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A Handbook for First-Year
Teachers Dealing With
Parental Communication

By
Connie Nowosacki

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division
of Rowan College
1995

Approved by.

Professor

Date Approved

5/4/95

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	iii
Mini-Abstract	iv
CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Limitations	7
II. RELEVANT LITERATURE	8
Opening the Lines of Communication with Parents	12
Positive Parent Communication Throughout the School Year	15
Teacher-Parent Conferences	16
Involving Parents in Helping Their Children Learn	19
Dealing With Parents in Difficult Situations	20
III. PROCEDURES	22
IV. FINDINGS	24
Opening the Lines of Communication with Parents	26
Positive Parent Communication Throughout the School Year	26
Dealing with Parents in Difficult Situations	27
Contacting Parents When Problems Arise	27
Ways to Involve Parents in Helping Their Children	28

Home Visits by the Teacher	28
Using a Home-School Contract When Dealing With a Student's Specific Problem	29
First-Day-of-School Objectives	30
How to Conduct a Parent Conference	31
Making Back-to-School Night a Parent Involvement Success	31
 V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	 32
Conclusions	32
Recommendations	34
Recommendations for Further Study	36
 APPENDIX: SURVEY INSTRUMENT	 37
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 38
Books	38
Magazines, Journals, Newsletters	39
Dissertations and Theses	41
Brochures	42

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ABSTRACT

Nowosacki, Connie

A Handbook for First-Year Teachers
Dealing With Parental
Communication, 1995,
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin,
Public Relations.

This study was conducted to create a handbook beneficial to teachers in dealing with parental communication. A review of the research yielded a wide range of practices that teachers can use to involve parents.

These practices can particularly help the first-year teacher communicate effectively to gain support needed for academic, discipline, and homework efforts.

An instrument was devised asking respondents to rank in order of importance ten of the most common topics and activities used in teacher-parent communication. Responses were arranged according to Very Important, Important, or Not Important. The list was sent to five public relations experts nationwide and six master teachers. From the group of six teachers who were surveyed, five responded. The checklist provided a basis for the public relations handbook in the study.

The resulting data were then used to develop suggestions and recommendations for first-year teachers who need help in finding ways to work cooperatively with parents.

MINI ABSTRACT

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This study was conducted to create a handbook beneficial to teachers dealing with parental communication. A review of the research yielded a wide range of practices that teachers can use to involve parents. These practices can help the first-year teacher communicate effectively to gain support needed for academic, discipline, and homework efforts.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis was to create a handbook that may benefit teachers in dealing with parental communication. It will give teachers suggestions and ideas needed to work effectively with today's parents. This handbook is designed to help the first-year teacher communicate effectively to gain support needed for academic, discipline, and homework efforts.

"A 1989 *Instructor* magazine poll asked educators to name the one thing they would like to tell national policy makers about the most effective way to raise student achievement. The answer given most frequently was 'more parental involvement.' These teachers went on to state that they felt parental involvement was more important than smaller class size, more important than increased control and power for teachers, more important than promoting student responsibility, and more important than decreasing the time students spend watching television."¹

The *Instructor* poll was consistent with findings in the 1985 Gallup survey of

¹ J. Epstein, "Effects on Parents of Teacher Practices in Parental Involvement," Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, *Teachers and Parents: An Adult-to-Adult Approach*, 4.

teachers, which reported that over 90% did not feel they were getting the support they need from parents. The teachers listed lack of parental support as one of their top problems facing education today.²

Lee Canter, who has published several resource books on parent involvement and assertive discipline, feels, "The teachers of the '90s are facing many obstacles to success in their classrooms. More and more students are coming to school with academic, behavior, and motivation problems. These problems are often magnified, more difficult to solve, because of a lack of parent support. This isn't a regional or economic problem; it faces every teacher, in every classroom throughout the nation."³

The value of parent involvement and support has been thoroughly studied and evaluated by leading researchers in the educational community.

"A 1986 United States Department of Education study concluded that the family is critical to success in school."⁴

Noted researcher, Urie Bronfenbrenner, studied a number of educational intervention programs. He concluded that active involvement and support of the family are critical to a child's success in school.⁵

² B. Clapp, "The Discipline Challenge," *Instructor*, vol. XCIC 2, 32-34.

³ Lee Canter and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side Resource Material Workbook* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 5.

⁴ Lee Canter and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents on Your Side* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 3-4.

⁵ Urie Bronfenbrenner, "A Report on Longitudinal Evaluations of Pre-School Programs," Washington D.C.: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *Schools and Families: Issues and Actions* (National Education Association, 1987), 10.

