CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TEACHERS, CAREGIVERS, AND THE COMMUNITY WORKING IN COLLABORATION

Act as if it were impossible to fail.

DOROTHEA BROUDE

Scenario

It is the end of May and Mr. Blackhawk has just completed his first year of teaching kindergarten. He reflects on the year by compiling two lists—one of triumphs and one of trials. He lists his triumphs first and is pleased with his accomplishments. Then he begins his list of trials. At the top he writes: PARENTS. As an undergraduate he learned that teachers are responsible for working with parents and making them a part of their children's education. He never expected, however, the wide range of parents' personalities and their unpredictable reactions. In general, he has encountered six approaches from parents and caregivers: (1) those who are concerned and want to do everything to aid their child; (2) those who appear not to care in the least about their child's education and seem to not want to be "bothered" with school; (3) those who refuse to believe that their child has any problem with school; (4) those who cannot help their child because of a language barrier but do care about their child's progress; (5) those who are new to the United States and do not understand its educational system; and (6) those who blame him for everything—these parents are frequently at the school interrupting his class.

Mr. Blackhawk decides his top priority for the summer is to research professional journals and books on working with and understanding parents. As he thumbs through some of his back issues of *The Reading Teacher,* he finds many schools and teachers have made it their priority to involve parents by giving them a simple yet effective routine for reading with their child each evening. He particularly likes Kindervater's (2010) research on using Padak and Rasinski's (2008) idea of using kinesthetic motions while reading poetry, chants, and songs. Mr. Blackhawk likes how it actively engages children in a fun way and that the idea might be new to parents. He figures most parents are like anyone else—they like new ideas. He also likes that it will not take much time each evening.

He finds a wide array of short poems, chants, and songs at the local library. He decides to use humor as a central theme. He believes humorous poems are more fun for the family to read than serious poems. Using *Fast Star: Getting Ready to Read* (Padak & Rasinski, 2008), Mr. Blackhawk types up pages listing the focus sound for each poem, the directions to the motion, and the poem; he adds his own illustration to make the page more appealing. See Figure 14.1.

He decides to use this as an action research project. During the first weeks of school, he will obtain a benchmark of each student's letter, letter-sound, and word knowledge. He plans to use the same assessment at the end of the year to record growth. He also needs parents to record the time they spent each evening, so he makes

figure 14.1 Sample poem, "The Town Clock," with motions.

Parents: Every time you and your child hear the /t/ sound at the beginning of a word, quickly tap your index finger on your thumb. Your child has learned this motion in school so he/she may want to "teach" you the motion.

The Town Clock

Tick, tock, tick, tock sounds the old town clock
Telling tiny tots in town
It's time to take a nap.

a simple form (Figure 14.2) that parents can use to record the amount of time and their reaction to the poem. He will introduce the project to his parents during the first open house in the fall and share one or two poems and motions with them so they will become excited about the project.

figure 14.2 Weekly log of reading together.

DAY	AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT	COMMENTS
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		

Parent Signature: _____

guiding questions

As you are reading the chapter, consider the following questions:

1. Describe the six different approaches/attitudes of parents toward their child's education that Mr. Blackhawk encountered.
2. How do you think Mr. Blackhawk should involve parents who exhibit each of these approaches/attitudes in their child's education?
3. What are some effective ways you would recommend that he communicate with parents?
4. What other guidance would you have to help him establish a home–school connection?

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement is an important ingredient in children's education. Initiatives at the local and national levels have aimed to promote parental involvement. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act states: "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting social, emotional, and academic growth of children." The National PTA has developed national standards for parental involvement programs, which charge both the school and parents with specific responsibilities. The school is responsible for (1) scheduling regular communication between home and school, (2) supporting parenting skills, and (3) involving parents in major decisions. The parents are responsible for (1) assisting in their child's learning, (2) volunteering at school, and (3) collaborating with the community to provide resources to the schools. Many local districts have also initiated school literacy programs. These programs challenge students to read books at home and to have their caregivers document it. The purpose is not only to have children read at home, but also to make literacy a family affair.

Parental involvement encompasses two basic categories: involvement at school and involvement at home. The involvement at school includes activities such as attending scheduled family–teacher conferences, attending PTA or PTO meetings, holding positions on local school boards, being part of decision-making committees, chaperoning class field trips, and volunteering on a regular

basis in the classroom, on the playground, or in the library. Involvement at home includes such activities as providing breakfast for one's children, monitoring their homework, reading and writing with them, and making sure they get the proper amount of rest. Studies have shown that parental involvement at home impacts students' learning more than parental engagement at school (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2006; Michigan Department of Education, 2002). However, both affect students' grades, test scores, and attitudes (Sheldon, 2002).

This chapter focuses on (1) the importance of teachers understanding their students' home lives; (2) the benefits of parental involvement; (3) attributes of engaged parents; (4) how to communicate with parents; (5) initiating parental involvement that makes a difference; (6) working with difficult parents; (7) working with community volunteers; and (8) parental involvement and technology. Remember that not all students in your classroom live with their biological parents. Instead of using the word *parent* in communications, use *caregivers*. References to parents in this chapter also refer to caregivers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING THEIR STUDENTS' HOME LIVES

It is imperative that teachers understand the homes from which their students come. Many teachers work in cultural environments that differ from their own backgrounds. Different cultures sometimes emphasize different value systems and ways of communicating.

Teachers must consider that:

- Some families value cooperation. These students may readily share answers with someone who does not know them.
- Some parents instruct children to lower their eyes when they are being reprimanded. These students may avoid eye contact when they are being reprimanded.
- Some parents will never ask a child a question if they already know the answer. These students may not respond to questions if they think the teacher knows the answer.
- In some cultures children bring disgrace to the family if they complete a task incorrectly. These students may not respond in class or hand in work unless they know the answers are correct.
- In some families men expect women to do as they are told. Students from these families may not accept instruction from a woman.

