Neighborhood Meetings

When Dr. John Metallo was superintendent of the rural Fort Plain Central School District in eastern New York, he realized that in order to encourage more family involvement in school, especially among parents who were reluctant to come to the school building, “We needed to get the show on the road” (personal communication, August 16, 2002). He began a tradition of neighborhood meetings to reach out to families, which continued for the five years he served there.

The neighborhood meetings, held monthly during the evenings, were inviting to parents because the settings were more comfortable and less intimidating than the school for many parents (Dietz, *School, Family*, 1997). Although most of the meetings were held in the homes of volunteer host parents, several were held in neighborhood churches and senior citizens centers. Each meeting attracted 10-14 parents.

School personnel attended the meetings in teams, according to Dr. Metallo, and focused the theme of each meeting on the concerns of parents who were attending and the ages of their children. Following an introductory overview by team members, the meeting facilitator would offer everyone an opportunity to ask questions on topics that ranged from the district budget to class size to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Then the host would provide refreshments and there would be an opportunity for informal conversations among parents and the school team members. These opportunities allowed parents to “see that we were real people,” said Dr. Metallo, “and that we shared a lot of the same values” (personal communication, August 16, 2002).

Dr. Metallo views neighborhood meetings as one effective strategy for schools to be more “user friendly” for parents. “The more accessible we can be, the better,” he said (personal communication, August 16, 2002).
**Neighborhood Walks in Wichita, KS**

**Colvin Elementary School** in Wichita, KS, is located in a high poverty, diverse community that includes families who speak a variety of languages but do not necessarily know how to navigate the school system (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2002). In order to “break down the walls between the home and school” and help these families feel welcomed and needed their community school, Colvin staff reach out to families utilizing a variety of communication strategies.

One of these strategies is to walk through the school neighborhood and knock on doors, to meet families and distribute informational flyers before the school year begins. “It lets families know we care,” said principal Karen Boettcher.

Each family receives eight positive, face-to-face communications about their school during each school year. Additionally, staff serve coffee every Friday morning in the school driveway in order to greet parents. Parent handbooks have been made available in video format in five different languages, translators are available on site to assist parents, and a parent room is open each day as a site for networking, parent education, and adult education.

Neighborhood meetings and walks are two of many effective strategies to communicate with families and build stronger school-family relationships. Communication often serves as the first step to developing other types of parental involvement (Elman, 1999). The more opportunities for personal contact through meetings such as these, “the stronger the bonds that link home and school” (Hiatt-Michael, 2001, *Promising Practices*, p. 41). In addition to administrators and teachers, school board members can also host neighborhood meetings and meet face to face with family members in order to get to know families in the school community they serve and address their concerns.

Good communication between teachers and parents increases trust (Adams and Christenson, 2000) and encourages realistic expectations for children by keeping parents and teachers “on the same page” (Drake, 2000; James, Jurich, & Estes, 2001).

To be effective, home-school communication needs to be “consistent, two-way and meaningful” (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000), using a variety of forms, both formal and informal, conveying both bad news and good, on a regular basis (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001; Power, 1999). Anne Henderson, author of *A New Generation of Evidence* (1994), recommends that schools make contact with *every family every month* by such means as parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, e-mails, home visits, or “quick chats” after school. She suggests that all teachers should have cell phones and/or all classrooms have telephone lines (Jones, 2001).

Rich (1998) acknowledges that it is more difficult to communicate with parents as students grow older. In kindergarten, children can “wear” notes home. In elementary school, notes can be attached to school menus. At the secondary level it becomes more difficult to reach parents. She recommends that teachers have parents’ work phone numbers and addresses and be “accessible and responsive” when parents call or want to meet (pp. 38-39). Some care must be taken in using families’ work numbers, however, as in some cases calls at work may not be allowed or employees may not have the privacy to speak freely about sensitive issues.

*We began to make real headway when we stopped assuming we knew what our parents felt, wanted, or hoped for their children. Only when we began to sincerely listen did we really hear.*

Dryfoos and Maguire, 2002
Communicating with culturally diverse families. All communication should be in the native language of parents and respectful of cultural variations. The personal approach to reaching out to parents is especially important in diverse communities (Kelty, 1997). The Hispanic Policy Development Project found that written communication and radio and television announcements were largely ineffective with Hispanic parents, even when they were translated into Spanish, and that “The only successful approach is personal: face-to-face conversations with parents in their primary language in their homes” (Inger, 1992, p. 132). From an analysis of family involvement in 42 school/parent projects, the HPDP concluded that “overcoming the barriers between schools and Hispanic parents does not require large amounts of money; it does require personal outreach, nonjudgmental communication, and respect for parents’ feelings” (p. 133).