Another noted researcher, Ann T. Henderson, summarized nearly fifty studies of parent involvement programs and concluded that programs designed with strong parent involvement components produced students who performed better than otherwise identical programs that did not strongly involve parents. She also found that teachers and schools that relate well to their parents and communities have student bodies that outperform other schools.⁶

More and more teachers are learning the value of communication with parents, which can result in better communications and cooperation between the school and community.⁷

Most first-year teachers have not had training or experience working with parents. Moreover, the teacher-parent relationship is not a simple one. The first-year teacher needs help in finding ways to work cooperatively with parents. Unfortunately, many teacher training programs do not provide opportunities for students to learn skills and techniques of communicating with parents.⁸

A project was done in 1992 by Robert Clarke and Bonnie Williams, both student supervisors at Bloomsburg University (PA). Both supervisors shared the opinion that their students lacked an appreciation of the importance of parental involvement and

⁶ Lee and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 4.

⁷ John M. Trump, "The Importance of Face-to-Face Communication," *School Management*, vol. 15, no. 18 (August 1971), 36.

⁸ Jeanne M. Korn, "Identification of Parent-Teacher Conference Techniques That Inexperienced Teachers Need To Develop," June 1990, 4.

communication. If this were the case, then the same attitude would persist into the beginning teaching years.⁹

The results showed that beginning teachers need inservicing in the importance of parental involvement and communication.¹⁰

New teachers are beginning to be asked their opinions on parent-teacher communication. For example, an evaluation on parent involvement by elementary teachers was done in a six-state southeastern regional survey. Teachers in this study were not enthusiastic about parents' participation in curriculum development, instruction, or school governance. They supported other forms of parent involvement, such as assisting with homework or tutoring children, but felt that they should give parents ideas about how to help. They also noted that their own schools did not usually provide opportunities for parents and teachers to work together. The teachers surveyed felt more opportunities were needed to improve communication with parents.¹¹

Albert E. Holiday noted that, "The bottom line of any school-community relations program is to help the children learn better. And they learn better if parents are involved."¹²

Parental involvement increases children's chances for success in school. Studies

⁹ Robert Clarke and Bonnie Williams, "The Importance of Parental Involvement as Perceived by Beginning Teachers vs. Experienced Teachers," 1992, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4.

¹¹ Dorothy Rich, *Teachers, and Parents: An Adult-to-Adult Approach*, A National Education Association Publication, 1987, 18.

¹² Albert E. Holiday, "In Search of an Answer, What is School Public Relations?" *Journal of Educational Public Relations* 11, no. 1 (2nd Quarter 1988), 7.

show that children whose parents are involved in education are more motivated in class.¹³ Therefore, a good school-community relations program should have a partnership between the school and the parents. This concept should be a free and continual exchange between parents and teachers. This exchange of information enables teachers to acquire a knowledge of pupils that they otherwise would be denied.¹⁴

Learning how parents think and act, knowing their attitudes, and what they want for their children, teachers are able to see children differently and are able to deal more intelligently with their needs.¹⁵

"The most effective teacher get parents on their side even before school begins and continues positive, open communications with parents throughout the entire school year."¹⁶

Together with these parents, teachers can be the driving force behind a successful year.

The result of the author's research will be a handbook for teachers to accomplish successful parent communication and support. Topics will include opening the lines of communication with parents, positive parent communication throughout the school year, teacher-parent conferences, involving parents in helping their children learn, and dealing

¹³ "There Is Time To Get Involved," *It Starts On the Frontline*, October 1994.

¹⁴ Leslie W. Kindred, Don Bagin, Donald R. Gallagher, *The School and Community Relations—4th Edition*, Prentice Hall, 1990, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 142-143.

¹⁶ Lee Canter and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side Resource Material Workbook* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 6.

with parents in difficult situations.

Data searches for current literature were conducted through several computer databases listing books, periodicals, and dissertations. Also, public relations experts and master teachers were surveyed to determine what topics and events would be more meaningful to teacher-parent communication.

LIMITATIONS

This handbook will be aimed at beginning teachers. It will cover the role and responsibilities of the teacher in relationships with parents and establishing open lines of communication that will ultimately benefit students.

CHAPTER 2

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The author researched over one hundred books, periodicals, and dissertation abstracts to gather information on teacher-parent communication.

The research for this thesis began with *The School and Community Relations*, Fourth Edition, by Leslie W. Kindred, Don Bagin, and Donald R. Gallagher. The readings from the book provided a basis and established a need for further research.

The research then continued at the Savitz Library at Rowan College of New Jersey. This study yielded twenty-five educational dissertation abstracts. There were eight relevant abstracts.