Be careful not to make assumptions about a student based on his neighborhood. Often teachers work in communities where the average socioeconomic status differs from their own. Here are some situations to consider:

- Not all poor students who live in urban areas come from homes affected by crime and drugs.
- Not all middle-class students who live in the suburbs come from homes that are free from crime and drugs.
- Some working parents are often on business trips and have little time to spend with their children.
- Some parents work two or three jobs to keep food on the table. They may have little energy to read and write with their child when they are home.
- Some students may live with two dads or two moms.
- Some impoverished families move frequently due to circumstances beyond their control. These students may attend two or three different schools a year.
- Some children live in ethnically blended families.
- Some children live with an aging grandparent, another relative, or in a foster home.
- Some children live in homes where domestic employees do everything for them. They may lack practical skills.
- Some children, regardless of their class or neighborhood, live with abusive parents.
- Some children are neglected for long periods of time while a parent engages in illicit behavior.
- Some parents overemphasize the importance of being popular or thin.
- Some parents who do not speak English strongly desire their children to succeed.
- Some parents will not recognize their child has difficulty learning.

Teachers must consider all of these situations and many others when thinking about parental involvement.

Because a positive home–school connection results in higher student performance, you may want to follow these effective principles (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2009).

1. Learn as much as possible about the student, his family, and the community.
2. Warmly greet parents at open houses, parent-teacher conferences, or on the street.
3. Share a student's success with her parents.
4. Ask parents what they observe about their child's literacy skills.
5. If there is a language barrier try to find someone in the school or community to help during con-

ferences and to write notes home in the parents' native language.

6. Attend community events so parents see teachers as people interested in their community.
7. Invite parents to sessions that demonstrate how parents can help their child at home.
8. Work with community groups that offer free tutoring to students in the neighborhood. Teach the tutor some basic strategies, such as creating story maps or graphic organizers for informational text.
9. Research available health and social services in the community and link the agencies with the families who need them.
10. Provide parent networks to help new families who have moved into the school district.

BENEFITS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Students benefit in a number of ways—academically, physically, socially, and emotionally—if their parents or caregivers are actively involved in their education. Studies indicate that students who are more successful academically have parents who are involved in their schooling (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; SEDL, 2006; Porter Decusati, & Johnson, 2004; Rasinski & Padak, 2003; Sheldon, 2002). This is true of students from across the socioeconomic spectrum and from both majority and minority groups (SEDL, 2006; Ho, 2002). Their improved academic success is reflected in the daily grades and test scores. Students who have parents who value learning and monitor homework also have a more positive attitude toward learning. Students whose parents discuss school with them also earn higher grades (SEDL, 2006).

Students who have academically involved parents also enjoy better physical well-being (Finn, 1998). Involved parents make sure the child eats well-balanced meals; they discourage sugary snacks and provide regular meals. Involved parents who qualify for free or reduced-cost breakfast at school make sure the child is at school in time to eat it. Involved parents monitor their child's sleep habits and make sure the child gets plenty of rest. They also understand the importance of regular physical exercise; they play outside with their children and allow ample time for physical activity. Involved parents monitor the number of hours their child sits in front of the computer or the television. They are aware of the websites the child visits and the shows he watches. They often watch and discuss shows together.

Students who have involved parents are socially well-adjusted (SEDL, 2006). Parents model the importance of social interaction when they are involved with PTA or PTO, school-wide projects, or class field trips. Through their parents' involvement, students learn the importance of contributing to society by helping others.

Students also benefit emotionally from parental involvement in school (SEDL, 2006). When there is communication between the school and parent, the student knows that two sets of people who are significant in her life are caring for her. Parents and teachers who have common goals for a child prevent conflict between home and school expectations. Children benefit from that stability.

Parental involvement not only improves students' performance, but it also improves parents' perception of school effectiveness (Jensen, 2006; Ho, 2002) and gives them ownership in the school's process. Parents who become involved in a school project work hard toward its success and take pride in their work. However, if the project is not as successful as expected, they understand the factors that hindered their goal and are not as critical as uninvolved parents.

ENGAGED PARENTS

Parents become engaged when they believe that (1) they can affect their child's education, (2) they are important in their child's development, (3) their school wants their help, (4) they feel comfortable helping at school, and (5) they can be successful in helping with their child's learning (Jensen, 2006; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Which parents are most involved in their children's school? Statistically, they are more likely to be white middle-class families (SEDL, 2006); other characteristics include parents with higher education and higher incomes, families with two parents, and parents who have ties with other parents from their child's school (Ho, 2002; Sheldon, 2002). However, demographics alone do not explain why parents become involved. Parents are inclined to become involved at school when they feel welcomed and needed by teachers and administrators (SEDL, 2002).

Who are the parents involved in children's education at home? Caucasian and non-Caucasian mothers have similar levels of parental involvement at home. Parents who have more ties with other adults—such as relatives or parents from other schools—are more involved than parents who are isolated. Urban parents have lower involvement at home than do rural or suburban parents (Sheldon, 2002). Sheldon found that when parents are connected to at least one or two parents from the same school, they become more involved in their children's education at school and at home. The social interactions give parents the opportunity to discuss

mutual concerns and to offer advice. Teachers and administrators must work at forming connections between parents and understanding parents' needs.

WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS

Teachers must communicate with parents so they feel connected to the school and understand their involvement greatly influences their children's learning (Morrow, Kuhn, & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Jensen, 2006; White & Kim, 2008; Kindervater, 2010; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Teachers can communicate with parents a number of ways—introductory letters, newsletters, bulletin boards, parents' nooks, good news calls, happy grams, portfolios with personal notes, greeting parents in the morning or after school, and family–teacher conferences (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2009; Jensen, 2006).