Family coordinators can serve as an effective communication bridge between culturally diverse parents and the school. In Austin, TX, Ridgetop Elementary School parent support specialist Maria Teresa Flores meets with parents, who speak limited English, either individually or in small groups before they meet with teachers or principals in order to help them understand the system and what questions to ask (Rothstein, 2002). Ms. Flores works to empower parents by using a variety of methods, including role playing (personal communication, September 22, 2002).

Parent Information Booth

The Arminta Elementary School Site Action Team in North Hollywood, CA, discovered a creative way to increase parent attendance at workshops and activities. The team created a Parent Information Booth as a way to disseminate information about opportunities (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2002). The Site Action team selected the information to be made available in the booth, including flyers about school workshops, community activities, and parenting classes. The Parent Information Booth consisted of several tables decorated with welcoming signs in English and Spanish, balloons, and poster displays of events. Team members and community representatives rotated coverage of the booth, which was present at all major school events. The consistency of the booth’s presence at these school functions helped family and community members gain information in a family-friendly setting.

Communicating with parents of students with disabilities. When parents have a child with a disability, “it is imperative that a trusting relationship is built between the family and the teacher(s). Partnerships can be built upon an openness to information shared with the family and a sensitivity to the changing needs and concerns within each family system” (Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996, p. 85). It is very important that school districts provide information to parents about services available to their child, and their rights as parents, as soon as the child is identified as having a disability. Otherwise, as one parent expressed it, “You’re sort of left out there hanging,” feeling lost at a time when information, support, and guidance are most needed (Lake, 2000). Developing good communication and building a relationship based upon trust helps strengthen home-school support for children with disabilities and diminishes the potential for conflicts.

In a 2000 survey of parents of students with disabilities, parents indicated that discrepant views of their children or children’s needs create the majority of home-school conflicts (Lake, 2000). Parents were frustrated when they felt the school did not
view their children as unique individuals with strengths and abilities and demonstrated a limited understanding of their children’s overall needs. Parents were also saddened when school personnel consistently described their children from a “deficit-model perspective,” emphasizing what their children could not do instead of what they were capable of doing. To avoid conflicts such as these, educators and parents need to communicate, so that educators are able to see that the disability is only part of the child. “This sharing of parent and school perspectives and viewing of the child as a whole person provides a firm foundation for good parent-school partnerships (Lake, 2000).

We have found that by establishing a positive relationship with our daughters’ teachers or case managers and communicating regularly, we can solve problems quickly when they occur. Effective ongoing parent and teacher communication is the key to ensuring that our children will be successful in school.

Bob Brick, Families and Advocates Partnership for Education, Minneapolis, MN

When communicating with parents of children with disabilities, there are many ways that teachers can be supportive, responsive, and resourceful. These include:

- recognizing the family as an invaluable source of information about their children;
- practicing active listening;
- providing comprehensive, accurate, and up-to-date information about the child’s disability and related issues;
- assisting parents as they learn to navigate the education system;
- providing information about services and benefits available to the family;
- providing emotional support for the family;
- conveying the value of the child to parents;
- having the ability to “put yourself in the shoes of the parent”;
- challenging stereotypes about parents;
- persevering in building partnerships;
- demonstrating interest in parents’ goals for their children;
- talking with parents about how they want to share information;
- developing effective ways for planning and problem solving that honor parent needs and preferences;
- learning and supporting the family’s decision-making process, even if the teacher may disagree with decisions made;
- expanding cultural diversity awareness;
- conveying assessment and evaluation information with sensitivity and empathy;
- advocating for the family across school and community agencies; and
- linking families who have children with similar disabilities (Hornby, 2000; Muscott, 2002; O’Shea, O’Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001; Davern, 1996; Smith & Smith, 2003).

When we respect parents as partners in their children’s learning, the lines of communication between home and school are strengthened, and we as teachers are not quite so alone in our efforts to educate children.