Next, the author conducted two on-line searches of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Data Base. ERIC has material from educational journals and documents beginning in 1966 to the present.

The author searched ERIC journals, which yielded sixty-four articles; thirty-two were usable.

The author concluded with another search at the Savitz Library, which generated four usable articles.

The author also used three “courtesy copies” of books from the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) and borrowed two books from a colleague.

A review of key points from the relevant literature follows.

“In a 1981 poll, teachers were asked: Do you think there needs to be more home-school interaction? ‘Yes’ was ranked at 93.6 percent over the 6.4 percent ranking for ‘no.’”¹⁷

“Effective parent-teacher communication is vital to an optimal learning climate for students.”¹⁸

“Of course,” according to Claudia M. Cuddy, “good teaching is essential. But beyond that, an excellent public relations program by an individual teacher is a must for optimum success.”¹⁹ Cuddy goes on to say, “Good classroom public relations helps the teacher, the parents, and the kids. When the kids are happy, the parents are happy, and the teacher’s job becomes much easier with the parents behind them.”²⁰

Many experts in education and public relations believe that the major reason for lack of citizen confidence is a lack of knowledge of the successes in public education, and a lack of adequate school-community relations that could result in better knowledge on the part of the citizenry. The key ingredient in developing lasting, positive relationships is

¹⁷ _____. *Nationwide Teacher Opinion Poll, 1981*, Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1981, 124.

¹⁸ Edward L. Phillips, “Strategies for Communicating With Parents,” *Journal of Educational PR*, 1st quarter, 1988, vol. 10, no. 4, 4.

¹⁹ Claudia M. Cuddy, “One Teacher Tackles Personal Pubic Relations,” *Journal of Educational Communication*, vol. 5, no. 4, August 1982, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 6.

effective communication.²¹

“The value of parent involvement has been well-documented in two recent research reports by the National Committee for Citizens in Education in which author Anne Henderson says, ‘Programs with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better, than otherwise identical programs that do not involve parents as thoroughly, or not at all.’”²²

Henderson found that the two common factors are enhanced student achievement and involvement of internal and external public relations.²³

Authors such as Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher has consistently cited the need for educators to be concerned with staff and student morale and parent and community involvement.²⁴

“Selling the school can no longer be left to the administrators. Teachers must have the traits of salespeople, for indeed theirs is a selling job.”²⁵

“Few colleges make teacher public relations a required part of the undergraduate curriculum. And not many education faculties and organizations have used the inclusion of

²¹ Art Steller and Donald Knox, “How to Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships,” *Journal of Educational Communication*, vol. 5, no. 2, November 1981, 28.

²² Albert E. Holliday, “Revise the Scope of Your School-Community Relations Programs to Enhance Student Achievement,” *Journal of Educational Public Relations*, 1st quarter, 1990, vol. 12, no. 4, 4.

²³ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁵ Thomas E. Robinson, “PR Can Grow Out of the Classroom if it Receives Nourishment,” *Journal of Educational Communication*, vol. 6, no. 1, December 1982, 12.

a course in 'Teacher-Created Public Relations.'²⁶

"The National School Public Relations Association took an important step three decades ago when it tried to stress the importance of teachers in development of pupil ambassadors of quality education. The association published an influential treatise called *It Starts in the Classroom*."²⁷

Clayton E. Rose, a former president of NSPRA, feels, "For every pebble tossed into a pond, there is a ripple. The initial effect of teaching and public relations, inseparably linked, may also be only a ripple. As it spreads in ever-widening circles, however, it touches and influences pupils, parents, friends of the school, and many persons the classroom teacher may never know personally."²⁸

Rose believes that public relations does not only consist of ideas and techniques. They are the working tools for the classroom teacher who knows that public relations is a frame of mind, a frame of mind that can enrich his person-to-person dealings with parents, with pupils, with fellow teachers, with members of the community.²⁹

"Perhaps no person is more important in the school-community relations program than the teacher. Teachers provide the key link between the home, the student, and the school."³⁰ This is why Rose says that public relations and good teaching are inseparable. A superior teacher knows that his pupils, their parents, and the community in which they live

²⁶ Ibid, 12.

²⁷ Ibid, 12.

²⁸ Clayton E. Rose, *Pebbles*, October 1961, 6.

