criteria-for-Credit are not met for an assignment, you will be expected to revise your assignment to meet the standards and resubmit the work. If the Criteria-for-Credit is not met with an assessment, the assessment will not be scored, and you will be expected to re-assess.

Wherever feasible, you will be involved in the development of criteria we will be using. To do this, we will compare exemplary examples in order to determine the important characteristics that determine quality.

Preparation for Class

I will do the very best I can to ensure that I am well prepared each day – this is what you deserve. If, however, an emergency happens which I could not have anticipated, I may be less prepared than I would like or than you deserve. Similarly, I know that there will be times when a family obligation, emergency, or obligation to some other school function may take away from your preparation. When this happens, just let me know and we will work together to adjust and to ensure your success with ultimately reaching the standards.

Assignments

All homework (practice and pre-reading for lessons) and project assignments will be posted and distributed to you long in advance. At a minimum, all assignments for a unit will be posted by the first day of any unit. If you cannot be in class, you will know what we are doing and what the assignments are so that, if you are able, you may keep up with the class.

Criteria-for-Credit

As a class, we will develop a set of criteria that must be met with each assignment, project, and assessment for it to be eligible to be accepted or scored. Homework and projects that do not meet the criteria will be accepted as soon as they are revised to meet the criteria. If your assessments meet the criteria, they will be scored. However, if they do not, the assessments will not be scored and you will be expected to engage in the reinforcement activities and practice and then to reassess until mastery is met for each unit objective.
Homework

In this class, homework is considered different from projects. Homework is a way of either ensuring adequate practice of skills learned in class or preparation through reading or research for what will be happening in class. Because homework is designed to either strengthen what has been introduced in a lesson or to help make learning a future lesson easier, not every student will have the same needs with respect to completing homework.

Homework can be an essential part of the learning process for any student. Because we all learn at different rates and require different amounts of practice and prior preparation, we will have flexibility with how the homework is addressed for each student. In order to make the homework most effective, I promise to:

Provide complete and correct examples for every assignment given. You may use these to help yourself complete each assignment. I will often provide you with completed versions of assignments for reference if you have difficulties.

Match homework assignments to what is likely to be essential for your success based on my experience. Please do the best you can with each assignment for 20-40 minutes. With anything you are unable to do at home, please seek help.

Expect sincere effort with homework, not 100% completion, accuracy, or correctness.

Provide opportunities for you to receive feedback on your homework when it is due.

Not require you to complete homework assignments that you do not need to complete for success on the assessments and the projects.

Engage you in cooperative activities using the homework when it is due.

Count homework for no more than 10% of an overall grade for the course.

Include special assignments called qualifiers in the computation for the homework component of your grade.

Qualifiers

Qualifiers are special assignments that are to be completed to predetermined standards in order for a unit or course assessment to be taken or to be counted. The concept of a qualifier is similar to that of “dressing out for sports” or passing a written and a driving test in order to have a driver’s license. Not all qualifiers will have points or grades associated with them, but they must be completed for you to be eligible for a test, assessment, quarter, or course grade.

Qualifiers for this course include the following:

Practice tests before each unit test and the final assessment.

Memorization quizzes showing required, predetermined levels of mastery for very important formulas, facts, information, and definitions.

Special assignments for establishing procedures such as the Personal Poster assignment.
Every homework assignment for a unit in which you do not show mastery of each objective with the unit assessment. The assignments that you did not complete or that did not meet the designated standards must be completed for you to be qualified to re-assess any objectives for the unit.

Projects

Throughout the course, there will be several projects assigned for you to show your ability to use the skills and concepts taught in the course. All projects must be completed and meet specified quality criteria for completion of the course. Each required project will have a set of checkpoints for supporting your progress toward meeting the standards. Also, each project will have a desired due date. If your project does not meet the standards by the due date, and you have been conscientiously applying yourself, you will be expected to continue until the standards are met with no penalty for completion after the desired due date. However, if your project has not met the standards for the project and you have not been conscientiously working, there will be a consequence for the lateness – but, you are still required to meet the standards with a completed project.

Quizzes

Because the number of practices and the amount of time required by people to learn something varies based on backgrounds and learning styles, we will not have typical graded quizzes. We will have regular individual and group activities that I will use to assess the learning throughout the classroom. Involvement in them will not be an option, but they will not be graded. Occasionally we will have Qualifier Quizzes on which you will be required to show 100% mastery of specific formulas, facts, information, or definitions as a qualifier for an assessment or a project. With these qualifier quizzes, you will know in advance exactly what must be known and you will be able to retake the quiz until you do reach mastery.

Distributed Practice

People learn best when they have opportunities to practice what they are learning over an extended period of time. Therefore, in each unit, you will be given exercises in which you will be practicing and revisiting objectives from previous units. These distributed practice (DP) objectives will be addressed with continuously increasing levels of difficulty. The DP objectives spread throughout each unit will be included on the unit’s assessment.

Incremental Development

People learn concepts and skills gradually over time. For this reason, we will only do a little bit with each new objective on any given day, and we will spread the learning of each objective over extended periods of time. Because of this, on any given day, we will be working on several objectives simultaneously – more objectives each day than usual, less depth with each objective per day, but overall, more depth than typically experienced.