Introductory Letters

Introductory letters from new or first-year teachers are very important to parents whether they are mailed or e-mailed. Parents are often wary of a first-year teacher who is new to the community or building. Introductory letters give parents a brief description of a teacher's past experiences and hobbies. Sharing this information makes the teacher sound both professional and human. The letter should also include a brief description of the educational goals for the class, any school-wide initiatives for the year, a description of any new national or state standards, and a brief statement of their teaching philosophy. The letter can also include a list of materials that would be useful for the class throughout the year, such as empty plastic containers, old appliances for students to disassemble, materials for science experiences, or old magazines. The letter should also include important lists of materials the students are required to have for class, a telephone number and e-mail address with the best times to contact the teacher, and reminders about upcoming events. The letter should conclude with an invitation for parents to become involved at school and name some specific opportunities, such as reading and playing literacy games with the students or writing the classroom's newsletter. Figure 14.3 presents a sample letter of introduction from a fourth-grade teacher.

Introductory Parent–Teacher Conference

An informal introductory parent–teacher conference at the beginning of the school year is another way teachers can begin collaborating with their students' parents. The conference can be at school or at the student's home. If the meeting takes place at the home, arrange for another professional to accompany you. The purpose of this conference is for you to listen to the parents and student to begin building rapport; it is an opportunity to find out information about the student the parents want to share. During conferences later in the semester, such a discussion is often not possible due to the educational matters that need to be discussed. The initial conference builds a relationship between the teacher and the parents that centers on the child and not the curriculum; it allows you to communicate a genuine interest in the child. Later, the relationship solidifies as the teacher and parents discuss the child's academics, behavior, and social interactions in detail. If issues arise about the student later, the rapport established in the early conference may make them easier to resolve.

Newsletters

Communication with parents via newsletters is often a one-way communication made from school to home. Teachers share what topics are being studied in math, science, social studies, and health and what stories they are reading. They may describe strategies they are teaching in reading and writing and share information about an author study and/or information about any technology the students are learning to use.

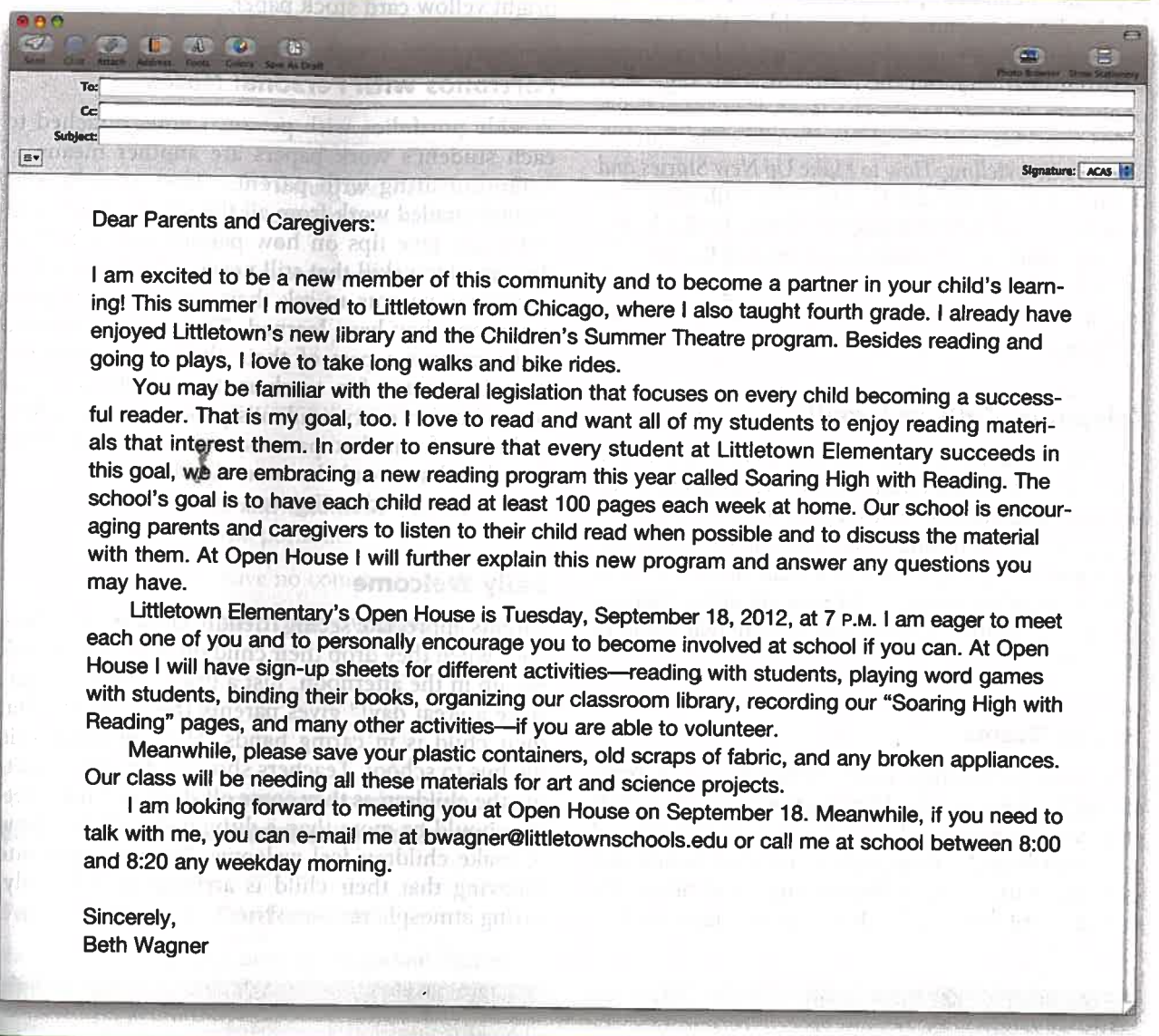
Jensen (2006) suggests teachers create newsletters that invite parents to initiate some home activities with the child, such as looking up information on particular websites or viewing certain educational television programs. Or, when the class is learning how to create timelines use the newsletter to ask parents to assist their child in designing a timeline of the child's life from birth to the present day, highlighting main events. If the class is studying different jobs around in the community, use the newsletter to invite parents to talk about their job(s) with their child so he can tell the class about it.