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

³⁰ Ibid, 7.

need to understand the purposes of education and the everyday ways used to accomplish these goals. Even in the 19th century McGuffey Reader era, the teacher was the point of contact between a community and the education that community offered to its young people.³¹

“Public relations starts in the classroom, with the efforts of each teacher to improve parent relations. But above all, it is a whole series of relationships between members of the school staff and the people living in the community.”³²

Opening the Lines of Communications With Parents

The lines of communication between school and community can improve educational opportunities for children, insure the survival of the public school as a democratic institution, and meet the changing conditions and needs of society.³³

Effective communication comes through respect and consideration for the people with whom you communicate.³⁴

More and more teachers are realizing that communication begins with the classroom teacher. Teachers communicate with parents in various activities, such as annual open house, PTA meetings, and athletic events. Other contacts are the students’

³¹ Ibid, 7.

³² Ibid, 7.

³³ Suburban Area Study Group of Montgomery County, “The Schools and the Community” (Maryland: Communication Study, 1968), 16.

³⁴ William D. Boutwell, “Three-Way Communication: Administrators, Teachers, and Parents Need to Talk,” *Parent-Teachers Association Magazine* (May 1971), 12.

report cards, telephone conferences, and letters home.³⁵

Parents and teachers need to feel comfortable with one another throughout the school year. Teachers and principals should work together to develop consistent, school-wide strategies to promote positive school-home relationships.³⁶

Show you care. For effective teachers, these are really words to live by. Every day, all year long, using positive communication is imperative for showing that you care and for getting past the roadblocks that keep parents from giving support. Parents view educators who consistently communicate positive news to them as educators who are truly concerned about their children. And the more a parent feels you are concerned, the more he or she will listen and support you. Unless you are prepared to pursue consistent positive communication with parents, you will have a difficult time getting all the parents on your side.³⁷

One of the most effective parent communication techniques is a quick phone call home to let parents know how well their child is doing. Get into the habit of phoning parents with good news, and it won't be so difficult to call them when there is a problem to be solved. You'll have already established a comfortable relationship, and parents will

³⁵ Columbus Public Schools, "Communication: School to Community," *Study Guide for Neighborhood Seminars* (Ohio: Columbus Board of Education, April-May 1969), 43.

³⁶ "Strategies for Communicating With Parents," Edward L. Phillips, *Journal of Educational Public Relations*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1st quarter, 1988, 4.

³⁷ Lee Canter and Marlene Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side* (Lee Canter Associates, 1991), 85.

be much more likely to listen to what you have to say.³⁸

Teachers can develop effective communications with parents by having a course syllabus on hand to be distributed and explained to parents during an open house event early in the school year. The syllabus would tell parents what their child's teacher expects so they can offer support at home to insure that these expectations are reached.³⁹

"Another strategy to improve communications with parents is a mentorship program. In a mentorship program professionals meet with students on an 'as-needed' basis. Mentors are then in contact with parents."⁴⁰

Sending written work of the student to their home on a weekly basis is a strategy frequently used by teachers. Parents can learn first-hand how their children are performing in school.⁴¹

Send a newsletter home each week informing parents about classroom activities and upcoming events. But don't do all of the work yourself. This method of communication will be even more effective if students help create it.⁴²

Many successful strategies beyond these are being used in schools to strengthen the parent partnership. An important first step is to assess your district's practices to learn what parents and teachers need so they can develop an effective communications program. If this challenge is met, positive attitudes and cooperation between parents and teachers

³⁸ Ibid, 87.

³⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 93.

⁴¹ Ibid, 93.

⁴² Ibid, 93.

will develop and lead to increased student achievement.⁴³

Positive Parent Communication Throughout the School Year

“The key ingredient in developing lasting, positive relationships is effective communication.”⁴⁴

The following checklist of ideas may help teachers to encourage an open and cooperative relationship between teacher and parent.

- Call parents regularly — ask them to call you.
- When you say you’ll keep them posted, make a note and follow-up.
- Have students keep a daily diary to be sent home weekly to keep parents informed.
- In clear, uncomplicated terms, give parents an honest appraisal of how their children are doing.
- Keep parents posted on their children’s progress and observations you feel would be of interest to them.
- Letters, etc., must be crystal clear so that painful misunderstandings can be avoided.
- In discussions with parents, be careful to use terms they can understand.⁴⁵
- Visit parents of each child in homes at least once during the year.
- Make phone calls for positive reasons.

⁴³ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁴ Art Steller and Donald Knox, “How to Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships,” *Journal of Educational Communication — The School PR Magazine*, 28.

⁴⁵ Donald R. Grossnickle, “A Checklist for Teachers: Successful School and Community Relations,” *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 442, February 1981, 76-78.