(Power, Strengthen, 1999, p. 31)

In addition to neighborhood meetings and walks, communication strategies that have proven effective in building personal connections with families include family focus groups, home visits, informal principal meetings, positive “warm” telephone calls, home-school notes, conferences, newsletters, technology tools, and processes for resolving family concerns.
**Family focus groups**

For families who are not comfortable coming to school, or cannot come because of transportation or child care barriers, family focus group sessions can be held in neighborhood homes, community centers, churches, businesses, or even fast-food restaurants. During these sessions educators can learn about family needs, concerns, and culture, and can help parents feel more connected to the school. Educators planning these meetings should be sensitive to family needs concerning location and times (Lueder, 1998). Providing child care enables more parents to attend.

**Home visits**

**Benefits of home visits.** Home visits are a “very powerful mechanism” for teachers to connect with families (Swap, 1993, p. 125) and a concrete demonstration of their “concern, caring, and commitment” to families (Lueder, 1998, p. 79). These visits allow teachers to understand their students better by seeing families in their home environment (Moles, 1996). In addition, two major barriers to family involvement — child care and transportation — are removed by home visits. Home visits also may be more comfortable for many parents, especially if there are cultural barriers or negative past experiences associated with going to the school building.

Home visits are most effective when made before the school year begins to establish relationships with families. Visits may also be made during the school year to continue building relationships and to work individually with families. If families speak different languages, outreach efforts to non-English speaking families should be made by individuals who speak their language and know the culture (Lueder, 1998). Blank and Kershaw (1998) have developed a Parent Information and Interest Inventory and guidelines that may be used as a starting point for planning home visits.

> I believe this time (making home visits) is the best investment I can make in my students and their families. The partnership is founded so early. We begin working together before the first bell rings, and I believe this personal introduction helps to alleviate the anxieties of all those involved: the students, their parents, and me. The first day of school is more like a reunion, and a very happy one at that.

Lori Woods, Teacher, Greenbrook Elementary School, New Jersey (Dodd & Konzal, 2002, p.198)

School staff members conducting home visits may require training in order to relate effectively with families. In many districts teachers who make home visits have their teaching schedules adjusted so that they are given the necessary time to make visits. In some school districts home visiting is built into teacher contracts as a responsibility (Swap, 1993). Some schools have used federal Title 1 or Chapter 1 funds to hire home-school liaisons who coordinate the home visitation program as well as make home visits themselves.

**Home visits to families of children with disabilities.** Many parents with children who have disabilities have difficulty attending school-based functions because of the intensive needs of their children. Home visits allow these parents to connect with teachers while caring for their children and sharing information about how they can work together to best meet their children’s educational needs. Additionally, home visits can serve as informal pre-planning meetings for annual Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). For a child with multiple special needs, visits might involve a team of educators who have specialized training in areas such as physical therapy, speech therapy, or occupational therapy. Families of different cultures have varying interpretations and attitudes toward disabling conditions; home visits allow teachers to learn more about the cultural perspective of the family toward the child’s disability (Research Identifies, 2001).
**Disadvantages of home visits.** Home visits have disadvantages as well. To plan, schedule, and make home visits is very time consuming for educators. Some families may regard home visits as an intrusion, and their privacy and boundary needs must be honored (Singer & Powers, 1993). Other families who live in poverty may be embarrassed to have teachers visit their homes. Home visits in high crime neighborhoods or rural areas can also be potentially dangerous. Visiting in teams and carrying cell phones for emergencies help ensure safety (Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996).

**Informal principal meetings**

Principals who make themselves available to families on a regular basis invite positive, two-way school-home communication and build bridges with families. The climate of these informal meetings, held during either morning or evenings hours, “can be an essential element in maintaining positive home-school relations throughout the year” (Robbins and Alvy, 1995, p. 210). These meetings can also serve as a forum to gain parent input on hot issues and let parents know that their opinions are valued.

At Ridgetop Elementary School in Austin, TX, Principal Julie Pryor meets parents for an informal potluck breakfast every Friday morning. Parents are invited to talk about any issues of concern to them, which can range from adjustment for new students to cafeteria menus. The informal meeting attracts about 35 parents weekly, according to parent support coordinator Maria Teresa Flores (personal communication, September 22, 2002).