When newsletters encourage their involvement, parents feel like they are a source of support for their child's learning. They feel connected to the school and are much more positive about it. Students are more successful and happier when they know that teachers and parents are communicating (SEDL, 2006).

Jensen (2006) suggests the following guidelines for creating newsletters:

1. The tone of the newsletter should be warm and inviting; avoid educational jargon.
2. Use a format that is simple in design and easy to read, including bold or italic print and color for headlines.

figure 14.3 Sample letter of introduction.



To:
Cc:
Subject:
Signature: ACAS

Dear Parents and Caregivers:

I am excited to be a new member of this community and to become a partner in your child's learning! This summer I moved to Littletown from Chicago, where I also taught fourth grade. I already have enjoyed Littletown's new library and the Children's Summer Theatre program. Besides reading and going to plays, I love to take long walks and bike rides.

You may be familiar with the federal legislation that focuses on every child becoming a successful reader. That is my goal, too. I love to read and want all of my students to enjoy reading materials that interest them. In order to ensure that every student at Littletown Elementary succeeds in this goal, we are embracing a new reading program this year called Soaring High with Reading. The school's goal is to have each child read at least 100 pages each week at home. Our school is encouraging parents and caregivers to listen to their child read when possible and to discuss the material with them. At Open House I will further explain this new program and answer any questions you may have.

Littletown Elementary's Open House is Tuesday, September 18, 2012, at 7 P.M. I am eager to meet each one of you and to personally encourage you to become involved at school if you can. At Open House I will have sign-up sheets for different activities—reading with students, playing word games with students, binding their books, organizing our classroom library, recording our "Soaring High with Reading" pages, and many other activities—if you are able to volunteer.

Meanwhile, please save your plastic containers, old scraps of fabric, and any broken appliances. Our class will be needing all these materials for art and science projects.

I am looking forward to meeting you at Open House on September 18. Meanwhile, if you need to talk with me, you can e-mail me at bwagner@littletownschools.edu or call me at school between 8:00 and 8:20 any weekday morning.

Sincerely,
Beth Wagner

3. Include students' work, with the permission of the parents or caregivers.
4. Always suggest websites, books, or projects that the parents can do with their child.
5. Include the topics being studied in each subject area and any new activity or project the students are doing.
6. Include a feedback section, in which parents tear off a section or link to an e-mail address to provide comments, ask questions, or express concerns.
7. Remember the parents whose first language is not English. Seek help translating some version of the newsletter if possible; students who speak the language may be able to assist you. Online translation websites may help, also, but beware: they tend to work best for single words or phrases.

Bulletin Boards

A bulletin board with notices of upcoming school events, field trips, fundraisers, assemblies, performances, meetings, and school pictures should be placed where parents see it when they enter the building. Important school policies, such as what happens during a tornado warning, a snowstorm, or a lockdown should also be posted on the board. Upcoming community events can also be posted. The bulletin board should be colorful and neat. Old notices should be removed and personal advertising prohibited.

Parents' Nook

A parents' nook is a special corner of the school that has books, magazines, and pamphlets that parents may borrow. The nook should include a checkout list so parents can sign out the materials. Two suggested books are Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2001) and Margaret Read MacDonald's *The Parent's Guide to Storytelling: How to Make Up New Stories and Retell Old Favorites* (2001). The school librarian can post an annotated bibliography of new books in the school library or a recommended reading list for each grade level. The nook can also serve as the school's lost and found area and as a place for parents to exchange games, toys, or books.

Telephone Calls or E-mails

Teachers usually contact parents when there is a problem with their child. However, teachers often fail to contact parents with a good report. It may be about a task with which the student struggled but now has mastered, or about a kind deed the child did for another student. All parents enjoy hearing about the positive actions and accomplishments of their child.

Happy Grams

Try communicating good behavior to parents through happy grams. Happy grams include words of praise, comments about kind acts, and reports of accomplishments. Happy grams must be honest and genuine. Parents appreciate hearing good news, and students are sure to give these notes to parents. You can design your own happy gram or use the design in Figure 14.4. Happy grams can be photocopied on bright yellow card stock paper.

Portfolios with Personal Notes

Weekly portfolios with personal notes attached to each student's work papers are another means of communicating with parents. The portfolio can include graded work from all the subject areas. The notes can give tips on how parents can help children master a skill that still needs to be mastered or encourage parents to ask their children to explain a concept they have learned. These personal notes make parents a part of their children's education. It is important for teachers to include personal comments on every student's paper. Some teachers include a form that parents must sign, indicating that they have read the note. A sample of a return form is presented in Figure 14.5.

Daily Welcome

Parents appreciate seeing friendly faces at the school door when they drop their child off at school or pick her up in the afternoon. Just a brief, "How are you? Have a great day!" gives parents the assurance that their child is in caring hands. Many children ride the bus to school. Teachers should take turns greeting the children as they come off the bus. This greeting should be more than a duty; it should be a time to make children feel welcome. Parents appreciate knowing that their child is arriving in a friendly, caring atmosphere.

figure **14.4** Sample happy gram.