- Send home happygrams, success cards, glad letters.
- Invite parents to your classroom to get involved with the children and activities.
- Always have prepared information to distribute to parents regarding special information on students.⁴⁶

Teacher-Parent Conferences

The teacher-parent conference is one of the most effective ways of communicating.⁴⁷ Successful conferences are an essential part of getting and keeping parent support. A regularly-scheduled conference can be a pleasant, informative, and productive meeting for both parents and teacher. It is an opportunity to get to know one another and interact on behalf of the student.⁴⁸

“A regularly scheduled conference isn’t the time to surprise parents with negative information about their child’s behavior or performance in school. These problems should never be saved for routine conferences. They need to be dealt with as soon as they occur.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Claudia M. Cuddy, “One Teacher Tackles Personal Public Relations,” *Journal of Educational Communication — The School PR Magazine*, August 1982, vol. 5, no. 4, 5-6.

⁴⁷ “Reaching the Parents,” *Public Relations Ideas for Classroom Teachers* (Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association with the Department of Classroom Teachers, National Education Association, 1964), 17.

⁴⁸ Lee and Marlene Canter, *Lee Canter’s Parents On Your Side* (Lee Canter Associates, 1991), 191.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 192.

These five ingredients will give you a start on building the foundation to successful conferences:

- Give parents a sense of need for the conference.
- Try to establish a desirable relationship.
- Provide an opportunity for the release of tension and feeling.
- Develop new insights and ideas once the tension is released.
- Let the new insights lead to effective thinking.⁵⁰

The following steps ensure a more productive conference for everyone:

- Send home a conference invitation.
- Plan the physical environment of your classroom.
- Plan where the parents will sit for the conference.
- Plan where you will sit. Parents will be more at ease when the teacher sits away from the desk.
- Sit poised and confident.
- Don't take notes while talking with parents.
- Don't let comments about other children creep into the conversation.⁵¹
- Put together samples of each student's work.
- Arrive at the conference site before the parent.

⁵⁰ "When Teacher Calls a Conference," *Public Relations Ideas for Classroom Teachers* (Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association with the Department of Classroom Teachers, National Education Association, 1974), 18.

⁵¹ Lee and Marlene Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 192.

- Greet the parent warmly and enthusiastically.
- Use effective listening and communication skills.
- Say something complimentary about the student early in the conference.⁵²
- Close the conference on a positive, optimistic note.⁵³

Involving Parents in Helping Their Children Learn

More than any other aspect of the school program, homework can help or hinder school public relations. Parents do like their children to have homework. It enables them to have some comprehension of what their children are learning. It also enables them to assist teachers in their task and to strengthen their own roles as co-teachers.⁵⁴

Many parents want to help their children do better with homework, but they don't know where to begin. Start the year off by providing parents with useful homework and study skills tips. With these tips, parents can start immediately to improve their child's homework performance. Plan to send these sheets home at the beginning of the year.

You can assign homework without the fear of ruining relationships with parents, if some of these ideas are applied:

⁵² Thomas E. Robinson, "PR Can Grow Out of the Classroom If It Receives Nourishment," *Journal of Educational Communication — The School PR Magazine*, December 1982, vol. 6, no. 1, 13.

⁵³ "Some Basic Advice on Homework," *It Starts in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association, September 1971).

⁵⁴ "Destination: The Home," *Pebbles* (Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association with the Department of Classroom Teachers, National Education Association, October 1961), 19.

- Keep parents informed. The less they understand about your homework policies, the more likely they are to have strong negative feelings about you and their child's homework assignments.⁵⁵
- Be sure every student understands the purpose of the homework assignment.
- Don't destroy the value of homework by using it as a disciplinary measure.
- Don't use homework as a means of merely keeping students busy. This builds student antagonism toward studying, the subject matter, the school, and you.⁵⁶
- Assign family weekend learning activities. These can be worthwhile experiences for everyone.⁵⁷

Dealing With Parents in Difficult Situations

"When it comes to their child's misbehavior, parents often resist believing what they are told. Nobody likes to hear bad news. It's especially hard for parents to hear anything negative about their child. They may feel it reflects on their parenting abilities or feel it's something they have no control over."⁵⁸

It will benefit both you and parents to keep accurate documentation of all academic or behavior problems as they appear. Documentation will strengthen your position as a professional, help you communicate clearly to parents, and provide strong

⁵⁵ Lee Canter and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents on Your Side* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), 105.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 117.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 118.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 143.

evidence to parents who may question your word.⁵⁹

Contact parents at the first sign of a problem. Lee Canter, an expert in parent communication, suggests the following:

- Make a phone call your first-choice means of reaching a parent.
- Make every effort to contact a parent. Don't give up after one or two tries.
- Always write down what you want to say before you phone a parent.
- Be prepared to describe the specific behavior that is causing problems.
- Be prepared to tell the parent what you are planning to do about the problem.
- Let the parent know that you're confident the problem can be solved.
- Tell the parent there will be follow-up contact from you either in a letter or a phone call.⁶⁰

Parents can be partners in providing an effective program of discipline in the schools. Just as we need to know how best to relate to contemporary youth, our efforts must also be directed at reaching the many parents who are "at risk" of dropping out of their kids' school lives. These efforts to reach many parents can be done through good communication.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Allen N. Mendler, *How to Achieve Discipline With Dignity in the Classroom*, The National Educational Service, 1992, 110.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 143.