Assessments

Each unit objective will be separately assessed with the expectation that the specific mastery level will be met for each objective. Also, each unit assessment will have one to three separate, distributive practice objectives assessing the distributive practice within the unit. The standard for mastery for each objective is for your work to be at an A or B level. Anything less than an
A or B will be scored as incomplete or “not yet.” To facilitate your mastery, you can expect the following:

At the beginning of each unit, you will be given a practice test to ensure that you are aware of the expectations for the unit. This practice test will be equivalent to your test in difficulty and in the nature of the questions and tasks. You are to complete this practice test correctly as a qualifier for the unit assessment.

The assessments and reassessments for each unit will occur on specified dates. If you are absent for one, you may take it after school on the same day or before school on the next day. If this cannot be done, then you will lose that assessment opportunity and automatically be in the “reinforcing instruction and practice loop” for the next reassessment.

The unit assessment will assess each unit objective separately with mastery expected for each. You will receive credit for each mastered objective, but you may choose to reassess to achieve a higher level of mastery if you wish. Each objective that is not mastered will be considered incomplete, and you are to complete the required reinforcing instructional support, do the associated practice, and then re-assess. In addition, any incomplete homework for the unit must be submitted according to its standards as a qualifier for any reassessment. The additional practice will be to correctly complete the missed objective on another form of the unit’s assessment.

There will be three such scheduled opportunities to demonstrate mastery of each of the unit’s objectives. “Incomplete” or “Not Yet” will be recorded for each missed objective until it is ultimately mastered.

If you would prefer to prove that you have met the objectives of a unit through an alternative method, this is fine. It will mean extra work for you, but as long as you convince me that you have met the objectives, I will be comfortable with you choosing your own assessment methods.

With the objectives on each assessment, your score is determined by your performance when you meet the standards of A or B. There is no penalty for needing more than one opportunity to meet the standards. On the last scheduled opportunity for each objective, it is possible to earn a C if your work shows the desired knowledge but has too many minor errors for an A or B. If, however, your work on an objective does not show the desired learning by the last scheduled opportunity, your score for that objective will be a zero (no credit) for that objective. There will be special one-time only opportunities made available twice a year to address any of these not-yet-mastered objectives.

As we progress through the school year, you will probably have many pressures for your time. If something important comes up for you, like studying for another teacher’s test or giving your best in a play or a game, please honor those commitments. Because there are multiple opportunities to prove we are meeting the standards for our objectives, I expect you to maturely schedule your energies to provide the most productive and beneficial school year possible.

Cheating

There is no need for cheating in this class to get a better grade. If you don’t know something by the time of the test, there will be additional support and more opportunities for you with no penalties. Therefore, cheating will not be tolerated. It will be treated as a behavioral problem...
and will have an appropriate discipline as a consequence such as spending time with me after school. If anyone cheats, they will receive an incomplete on the assessment and will be required to engage in the appropriate additional instruction and practice before being required to re-assess.

Grades and Report Cards

Grades should reflect your academic progress as we move through the course. Your interim grades throughout the year will indicate your progress to that point and may not be an accurate indicator of your final grade. To be qualified for a final course grade, you are required to meet all the course objectives. At the end of the course, when you have met all the objectives, your final grade will reflect the level to which you have met these objectives.

Your behavior, motivation, effort, and speed of learning will not be computed into your grades. Each of these will be recognized and responded to appropriately, but they will not be "averaged into" your grades.

When it is report card time, we will typically not have had all three of the assessment opportunities for some of the units. Any units for which there are still more scheduled assessment opportunities will not be included in the grade computation. However, if you still have not mastered some of the objectives from these units, your parents or guardians will be advised that you still have some objectives to master. The same will be true for any projects you have not completed to the established standards. This method of reporting will ensure you are not penalized for taking the appropriate time and opportunities to reach mastery. At the same time, your parents or guardians will receive an accurate picture of your progress.

Eligibility

Eligibility will be determined by two factors. To be eligible for extra curricular activities with our no pass, no play policy, you must be:

Keeping up with your opportunities of corrective instruction and re-assessments.

Passing objectives for which we have had three assessment forms completed.

Course Final Assessment

Approximately three weeks before the official calendar end of the course, you will be given a comprehensive, end-of-course assessment for each course objective. This assessment will be handled the same as the unit assessments. You will be given a practice assessment to help you prepare; each objective will be scored separately, and you will be given extra instructional support and practice to facilitate your effort to master each course objective. Completion of the course requires mastery of each course objective.

Bottom Line

I'm glad you are in my class this year. I feel truly honored to be your teacher, and I hope that when the year is over, you will believe that this class has been an important contribution to your education. Thank you in advance for working with me and the others in this classroom to make a difference in your life. You are worth whatever it takes!
Parent Open House and Conference Nights

Parent conference times or a school open house are wonderful opportunities to earn greater support from your students’ parents and guardians. Your classroom will provide evidence of student progress. The following are a few critical points for improving the effectiveness of your communications.

- Communication of perspectives and approaches are:
  - Drawn out through questions and activities when there are any deviations from what the parents are expecting
  - Stated clearly and succinctly and in writing when they are totally in line with what the parents are expecting

- Whenever possible, include students in Open House events or conferences. Having them there as a part of the process lends credence to the classroom.

- Establish individual meetings to discuss grades and individual progress.

- Provide parents with necessary information for contacting the teacher.

- Direct parents to resources the teacher has established for student use, including a website if available.