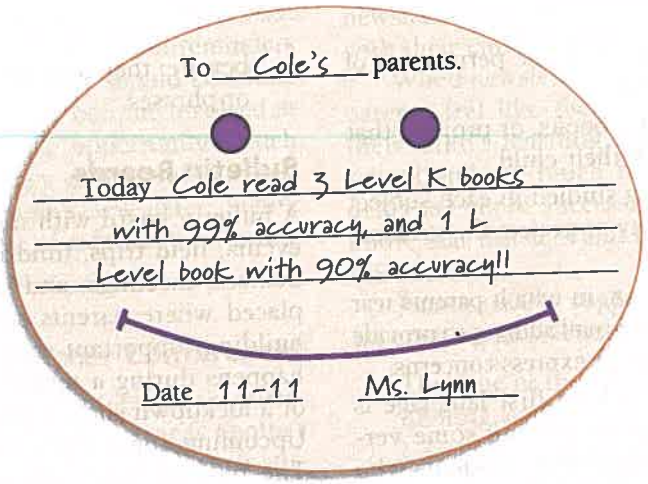


figure **14.5** Sample portfolio return form.

DATE: _____

DEAR _____

Thanks for reviewing and discussing the enclosed papers with your child. I am interested in your comments and questions. Please sign the form and give it to your child to return on Monday.

Thanks again for letting me share in your child's education!

Sincerely,

I reviewed and discussed _____ (child's name) work that you placed in the portfolio.

_____ I have no comments or questions.

_____ I have these comments, questions, or concerns:

SIGNATURE: _____

Family–Teacher Conference

Family–teacher conferences are important opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to exchange information about the student's education. When preparing for the conference, consider the following:

1. Schedule a time that is good for parents. Many working parents cannot come during the school day. Ask them for times and days when they will be available. Parents who have a number of children in the same building appreciate scheduling siblings' conferences around the same time.

2. Find out if the parents are able to read and/or speak English. It is important that teachers communicate clearly with these parents about the time and place of the conference. You may need to schedule an interpreter for the conference.

3. Be aware of who is coming to the conference. Not all children live with their biological parents. Children may live in a foster home, with grandparents, or with another relative. Also, be sensitive if there has been a recent death in the family, a divorce, or another difficult event.

4. Be sensitive regarding parents who live in poverty. They may not have transportation to the school and may not have a working telephone. Do not pressure the caregivers so they feel guilty or hostile. Be creative in letting these caregivers know they are an important part of the student's education.

5. Prepare for the conference by gathering samples of children's reading, writing, and other work. It is a good practice for you to record a student's reading on a recording device. The parents can listen to the recording during the conference, and they can discuss the student's strengths and weaknesses.

6. Involve students. Have students help select the work they want their parents to view. Discussing concerns about children when they are present reassures them that both parents and the teacher care about their progress.

7. Arrange a clean, comfortable place for the conference. Do not sit behind your desk! The desk

becomes a wall between the parents and the teacher. Also remember that student desks are not comfortable for most adults. A round table with adult-size chairs is the best setting. The room should be clean with no extra clutter.

8. Use a timer if you have conferences that run back-to-back. For example, set your cell phone to vibrate five minutes before the conference ending time. It is impolite to keep the next set of parents waiting.

9. Begin on a positive note. All parents like to hear something positive about their child. This is also a time when you can help negative parents understand that their child can do things well.

10. Have goals. Know what you want to accomplish during each conference. A few written notes can keep the conversation on track.

11. Listen to parents' concerns and questions. Parents may also have goals for the conference. It is important that you understand how parents perceive their children.

12. Don't become defensive when parents question your instructional approach or classroom policies. Many parents think they know what should be done in the classroom and disagree with how a teacher conducts her class. Give the parents plenty of time to air their concerns. If appropriate, tell them that you will consider their criticisms and suggestions.

13. Never talk about another student. Often highly competitive parents want to compare their child to classmates. Avoid mentioning the other students. Some parents may also complain about other students. Listen to what they say and reassure them that you will give their child a safe and effective learning environment.

14. Do not use jargon. The purpose of the conference is to inform the parents about their child's progress, not impress them with your knowledge.

15. End the conference with specific goals. The goals should be attainable for the child and should be goals that the parents can help the child attain. Always thank parents for coming. It is important that parents go away with valuable information and a positive feeling about the child's classroom.

Communicating with parents is an important way to get and keep them interested and involved in their children's education.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

When parents ask you what they can do at home to help their children, here are general suggestions and specific activities you may offer them.

General Suggestions to Share with Parents

First, effective parental home involvement includes having a distinct style of interacting with the child. Parents need to ask about their child's day: "What did you learn?" "What problems did you have in your subjects?" "What fun things did you do with your friends?" and "What problems did you have with classmates?" Parents need to listen attentively and provide encouragement. Second, parents should provide an emotionally supportive home environment. Children need to feel safe discussing anything without fear that their parents will become angry or stop listening. Third, parents need to provide reassurance when children encounter failure. When their children are having a difficult time with reading, writing, or spelling in school, parents should encourage them to practice, without resorting to pressure or ridicule. The parents' primary duty when it comes to education is helping their children understand that practice is necessary to become skillful in any task.

Boers (2002) collected a list of traits that teachers desire parents to have:

1. Parents who initiate communication about their child's learning style, personality, family arrangements, extracurricular activities, and perceived school problems.
2. Parents who monitor homework at home.
3. Parents who create a time and place for homework and work with their child's basic reading and writing skills.
4. Parents who value learning by allowing time for homework.
5. Parents who get involved by coming to family–teacher conferences, open houses, and other school activities.
6. Parents who discuss school matters with their child at home.
7. Parents who establish good student behavior by teaching respect, courtesy, patience, and clean language.
8. Parents who do not cover for their child.
9. Parents who respect teachers by encouraging them.
10. Parents who emphasize reading. They read with their child, to their child, and model reading for their child.
11. Parents who respond to notes promptly.
12. Parents who monitor their child's eating and sleeping habits and make sure the child comes to school clean.

Administrators can tactfully list such "Good Parenting Tips" in a newsletter that is sent home to

all parents at the beginning of the year. Parents need to understand that when they perform these acts at home, they exert a positive impact on their child's education.