⁶¹ Allen N. Mendler, *How to Achieve Discipline With Dignity in the Classroom*, The National Educational Service, 1992, 110.

CHAPTER 3

PROCEDURES

Database searches were conducted at Rowan College of New Jersey, Glassboro, New Jersey, to determine the existence of available information on topics pertaining to aspects of the first-year teacher communicating with parents to gain support needed for academic, discipline, and homework efforts.

The searched utilized databases for books, periodicals, booklets, reports, and dissertation abstracts in the areas of education, school public relations, and school communications. They yielded thirty-five articles and twenty-five dissertation abstracts; eight were pertinent to the topic.

Review of available pamphlets, booklets, and brochures on the topic demonstrated a need for better teacher-parent communication. This review allowed the researcher to proceed with the handbook.

After reviewing and summarizing the research, the most common topics and activities used in parent communication were then utilized to create the content of a checklist. The checklist sought to determine how important each topic is in regard to

teacher-parent communication. This checklist would provide a basis for the public relations handbook in the thesis. The list was sent to five public relations experts nationwide, who were selected and agreed upon by the author and her advisor. These public relations experts are recognized for their achievement in educational public relations. Six master teachers throughout the country were also selected by the author with the help of the New Jersey Education Association. The master teachers were chosen based on their achievement and recognition by colleagues, students, and community members on district, county, and state levels.

The resulting data were then analyzed to develop suggestions and recommendations for first-year teachers who need help in finding ways to work cooperatively with parents.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The education of children is a responsibility that must be shared by the teacher and parents alike. Teachers need to recognize what a powerful asset a parent can be. They need to realize what a powerful component parents are to a child's success. To work effectively, teachers need parents to support academic, disciplinary, and homework efforts.⁶²

Until research began on this thesis study, the author did not realize just how much could be gained in the classroom by establishing positive relationships with parents and by conscientiously maintaining these relationships throughout the year. Even the most difficult or apathetic parents can be motivated to give support when there is good communication between teachers and parents.

This study investigated the need for good public relations between teachers and parents. After reviewing and summarizing the research, the most common topics and activities used in parent communication were then utilized to create the content of a

⁶² Lee Canter and Marilyn Canter, *Lee Canter's Parents On Your Side* (Lee Canter & Associates, 1991), x.

checklist.

The author used this checklist of the ten most common topics and activities to survey five public relations experts. The experts were agreed upon by the author and her advisor, based on achievement and recognition each has received in the field of educational public relations.

The New Jersey Education Association assisted the author in selecting six master teachers to be surveyed. From the six who were selected, five responded. The master teachers were chosen based on their achievement and recognition by colleagues, students, and community members on district, county, and state levels.

The checklist was helpful to the study not so much to answer specific questions, but rather to generate specific topics for research.

Ten persons participated in the study. Each person indicated a checked response on all ten of the topics. Two of the public relations experts gave written comments to four of the topics in addition to a checked response.

Significant findings from the checklist, additional reading, and research on the subject are included here. The resulting data were then analyzed to develop suggestions and recommendations for first-year teachers who need help in finding ways to work cooperatively with parents.

A copy of the checklist is included in the appendix of this thesis.

Opening the Lines of Communication With Parents

Before school begins in September, teachers should develop a parent-involvement plan for the entire year. The author's research showed that when your first interaction with parents is a positive one, you set a tone of cooperation and good will that will last throughout the year.

Both groups of experts who participated in the completion of the checklist agreed with the research that opening the lines of communication with parents is very important.

Positive Parent Communication Throughout the School Year

The group of public relations experts agree 100% that positive parent communication throughout the school year is very important. From the master teachers' responses, 80% felt it was very important, and 20% regarded it as important.

Professionalism in dealing with parents requires a plan for working with parents all year long. Parent involvement is not a twice-a-year event. It is a daily part of a teacher's responsibilities. It cannot be left to chance encounters and sporadic conversations. Teachers need to know exactly when, how, and why they will contact parents from the first day of school to the last.⁶³

⁶³ Ibid, 15.