**Positive “warm” telephone calls**

In most instances the only time parents receive a telephone call from their child’s school is when there is a problem. The intent of a positive “warm” telephone call, in contrast, is to “establish or strengthen a two-way communication flow and to build the collaborative relationship between the family and the school” (Lueder, 1998, p. 105). Positive calls “can go a long way in fostering a sense of commitment to the student and to ongoing communications with the family (rather than communications that occur only when problems arise)” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). In addition to welcoming parents, these calls can convey the importance of information sharing, provide contact information, invite parents to school events, give parents an opportunity to ask questions, and enable teachers to learn more about individual students (Gustafson, 1998).

In addition to making positive phone calls, former Missouri junior high principal Dr. Todd Whitaker also sent “positive postcards” home to parents. These served as an effective way to praise students for positive accomplishments and to “enhance positive relations with all parents in the school” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001). Postcards were “doubly appropriate” for students whose families did not have telephones. Although Whitaker had doubts when the school first started sending the postcards, these were quickly alleviated:

> “I’ll never forget that years after some students went through our school I could go into their homes, and every postcard they ever received from our staff was still prominently posted on the family refrigerator. And I do believe that having parents think positive thoughts about you and your school every time they get out the milk is probably very beneficial in establishing the relationship that you would like.” (p. 61)

When school staff members do need to contact family members with concerns, positive communication strategies should be used to connect with families. These strategies include conveying the desire to work together to help the child, using the family’s own language or a translator, not talking “above” family members, listening to the family member’s perspective and valuing his/her input, asking the family member for help, and thanking the family member for “listening, caring, and helping” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Moles, 1996).
**Home-school notes/notebooks**

Communication can be sustained by a variety of parent-friendly formats that invite two-way interaction (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, *Critical Issue*, 1996). For example, special folders can be used to send home student work and school notices each week; the folder can include a place for parent comments to encourage two-way communication (National PTA, *Standard 1: Communicating*, 2000).

**Fayetteville Elementary School** in Fayetteville, NY, has adopted a brightly colored, easily identified, parent-friendly, bound notepad for the past three years to encourage two-way communication between home and school. Fayetteville Elementary Principal Nancy Smith says her staff “views the form as a simple practice that facilitates home-school communication and sends a message to parents that we realize their time is valuable and that we want to assist them with following school procedures” (personal communication, August 20, 2002).

Home-school interactive notebooks, or message journals, are an effective way for parents and teachers to maintain communication (National PTA, 2000). These journals can be beneficial not only to communicate to families what their children are learning at school, but also to help students “integrate their understandings” of what they are learning while improving their writing skills (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000; Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002).

Home-school notebooks are also an effective way to communicate with families of children with disabilities who may be unable to communicate important information to their families. Notebooks travel back and forth between home and school carrying messages about accomplishments, concerns, needs, and assignments. Parents and teachers communicating with interactive notebooks should decide together how frequently to write, who will write, what kinds of information will be shared, and who will have access to the journal (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

**Conferences**

School conferences, scheduled periodically throughout the school year, allow families to communicate face-to-face and individually with teachers concerning their children’s academic progress at a time and location that is convenient to their needs. If parents cannot come to school, they may be able to participate through conference calls or other technological means. Berger (1995) offers a Conference Checklist (p. 199) which may be used to evaluate the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences.

---

**Mobile Conferences**

Giancarlo Mercado, who characterizes herself as a “community style teacher,” teaches several students in the Los Angeles School District who are bused across town to Venice from East Hollywood. To make conferences more convenient for these parents, Ms. Mercado makes arrangements to meet parents in their neighborhood schools for conferences three times yearly. “Yes, it takes effort,” she said, “but they (the parents) are making an effort, too. And I can’t think of what our relationship would be like if I didn’t meet them halfway.”

(Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001, p. 71)
**Student-led Parent-Teacher Conferences.** Student-led parent-teacher conferences encourage both students and parents to actively participate in the educational process. Schools that used student-led conferences found that parent attendance rates were higher than with traditional parent-teacher conferences (Hackmann, 1996; Little & Allan, 1989; Borba & Olvera, 2001). The student-led conference enables students to reflect on the school curriculum and their own learning (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002), communicate with both teachers and parents about their learning experiences, assume more direct “ownership of their learning” (Borba & Olvera, 2001), and “see themselves as capable of participating in the assessment process as reflective learners” (Austin, 1994, p. 90).