Suggestions for Establishing a Home–School Literacy Connection

Many parents appreciate specific advice on how to help their child become a successful reader. The following different strategies have proven to be successful based on completed studies by reading specialists, researchers, and teachers.

Reading together

Rasinski and Padak (2003, 2007) provide the following basic guidelines for teachers to help parents read with children at home or to have the children read to the parent.

1. Limit the time to 10–20 minutes; remember that parents are tired and very busy.
2. Give parents options, such as reading to the child, reading with the child, or listening to the child read.
3. Provide the texts or booklists.
4. Teach parents how to select books at the child's reading level. If a child comes across more than five words on one page that he/she cannot read, the text is too hard for independent reading.
5. Encourage all types of reading.
6. Send home audio versions of the books if parents are learning English.
7. Share one or two new strategies with parents so they stay motivated.

Recommend that parents do the following during a reading session:

1. First, the parent reads a passage to the child (or they both listen to an audio version) and then they discuss the story.
2. Parent and child read the passage in unison (or child reads along with the audio version).
3. Parent listens as the child reads the passage.
4. Parent and child choose words from the passage and write them on index cards.
5. They use these cards to play different word games such as concentration or word sorts. They can sort words according to syllables, word patterns, or by root words.
6. To help parents who have a limited number of books in the home and do not have access to the public library, send books home with students in a plastic or canvas bag. For parents who do not read English, you can include a portable CD/DVD player with audiobooks on disks.

It is important that parents and children read together at home; however, they do not need to limit themselves to stories (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Here are suggestions for interacting with a variety of materials:

1. Read environmental print on billboards, specials in fast-food restaurants, labels on food items, and newspaper ads.
2. Read and write lists, such as recipes and birthday wish lists.
3. Read rhymes and poems and write their own version or a parody of one.
4. Sing songs and read the lyrics together. www.kids.niehs.nih.gov/music.htm includes many lyrics of children's songs.
5. Read parts of the newspaper together, such as the sports section, comics, the entertainment section, and ads from grocery stores. Play the word games found in newspapers.
6. Read mail together, including bills, so children learn how to read the amount due and the date that it is due.
7. Read from religious texts.
8. Read from song or hymnbooks.
9. Families with Internet access can visit word play sites.

Kindervater (2010) took Rasinski and Padak's suggestion about using poetry (see the chapter's opening scenario) and conducted a study to see if using poetry, chants, and songs would strengthen the home–school connection with kindergarten students. The home–school activity described in the study included the following steps:

1. Display a poem, song, or chant on a whiteboard or large poster so the class can read it a couple of times throughout the day.
2. Points to each word as you read it chorally with the class. This helps students learn directionality of reading and also learn to identify words.
3. Use kinesthetic motions that correspond to particular sounds of the consonants (Padak & Rasinski, 2008). For example, for the /t/ sound, the students put their index finger on their thumb as they would to indicate the OK gesture. When they hear the initial /t/ sound they quickly press their index finger to the thumb a couple of times and end with the index finger released from the thumb. Other consonant movements are explained in *Fast Start: Getting Ready to Read* (Padak & Rasinski, 2008).
4. After reading the poem using the kinesthetic motions, have each student take a copy of the

poem home and read it with her parents. The student gets to teach the parents the motions. Parents are encouraged to listen to their child read the poem, read the poem in unison, or do alternate readings in which the parent reads one line and the child reads the next.

Kindervater (2010) reported that 81 percent of the kindergarten students who did this activity with parents scored very well at the end of the year on their tests. Kindervater also reported that the parents really got involved and were excited to learn the new motions. Many reported that they would look for words in the environment and would say the word and do the motions; they found it a fun way to get their child excited about print.

Imperato (2009), a reading specialist, also used poetry to connect parents to the school. She suggested that teachers introduce a poem to the children on Monday, then send a copy home with students in an envelope with the general directions glued on the front and a parent-activity sheet glued on the back. On the activity sheet, parents record what activity they did with their child that evening and the amount of time they spent on the activity. The routine took about 10 to 15 minutes each evening. Imperato (2009) gave parents the following general directions:

1. Parent and child sit side by side so both can see the text.
2. Parent reads the poem two to four times as they point to each word.
3. Parent and child read the poem in unison two to four times, again pointing to the words.
4. The child reads the poem two to four times to the parent as the child points to each word.
5. Parent and child focus on a phonemic awareness or phonics activity. If the poem uses the rime /at/, the parent and child can find all the words in the poem that follow that pattern and then think of other words that come from that word family. If the poem has alliteration of the /s/, they can find all the /s/ words and then think of other words that begin with the /s/ sound.

Imperato (2009) found this activity brought good results in the first half year that the school implemented the routine. In January 66 percent of the students were nonreaders, while at the end of the year only 19 percent were nonreaders.

Summer reading programs

White and Kim (2008) were interested in connecting school to home by involving parents in their child's summer independent reading time. They believed that when students read for enjoyment, their reading skills, such as word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, world knowledge and comprehension, all improve. They also knew that maintaining students' motivation to read relied on providing them with books at their easy and independent reading levels. The summer program White and Kim (2008) started matched students with books at their reading level. Before the students left for summer break, they taught students some basic strategies to help them with comprehension as they read independently. They also taught parents how to listen and give positive feedback to their children regarding fluency. They were also prompted to ask their child to retell the story. At the end of the summer the students involved in the program had 1.3 additional months of school learning and their total reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills were higher than for students who were not involved in the program.

Students and parents were responsible for recording information about each book the student read on postcards. A copy of the postcard that White and Kim used is in Appendix D.32.