Dealing With Parents in Difficult Situations

Answers to the topic, "Dealing With Parents in Difficult Situations," indicated that 100% of the public relations experts regard this to be very important. When asked of the master teachers, 80% responded as very important, and 20% felt it to be important.

Dealing with difficult parents should be handled with skill and confidence. Once teachers have practiced and honed their own listening skills, they can recognize and move parents past roadblocks. This will help to achieve the ability to handle difficult situations, which will improve the students' chances for success.

Contacting Parents When Problems Arise

The two groups of participants in the study offered a balanced response. The public relations experts and master teachers both agreed that contacting parents when problems arise is very important. Both groups agreed by 80%. The remaining 20% indicated this topic to be important.

Albert E. Holliday, *The Journal of Educational Public Relations* publisher, feels that knowing how to contact parents when problems arise is just as important to communication as contacting them. He also suggests the need for contacting parents in advance of problems.

The National Education Association, through its Nationwide Teacher Opinion Poll, surveys teachers regularly on a variety of issues. In 1982, of all the issues listed, including overcrowded classes, unskilled teachers, and lack of support from principals,

keeping parents better informed of problems at school was ranked highest with 97.4% of the responses.⁶⁴ Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress supports the 1982 responses. The 1991 data says despite our nation's extensive efforts to improve teaching, develop better instruction, raise standards, and motivate students, parent involvement helps achievement trends in reading, mathematics, and science.⁶⁵

Ways to Involve Parents in Helping Their Children

Most of the public relations experts who participated in the survey agree that it is very important that teachers provide parents with ways to involve them in helping their children learn. Providing ways to get parents involved was rated as very important by 80% of the public relations experts, and 20% feel it is important. The master teachers responded the same way.

Home Visits by the Teacher

The public relations experts responded to home visits positively, with 80% regarding them as very important. The master teachers feel differently. From the teachers' responses, 40% feel home visits to be very important; 20% indicated that visits are important, and 40% regard home visits as not important.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Rich, *Schools and Families: Issues and Actions*, A National Education Association Publication, 1987, 24.

⁶⁵ John Ralph, Dana Keller, and James Crouse, "How Effective Are American Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 76, no. 2, 148.

Albert E. Holliday indicated that home visits are particularly important for needy children and those who come from dysfunctional homes. He also questioned on whose time it would occur. Holliday was concerned that if teachers were required to visit students' homes on personal time, instead of school time, that the job wouldn't get done.

Using a Home-School Contract When Dealing With a Student's Specific Problem

"A home-school contract is a written agreement among teacher, student, and parent. The contract states that the student agrees to a specific behavior. If the student complies with the terms of the contract, he or she will earn praise and rewards from both the teacher and parent."⁶⁶ The success of a home-school contract demands that both parent and teacher consistently enforce it.

The two groups of participants disagreed on the importance of a home-school contract when dealing with specific problems. The public relations experts responded with 80% regarding contracts as important, and 20% feel they are not important. The master teachers responded with 80% indicating that home-school contracts are very important, with 20% indicating that the topic is important.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 164.

First-Day-of-School Objectives

The first actions a teacher takes helps to establish the teacher's reputation with parents as an effective professional. To send parents the message that a teacher has confidence and the skill to take charge, a plan of objectives needs to be made to break down communication barriers.

Preparing different parent communications for the first day of school will set the stage for a year of positive parent involvement.

In her research, the thesis author found three objectives that should be met on or before the first day of school. These are:

- Send a "before school starts" greeting to all parents and incoming students.
- Open up verbal communication with parents of potential problem students.
- Communicate your expectations to parents.

Research shows that teachers feel this effort is too time-consuming. Teachers avoid this contact, not realizing that it is a preventative action.⁶⁷

The public relations experts regard this topic to be important by 80% of those who responded, with 20% indicating that it is not important. The teachers who responded feel, by 80%, that First-Day-of-School Objectives are important, with 20% responding that this topic is very important.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 64.

How to Conduct a Parent Conference

The results by both groups were the same. Teachers and public relations experts agree by 80%, that knowing how to conduct a parent conference is important, with 20% regarding it as very important.

Making Back-to-School Night a Parent Involvement Success

Back-to-School Night can be the most important event of the school year for elementary and secondary teachers. Research shows that for such an important event, more than half of all parents don't attend.⁶⁸ This is why the checklist responses were not surprising to the author.

The public relations experts' responses show that 20% regard Back-to-School Night as very important; 60% feel it is important, and 20% indicated that it is not important. From the group of teachers who participated, 80% regard Back-to-School Night as not important, with 20% indicating it as very important.