With sufficient preparation and support, students with disabilities from age 14, or sometimes even younger, can be active participants in planning their Individualized Education Program (IEP). With training in self-determination skills, these students may participate in and even lead their own IEP meetings, including the development of their individualized transition plan (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001; Warger & Burnette, 2000).

**IEP Conferences.** The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandates that “schools provide an opportunity for active parental participation in decisions about the education of children” (Smith, 2001), including the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEP). In fact, family involvement is considered a “necessary ingredient for appropriate and individualized educational programming” (Smith, 2001). One of the many benefits of family involvement in the IEP process is improved communication between parents and the school (Smith, 2001).

Much has been written about how to conduct IEP meetings that maximize parent participation. The following are a few suggestions for how school staff might prepare for an IEP meeting (Peter, 1992):

- Tell parents why parent involvement is crucial and what will happen at the meeting
- Invite parents to bring anyone they wish
- Explain who will attend from the school district and why; ask parents if anyone has been left out
- Schedule a convenient time and location, and ample time for the meeting
- Find out if parents need help with transportation or childcare
- Invite parents to review relevant documents prior to meeting and encourage classroom visits

To promote the family partnership envisioned by IDEA, teachers should meet the child’s family to obtain information at the beginning of the year and maintain contact throughout the year to report progress and solve problems collaboratively via communication notebooks, phone calls, e-mail messages, and/or face-to-face meetings (Beckman, 2001).

*Parents who work collaboratively with schools provide educators the necessary tools to value their child as a learner, a student, and as a human being.*

*Cassandra Archie, Advocates for Educational Equity, Rochester, NY*

**Newsletters**

School and classroom newsletters can provide a steady stream of information from school to home. Brief newsletters that are informative and sent to families on a regular basis are more likely to be read than longer newsletters that are printed occasionally (Power, *Parent Power*, 1999). Newsletters can include interactive features that allow for two-way communication, including columns written by family and community members and mini-surveys inviting family responses. They may also include suggested learning activities that involve family members. Family volunteers can work on newsletters at home or at school assisting with the writing, design, desktop publishing, and dissemination.
Technology tools
A variety of technology tools may be utilized to effectively and efficiently communicate with families. Many schools have developed and maintain World Wide Web sites that include a wealth of information for families. Some districts have developed Internet-based, home-school communication programs where families can access student and school information such as daily grade reports, attendance reports, individual class web pages, class newsletters and reports, and school information and calendars (Imelli & Purvis, 2000; Nixon, 2002). Including a special link to information of interest to parents (family center hours, family involvement policy, upcoming workshops, volunteer opportunities, homework hotline, etc.) is a family-friendly way to make information readily available.

The Rush-Henrietta Central School District in New York has created a family-friendly school calendar on its web site, which may be accessed by month, school, or category. This resource allows parents to access information about district-wide events for the entire school year or to narrow their search, for example, to upcoming family center events and school parent group activities in a particular school during a given month of the year (Rush-Henrietta Central School District, 2002). The Paideia School in Atlanta, GA, has developed a web site (http:/www.paideiaschool.org) that includes an extensive listing of parent organizations and events as well as an online parent involvement interest form.

Teachers are also using e-mail messages and list servs to maintain two-way communication with families. However, since not all families have Internet access, teachers need to communicate with families in a variety of ways. Publicizing the availability of school computer labs for family use during non-school hours is helpful for families who do not have computers at home, as are computer lending libraries for families (Power, Parent Power, 1999).

Many schools are now wiring classrooms for telephones at the same time that they are wiring for Internet access, giving teachers telephones in their classrooms for the first time (Zehr, 1999). The introduction of this technology in the classroom, which many educators feel is long overdue, represents yet another avenue for teachers to communicate with family members, both directly and indirectly. Utilizing the “Transparent School” model, parents can leave messages for teachers, and an autodialing system can broadcast messages to multiple families to convey school information (Fruchter, Galleta, & White, 1992).

