COMMUNICATION NEWSLETTER

Enhancing Effective Communication in Home, School, and Community

Over the past few years, the Parent Education Initiative, school staff, and consensus parent representatives have cosponsored gatherings on the topic of "enhancing communication at the intersection of family, school and community." We invited Drs. Kathleen Galvin and Charles Wilkinson to guide the process and challenge us in our thinking and proactive response. As we begin the 1998 school year, I would like to share some information and themes that emerged from these two productive discussions. Enclosed also are a few inspiring handouts from our speakers. Finally, I will pose some questions I hope we can all think about and discuss in the coming months. First, some information from the presentations is paraphrased below:

PART 1: SOME BASIC BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON COMMUNICATION

- *We can never not communicate.* We communicate either verbally or nonverbally.
- Anything that happens to one member of a family affects the rest of the family.
- *Families come from families.* It is important for us to talk about our different families of origin and different values and get to a place where people can work with the differences. One needs sensitivity and a sense of humor to get to that place and to avoid the mistake of forever fighting the differences.
- Schools, families, and communities are all affected by families of origin.

- *A family's communications are on a continuum from enmeshed to disengaged.* An enmeshed parent may feel what is said to the child is being said to the parent. The boundaries may not be clear. A disengaged parent may for various reasons have little or no emotional connectedness and few expectations for the child. The middle ground would be a parent who is clear about expectations but knows the difference between his or her own life, goals, and needs and the child's.
- No two children grow up in the same family.
- No two children have the same perception of their childhood.
- Communications can be position oriented (age, gender) or person oriented (unique talent, interests, etc.).
- Communication can be restricted (Do it because I said so) or elaborated (explaining, talking, negotiations).
- Communications reflect family themes. They are statements that reflect what the family values, such as "The Smiths never quit" or "Always use your gifts." Awareness of these themes can explain a lot of child behaviors or potential problems.

PART 2: COMMUNICATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY

Dr. Wilkinson began our second meeting by noting that every community has a shared vision and a shared history. To paraphrase his presentation, parents, teachers, and staff walk into a particular school history. They also add to it, challenge it, and enlarge it. The goal is to contribute to that history and enrich it. "Ideal community" means all the members have a shared responsibility for full functioning and connectedness. For many, this responsibility implies a permission to say what needs to be said. The community at our school, as at other schools, is becoming more diverse. The goal, then, of our diverse school community is a unity of often very different and unique individuals in a sense of togetherness toward some common goals.

In searching for common goals, Dr. Galvin asked parents in the audience why they chose this school community. The answers included the following: academics; love of learning; good mix of academics, sports, extracurriculars; a small and nurturing environment at the entry point in the lower school; a school within the city; an ethnically and religiously diverse school that might be found more often in the city than the suburbs; a school not afraid to discuss an honor code and values; a school providing safety; a school you can walk to from home; a place where you can also meet adults with similar goals and interests. She noted that while one might not originally or consciously choose this school to meet other adults with similar interests, this was often a benefit of the choice to come here and potentially a source of support.

Dr. Wilkinson then noted that a binding factor in communities is *shared meanings.* It takes work to get at these. He also suggested it involves people taking the risk of letting themselves be known. It can and should be a creative process. It also involves the following:

1. Open Versus Closed Communication

An open attitude means that when you need to talk about something, you can talk and people will be receptive. Closed communication often shuts the door to safe and productive engagement.

2. Vertical Versus Horizontal Communication

Horizontal communication refers to a dialogue of equals, whereas vertical communication refers to an "expert" talking down to persons in lower positions. Certainly there are learning modes in which vertical communication has a place, but the ideal would be colearning in a more horizontal manner.

3. Functional Versus Nurturing Communication

Parenting can often fall into the functional mode as a result of the business of life and the number of things to get done. One would hope for nurturing communication as opposed to the more predominant "this is what I need you to do." Often for young children, nurturing communication predominates. As the child gets older or in communication between adults, the more mundane functional communication occurs more and more. One would hope that more communication continues to be nurturing for all involved.

Dr. Galvin discussed *cohesion.* Parents with high cohesion may want or need family members to think and act in similar ways. They may seek out parents and schools with similar viewpoints. Parents low on cohesion would not need people to be alike. They may not be as invested as others in having everyone on the same page or in agreement about community standards or practices. In thinking ahead to planning school communications with families, understanding the importance of cohesion to families and the school is important.

Next we looked at *adaptability* on a low-to-high continuum. What are the implications of relating to parents, students, and teachers who are able or willing to adapt as opposed to those who are not? Are expectations of adaptability based on a person's position or simply the person's unique personhood? People tend to be either too adaptable toward children or not very adaptable at all. What is the impact of these adults on other adults who are trying to make good choices or maintain some amount of consistency for children?

Dr. Galvin described *boundaries* as physical or psychological limits that regulate access to people, places, ideas, and values. Boundaries can be closed, permeable, or nonexistent. The families with closed boundaries may be closed off from others and the school in order to restrict the flow of information into the family and maintain its identity. These families may limit or control their children's behavior in ways some schools or other parents might not feel necessary. Friends of their children may at times feel too studied or judged by these families. These families may expect the school to take a strong stand on certain issues in order to honor their boundaries. Most families attempt at some level to monitor children's friends, television watching, activities away from home, and so on. In families with permeable boundaries, children are allowed to make many different kinds of friends and explore alternative ideas. Finally, some families may offer little or no sense of identity for members and no control of their contact with the external world.

The remainder of our time in these meetings was spent in small groups to discuss ways parents can support each other and use these concepts of communication to understand the challenges we all face. The questions I encourage you to think about discussing with fellow parents are some I and the presenters have posed previously:

- Does the information above help you to better understand communication challenges at our school and elsewhere? Does it raise additional questions? If so, what might they be?
- Would you like to further discuss the expectations we communicate to teachers, parents, and children?
- Do you wish you knew what other parents told their children?
- Would you like to discuss further how parental messages and school messages might contradict each other?
- What information or services could the Parent Education Initiative, consensus, or the school staff provide to facilitate better communication at all levels?

Please call or write or share your ideas and thoughts with us or other parents. Also, talk with the parent leaders of the lower, middle, and upper school who have detailed notes from the excellent small-group discussions at these two sessions. Many wonderful ideas and solutions were shared.

Some Books on the Topic by Dr. Galvin

Galvin, K., Brommel, B., & Byland, C. (2003). *Family communication, cohesion and change.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Galvin, K., & Cooper, P. (Eds.). (2006). *Making connections: Readings in relational communication.* Los Angeles: Roxbury.