Traveling Tales

Another literacy activity for parents and children is Traveling Tales. Reutzel and Fawson (1990) designed Traveling Tales to promote writing at home. Teachers explain the process of Traveling Tales to the parents at Opening Night at the beginning of the year and give them a list of instructions. The teacher puts together a backpack or old briefcase of writing materials that travels from one student to the next. Each child receives the backpack for two nights. Figure 14.6 lists materials that should be included in the backpack.

In the Traveling Tales program parents are encouraged to write a story with their child using all of the steps of the writing process as follows:

1. The parent and child brainstorm ideas for a topic for a poem, skit, puppet play, recipe, or story.
2. They decide on the intended audience and begin to write the first draft. The draft focuses on content and not mechanics.
3. They read the passage and decide how to revise it. They are encouraged to add information, delete unnecessary material, to rearrange the material so it is easier for the reader to understand, and to look at word choice.
4. They read the second draft carefully to check for spelling and the other issues of writing mechanics. The final copy must be neat, clear, and accessible.
5. After the activity is completed, parents are invited to come to school and share the result with the class.

figure 14.6 Materials for Traveling Tales backpack.

Instructions and ideas	Stapler with staples	Unlined paper
Brass fasteners	Lined paper	Card stock paper
Various colors of construction paper	Hole punch	Drawing paper
Yarn	Poster paper	Wallpaper for book covers
Crayons	Glue sticks	Watercolors
Tape	Water-based markers	Ruler
Colored pencils	Letter stencils	Pencils
Paperclips	Felt-tip pens	Sticky notes
Plastic scissors	Examples of other books made by students	

Source: Reutzel, D. R., & Fawson, P. C. (1990). Traveling tales: Connecting parents and children through writing. *The Reading Teacher, 44,* 222–227. Reprinted with permission of the International Reading Association via Copyright Clearance Center.

Word study

Teachers can encourage word study by making word puzzles, sending them home and having the parents complete them with their children. Other game-like activities are listed in Chapter 4 (Phonemic Awareness), Chapter 6 (Word Identification), and Chapter 7 (Vocabulary Building). After you have introduced these activities to students, send examples home so they can play them with their parents. Children have the satisfaction of teaching their parents a new game! All of these activities reinforce literacy skills.

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

Teachers would be living in utopia if all parents were involved in their child's education and fully supported their schools. However, three types of parental approaches pose challenges for both seasoned and beginning teachers. They are (1) parents who do not seem to value education, (2) parents who seem highly critical of everything the teacher does, and (3) parents who seem not to accept that their child is struggling in reading or writing. The first group of parents appears to avoid responsibility for any aspect of their children's education. They may not seem to care if their child learns to read and write or if their child is in school at all. The parents in the second group may frequently be at school demanding the teacher's attention. They may often come at inappropriate times, such as in the middle of class instruction. In their eyes the teacher is almost always at fault, and they frequently blame the teacher for their child's poor progress. Parents in the third group are often highly educated and have high expectations for their child. They may not accept that their child has a difficult time with something as basic as reading and writing. All three groups of parents present different challenges.

Each of these parents is worthy of the teacher's respect. A teacher needs to remember the child when dealing with these parents. Every child deserves a fair education.

Parents Who Do Not Seem to Value Education

For students with this type of parent, provide as much extra help as possible in school because they are unlikely to receive any help at home. Pairing these students with an older, caring adult (either a retiree or a university student) or with a buddy from a middle school may help them see the importance of learning to read and write. Send home happy grams as often as possible so the parents come to see education in a more positive light. If the class presents puppet shows or readers theater for parents, encourage them to come see their child perform. Call these parents to schedule family–teacher conferences, encouraging them to come in and see the good work their child has completed. These parents need help changing their attitude about education; a positive teacher doing positive work can be just what they need.

Parents Who Seem Highly Critical

These parents present a totally different problem; they are negative and may attempt to control the teacher and the class. Giannetti and Sagarese (1998) present suggestions on how to transform these potential adversaries into educational partners:

1. Roll out the welcome mat when it is appropriate. When these parents come at inappropriate times, get out your calendar and ask them to schedule a time when you can give them your full attention.

2. Let them know you are an expert at what you do.
3. Show these parents a positive portrait of their children. Let them know that you too think their child has potential, but be honest!
4. Convey long-term goals you know you share with the parents. Plan with the parents some short-term goals that will help the child attain the long-term goals.
5. Reassure the parents that their child is in a physically and emotionally safe environment.
6. Be consistent.
7. Do not at any time make negative comments about other students. They will think you say negative things about their child to other parents.
8. Listen! Listen! Listen! They will eventually run out of steam!
9. Do not turn any conversation into a shouting match!
10. Ask the parents what they suggest you do with "the situation."

Parents Who Seem Not to Accept Their Child's Academic Difficulties

These parents frequently care a great deal for their child, involve him in many extracurricular activities, and set high goals for him. Use some of the same tactics here that you use with the aggressive parent:

1. Share with the parents the things that the child does well. Be positive about the child. Let them know that you too think their child has potential.
2. Be friendly, warm, consistent, and honest.
3. Never compare their child to another student in the class.
4. Never talk about another student.
5. Share honestly the concepts and skills with which their child struggles. Have examples of the child's work on hand to share with the parents. Your goal is to help them understand there are some skills that are difficult for their child. Convey that their goal is your goal: academic success for their child.
6. Let the parents know that with extra help from them and in class, the child will succeed.
7. With the parents, set long-term goals.
8. Also set short-term goals so that parents can see progress.
9. Send progress reports regularly to the parents.

Parents are right to expect that their child's teacher cares about their child and provides a safe learning environment in which every student can succeed.

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Teachers can involve other members of the community besides parents in the classroom. Many volunteers are retired persons who are interested in helping young children succeed or business leaders who understand the importance of reading for success in life. Successful volunteer tutors possess the fundamental characteristics presented in Figure 14.7 (Otaiba & Pappamihiel, 2005).

