

Communicating with Parents/Caregivers to Support Effective Expectations

Further resources are included in Section 12 of the toolkit – Compassionate Connections with Parents

When educators are sharing data with parents about their child, whether it is achievement data or behavior data, how we talk about the data and the context we set for the conversation can determine if it is helpful or hurtful to the child and their ongoing engagement in school. We can fan the flames of unrealistic expectations parents (and we) might hold for the child or support parents (us) in developing helpful aspirational and realistic expectations with their child.



Such data is shared in many ways:

- Reports on assessment outcomes (MAP, Forward Exam, student engagement surveys, student report cards, etc.)
- Through child-specific communication to a parent by phone, digitally, or face-to-face (parents-teacher conferences, daily check-ins, etc.)
- Through class-specific communication to parents as a group or individually (verbal, comparative generalizations about a class, school-home communication tools, etc.)



Introductory discussion:

1. How have you experienced the sharing of data with a parent having a positive impact on a child's behavior or academic success? (your sharing or your observation of another teacher's sharing)
2. How have you experienced the sharing of data with a parent having a negative impact on a child's behavior or academic success?
3. What elements of your (or others) approach do you believe led to the negative and positive outcomes of the data sharing?

Tips for data sharing with parents:

1. Clarify data by putting it in a broader context that includes:

- The recognition that any data you are sharing is only one point of information at one point in time and is only truly valuable if considered in the context the many points of information you hope to gather to better understand a child's behavior and academics.
- The parent brings the broadest perspective on their child and without the parent sharing that with the educator, it is impossible for the educator to have a clear picture of the child they seek to teach and with whom they seek to build a relationship.
- Information about a child's engagement in the classroom, with peers and adults.
- Approaches the educator has tried to build a relationship and support the child's success – how the educator builds students' resilience in the classroom.

The broader context must drive our discussions with parents about realistic and aspirational expectations. The information we have gained from the parent is set alongside what we have observed in order to discuss any adjustment to expectations and how we will break the larger expectations into smaller steps towards them. These conversations are often best with the child included!

2. Create a safe space and then invite parents into that space for authentic conversations. It is not good enough to say that we believe the parent's input is crucial to our work with their child, we must create safety by:

- **Offering multiple ways to connect with us** – email, text, phone, in-person, in our classroom, in a location in the school that the parent suggests, at times that work for the parent, etc.
- **Remembering to not talk too much** after our initial welcome to the conversation. Start with asking if they have anything to share with us. When we share our observations, do so in a concise way that does not overwhelm and offers strengths and areas for improvement. Ask an open-ended exploratory question. Then listen! Create a vacuum and notice (out loud) that sometimes it takes a while to gather our thoughts in response to things we have heard.
- **Limiting education jargon and acronyms.**
- **Admitting to our vulnerabilities!** We are seeking help so we can be a better educator.
- **Receiving feedback with gratitude and curiosity.** Excerpts from a WI school superintendent's advice to district staff: "In an article posted in the Harvard Business Review the author, Tasha Eurich, notes that some critical feedback 'can make us defensive, angry, and self-conscious, which subsequently impairs our effectiveness.' From my perspective, the best thing to do after having received critical feedback is to give yourself and if appropriate, your team, time to



reflect. ... He goes on to share Eurich's summary of five empirically supported actions that can be used to help you use critical feedback without letting emotions get in the way of using the feedback to improve desired outcomes.

- a. *Don't rush to react. Though you might feel pressure to push past emotions and respond to critical feedback right away, the best reaction generally comes when we take the time to step back and see the bigger picture to help put the feedback into perspective.*
- b. *Get more data. We shouldn't act on feedback until we truly understand it. Taking time to gain more details and information related to the feedback helps ensure our response is thoughtful and purposeful.*
- c. *Find a harbinger. In responding the opportunities that are developed based on feedback, choose one highly visible and symbolic action that will show how serious you are about your next steps toward transformation.*
- d. *Don't be a lonely martyr. After receiving critical feedback people often tend to avoid the person or people that provided the feedback. If anything, we should pull people who tell us the truth even closer. Our biggest critic can become our greatest champions when we enhance relationships through ongoing discussions related to their feedback.*

The superintendent closed with these words: "Remember that change is just one option. Sometimes the best response to critical feedback is to admit our flaws both to ourselves and to others. When we let go of the things that cannot change, it frees up the energy to focus on changing the things that we can."

Your ability to reflect on critical feedback to help achieve improved outcomes will prove beneficial to both you, your team, and the students in your buildings. Embrace these moments as opportunities to move forward and grow. Thank you for your leadership."

3. **Collaborate with the parent** to plan what each of you will try to discover about the student by adjusting your behavior. Decide how you will work together to minimize the stress on the child and maximize the child's sense of competence. Clarify what you expect of yourself and invite the parent to join you. "I will talk with your son about his love of baseball cards and see if we can find a way to transfer that to our social studies unit. Would you be willing to set a timer and require him to spend no more than 20 minutes a day on the homework during the next two weeks? Then let's talk to see if my connecting what he's passionate about to his school work and you spending less time feeling frustrated with him not doing his school work has any positive impact."
4. **An effective process** for a teacher, parent and student meeting when some change is needed can be found [here](#).
5. **Select best time for the data sharing.** Avoid the "autopsy" timing. Get at challenges early on. Parent-teacher conferences that come too close to the end of a grading period can be demoralizing. If you have no control on the timing of your meeting, consider focusing on the next semester or year, "What have we learned that we can carry forward/ communicate with the next teacher to support your child?"
6. **When the data is primarily positive, don't overlook the opportunities.** For some parent-teacher conferences we are telling parents that their child is doing very well in school, both socially and academically. Use this time to build

a positive and collaborative relationship with the parent. Be curious about to what the parent attributes their child's success. Ask about any specific strategies they have used as a parent that might translate into the classroom and any practices of educators in the past that stand out to them as helpful to their child's success.

7. **Take a moment to do a self-check** before you move forward in any attempt to share data as a way to support student success. The goals of the self-check are to:
 - a. Identify any underlying discomfort with the prospect of meeting with parents or a specific parent or around the data you want to share.
 - b. Decide if you feel competent enough in your communication skill and the strategy you will use that those two strengths can to override the discomfort. Seek some collegial support if you do not.
 - c. Create space for you to move from discomfort to curiosity. This will allow you to approach the parent with humility, openness to learning, and confidence in what you bring to the collaborative conversation.

Scenarios to discuss how you might apply the tips:

1. The state test scores have arrived in your district and you will write the cover letter to go home with the scores. Outline the key points you want to make in the letter. What does your school currently do well when it comes to sharing test score data with parents? What concerns do you have about how your school currently handles the sharing of test score data? What adjustments would you like to suggest?
2. It is parent-teacher conference time! You have a student who works very hard every day to the point where you are concerned that the student is experiencing an inordinate amount of stress. The student has dropped out of a band club and often goes to the library to do homework during lunch. He is at the top of the class ranking as a sophomore. Outline what you want to share with the parent. Outline what you hope to learn from the parent. How will you create a safe space for this conversation? What fears do you have about this conversation? What strategies will you employ to minimize the possibility of your fears coming true?