Dr. Lew Armistead, President of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, thinks all of the topics and activities are important, perhaps even essential. He admits some are more important than others, but recommends the practice of all items to achieve maximum success.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 68.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More and more teachers are learning the value of communication with parents. Improved communication can result in better cooperation with the school community. It can increase parent involvement and help gain support needed for academic, discipline, and homework efforts.

This study was conducted to create a handbook beneficial to first-year teachers in dealing with parental communication.

Based on review of available literature and information gathered in the author's related findings, conclusions and recommendations are made on how first-year teachers can work cooperatively with parents.

Conclusions

Good classroom public relations helps the teacher, parents, and students. When the students are happy, their parents are happy. The teacher's job becomes easier with parental support.

Programs with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better.

Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with schools score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background whose parents are not involved.

When parents are involved and supportive, students benefit.

The involvement of internal and external public relations enhances student achievement. To help increase citizen confidence and better knowledge of the successes in public schools, teachers should develop lasting, positive relationships.

Few colleges require public relations as part of the undergraduate education curriculum. Many teacher training programs do not provide opportunities for students to learn skills and techniques of communicating with parents.

Opening lines of communication with parents, and continuing to keep those lines open throughout the school year, is very important to good public relations.

Communication is the key to a successful school year for teacher, parents, and students.

Open communication provides the teacher with more parental support when dealing with difficult situations and problems. Once teachers have practiced and honed their own listening skills, they can recognize and move parents past roadblocks. This will help to achieve the ability to handle difficult situations, which will improve students' chances for success.

Before school begins in September, teachers should develop a parent-involvement plan for the entire year. Research shows that teachers should meet three specific objectives to send parents the message that a teacher has confidence and skill to take charge. These are:

- Send a “before school starts” greeting to all parents and incoming students.
- Open up verbal communication with parents of potential problem students.
- Communicate your expectations to parents.

Research indicates that parent involvement can achieve the following:

- Raises the academic achievement of students.
- Improves the attitudes and performances of children in school.
- Helps parents understand the work of the schools.
- Builds school-community relationships in an ongoing, problem-preventing way.

Chapter 2 has specific suggestions for teachers to practice to improve parent communication. These suggestions are based on the findings discussed in Chapter 4.

Recommendations

Teachers and principals should work together to develop consistent, school-wide strategies to promote positive school-home relationships.

Educators need to show they care. Parents view teachers who communicate positively as teachers who are truly concerned about their children.

Teachers should use the quick phone call home as one of the most effective parent communication techniques. Phone parents with good news, and it won't be so difficult to call them when there is a problem to be solved. Establishing a comfortable relationship with parents will more likely increase the chances of them listening to what you have to say.

Teachers should speak in clear, uncomplicated terms when giving parents an appraisal of how their children are doing.

Always have prepared information to distribute to parents. Brochures and pamphlets on specific student information can be helpful to a parent who has a particular need or concern. These materials should be readily available and displayed prominently for parents, particularly at conference time.

Teachers should give parents a sense of need for a conference. During the conference, teachers should use effective listening and communication skills.

Keep parents informed about homework policies. Make sure the student and parents understand the purpose of assignments. Teachers should never destroy homework's value by using it for discipline. Teachers should start the year providing parents with useful homework and study skills tips.

Teachers should always contact parents at the first sign of a problem. When dealing with parents in difficult situations, keep accurate documentation of all academic or behavior problems.

Staff training should include public relations seminars and workshops. Administration should include public relations literature and videos in the professional library.

Recommendations for Further Study

Recommendations for further study would include:

1. Surveying leading teachers' colleges to find how many offer public relations courses to undergraduates. Base the study on types of courses and how effective they are in the classroom.
2. Study the effectiveness of Home-School Contracts. Determine if the written commitment encourages more of a parent and student commitment.
3. Survey teachers who use weekly and monthly teacher prepared newsletters as communication tools in their classrooms. Determine how widely read they are among parents. The study could also research the effectiveness of the newsletter and how it relates to parental support.

APPENDIX

PARENT COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

Please check the following list of topics as very important, important, or not important:

	Very Important	Important	Not Important
1. Opening the lines of communication with parents			
2. Making Back-To-School Night a parent involvement success			
3. Positive parent communication throughout the school year			
4. Contacting parents when problems arise			
5. How to conduct a parent conference			
6. Ways to involve parents in helping their children learn			
7. First-day-of-school objectives			
8. Home visits			
9. Dealing with parents in difficult situations			
10. Using a Home-School Contract when dealing with a student's specific problem			

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