Daily Family Phone Messages
Teresa Jo Clemens-Bower (1997), a teacher at Errol Hassell Elementary School in Aloha, OR, records a one-minute voice mail message to inform family members about what is happening in her class each day. At the end of the recorded message, family members and students calling in have the option of leaving messages. “Over the past seven years,” she says, “parents have heard trumpet performances of Three Blind Mice, responded to request for toilet paper rolls, left many messages of thanks and praise, and have always appreciated feeling connected in a non-threatening way. Most importantly, children who used to report they did nothing at school know that parents now have a way to really hear what has been going on. This back-up system has increased the amount that children share with parents and has families feeling like our school is doing great things for children!” (personal communication, August 12, 2002).
Homework hotlines where students and parents can access homework assignments on a daily basis have also become increasingly popular. The New York City United Federation of Teachers maintains Dial-A-Teacher, a homework helping service for parents and students, 12 hours weekly in eight different languages. (See Strategy 5: Supporting family involvement on the homefront). Some schools offer regular “parent call-in” times for parents to discuss their questions or concerns with teachers or administrators (Moles, 1996).

The Pioneer Central School District in Yorkshire, NY, uses a ParentCONNECT system maintained by the school district to communicate with parents. Logging into the site, parents may access information about their children including: attendance records, discipline incidents, and health and immunization records. In addition, parents of students attending Pioneer Middle School and Pioneer High School have access to information pertaining to homework assignments, report card grades, and current grade point averages. ParentCONNECT users may also subscribe to automated e-mail notification of attendance reports, discipline incidents, failing grades, or missing assignments.

Local cable channels and radio stations can also be effective communication vehicles for school-family information. For non-English speaking parents, school events may be publicized on radio stations/programs that broadcast in their language (Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996).

Making sure that school-home communication is conveyed in multiple ways and does not assume that all families have access to technology will help all families in the school community stay informed.

**Processes for resolving family concerns**

Each school needs to have a clear process for resolving family concerns. “Although conflict in schools is inevitable, effective school leaders minimize, manage, and eliminate misunderstandings” by addressing concerns in a responsive manner (Strickland & Chan, 2001, p.81). A parental complaint form may be used to document the individual making the complaint, the nature of the complaint, and the follow-up actions taken by the school to address the concern. An electronic version may be posted on the school’s web page.

For disagreements arising from special education issues, “the best, fastest, and least costly way to solve a conflict is through informal problem solving” (Smith, 2001). Family members and educators “should keep in mind that the student’s interest is the main objective, and, regardless of the outcome, school personnel and parents will still have to work together” (Smith, 2001).

**Family Support Teams**

Peck Elementary School, a high poverty school in Houston, TX, has created a Family Support Team to assist teachers and families when they have problems related to children’s learning or behavior. The team communicates to the family what the school is doing to address the problem and works to involve the support of the family at home. This promotes consistency between what is happening at home and at school. The team also helps to “identify and resolve” home situations that may be affecting children’s success at school. The team, which meets weekly, includes the project manager, school principal, Title I coordinator, and school nurse, according to Tameka Qualls, project manager.

(Council for Chief State School Officers and The Charles A. Dana Center, 2002; personal communication December 5, 2002)
If family members and educators are unable to resolve the conflict, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides for mediation, “a voluntary and confidential process that brings conflicting parties together” to resolve their differences and avoid due process through the assistance of a trained mediator (Smith, 2001). “Conflicts that arise out of misunderstandings or lack of shared information can be resolved through mediators helping parents, educators, and service providers to communicate directly with one another” (Engiles, Fromme, LeResche, & Moses, 1999). When working with culturally diverse families, it is important that mediators be skilled in “diversity, cultural competence, flexibility, and the design of processes that are culturally relevant and appropriate to all participants” and to put into practice “collaborative dispute resolution strategies that respect diverse methods of handling conflicts” (Engiles, Fromme, LeResche, & Moses, 1999).

Following parent-teacher disagreements, it is important to be ready to “mend fences” (Smith & Smith, 2003). “There may be times when you disagree with families or they disagree with you. Remember that it is in everyone’s interest to understand and accept these differences and not let them interfere with the ongoing collaborative relationship.”

---

**Guidelines for Written School-family Communication**

- Include non-custodial fathers and mothers in all correspondence, including divorced parents as well as parents whose children are in foster care.
- Include parents whose children are placed out of district in all communication.
- Use current terminology that is respectful of families who have children with disabilities.
- Make sure written communication is easily understood, jargon free, and available in the native language of all families represented in the school, and that it recognizes that family members other than parents may be raising children (“Dear Parent or Caregiver”).
- For families with emerging literacy levels, record communications on cassette tapes and make these available through the family center lending library. (See *Strategy 2: Building a Support Infrastructure* p. 36.) (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Critical Issue, 1996).