Volunteers who read to children should receive training from a reading specialist about effective reading techniques with students. First, they need to know how to model fluent, expressive reading so that the story comes alive for the listener. Reading specialists train volunteers by demonstrating expressive reading and "echo reading" (in which the tutee repeats the phrase or short sentence the volunteer has just read, using the same rate and intonation). Later the volunteers read to each other so they are comfortable reading with expression. Because students are introduced to new vocabulary words as they listen to stories, volunteers should learn how to prompt tutees to make guesses about the meaning of new words using picture and context clues. For example, when a tutee comes to an unknown word, he should be encouraged to read to the end of the sentence and ask, "Does the picture tell me what the word is? What word makes sense? Does that word sound right? Does it look right?"

Volunteers also need to be trained to encourage tutees to predict what will happen next in a story and how to discuss books without making the discussion seem like a quiz. For example, the following

figure **14.7**

Characteristics of effective volunteer tutors.

1. Meet state and district required background checks.
2. Have prior experience reading to children.
3. Be competent in the literacy skills they are to teach during tutoring (e.g., help children with grapho-phonic concepts and/or comprehension strategies) and be able to master skills taught during training.
4. Have positive attitudes about working with children of many cultures and backgrounds. (They must accept the child where he or she is.)
5. Be proficient in English if volunteers are second language learners.

Source: Otaiba, S., & Pappamihiel, N. E. (2005, July/August). Guidelines for using volunteer literacy tutors to support reading instruction for English language learners. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 37*(6), 6–11.

are two strategies that volunteers can use to help tutees make predictions. The first strategy involves discussing the cover illustration. The volunteer asks, "What do you think this book is about?" The tutee makes predictions based on the illustration. In the second strategy the volunteer and tutee preview the book by discussing all the pictures. While they discuss the pictures, the volunteer uses words that are found in the text. For example, while previewing the book *The Koalas,* from the Literacy 2000 Satellite series, the tutee may see a picture and predict that the koala is sleeping. While discussing how the koala is hanging in the tree, the volunteer uses the word *resting,* the word used in the text.

Discussions with tutees should evoke higher-level thinking. Volunteers need to be taught the difference between lower-level questions in which the answer is written on the page and higher-level questions that have no simple right or wrong answers. Volunteers need to understand the importance of having the student explain answers to higher-level questions, because sometimes the answers appear to be incorrect until they give their reasoning. Volunteers also need to encourage students to ask questions as they read stories and concept books. Volunteers do not diagnose reading problems nor do they provide instruction; however, they are important allies in students' literacy development. These volunteers' main goal is to provide enrichment experiences without emphasizing the diagnostic and intervention aspects of reading events. They accomplish this goal by supporting students as they read and by modeling good fluent reading. Research indicates that reading to students is positively related to children's reading success (Morrow, 2005; Kindervater, 2010; Padak & Rasinski, 2008; Imperato, 2009). As volunteers spend time listening to tutees read, they also teach them new words. They encourage tutees to work on expression, fluency, and rate by reading easy books. When a tutee reads a book that is at his or her instructional level, the volunteer and the tutee can read in unison so that the tutee does not struggle with unknown words. If possible, volunteers should record a tutee's reading and then listen to the recording with him or her, pointing out areas of improvement. This procedure permits students to evaluate their own reading. Volunteers provide encouragement and give struggling readers a chance to read without fear of being ridiculed by classmates.

Throughout this text, there are many game-like activities that build reading and writing skills. Volunteers can conduct these activities with tutees to make reading a more enjoyable experience for tutees. Reading specialists should explain how these activities build literacy skills so the volunteers understand their importance in helping a child learn to read.

CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

Technology Nights

Many parents understand that computers are essential tools in the 21st century. Schools can share with parents what they are doing with computers. One event that can connect parents to the school is a technology night at the school (DuPont, 1998) in which parents come to see what their child can do on the computer. The children serve as teachers for the evening with the classroom teacher monitoring the activities. Present a sample of each student's writing and have the student demonstrate to his parents how he uses the word processor for revisions, adds clip art to his story, or creates PowerPoint presentations of his research. For parents who lack computer skills such a demonstration may be impressive. Parents who work on a computer daily will appreciate that their child is learning to use this important tool.

On a technology night, a younger child can demonstrate how she reads along with the computer. Using one of the many interactive books, the child can share how the computer helps her pronounce unknown words and how the computer gives her the definitions of words she does not know.

Technology Classes for Parents

Some schools are in neighborhoods where most parents do not have a computer at home. These schools can sponsor a technology class for parents on a Saturday morning or another time when most parents can attend. The instructor must know which computer programs are available to the parents in the public library so they can introduce those programs first. Then parents can go with their child to the library and use the computer together.

Technology in the Home

Teachers who work in neighborhoods where most households have computers may find it helpful to share educational websites with parents. Many authors of children's literature have websites featuring various types of activities that are age-appropriate for the author's readers. Many of these authors allow interested readers to subscribe to free e-mail newsletters through their websites. An activity in Chapter 11 includes a list of authors' websites.

Other educational websites are designed for home use. One such site is www.afterschool.gov. This site links to other enriching websites that reinforce skills and provide information about the world (Henkel, 2002).

Padak and Rasinski (2007) suggest teachers share the following websites with parents to assist them in choosing quality literature for their children.

American Library Association's site of notable children's books: www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb/index.cfm.

Booklists by grade level: www.waterboro library.org

The IRA children's choice of books: www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/ChildrensChoices.aspx

NEA teachers' top 100 books list: www.nea.org/grants/13154.htm

Carol Hurst's children's literature site: www.booksintheclassroom.com/allreviewed.php

The Horn Book's list of recommended books: www.hbook.com/resources/books/default.asp

The Children's Book Council book lists: www.cbcbooks.org/readinglists/

A comprehensive guide to English-language children's book awards: www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/awards.html

Links to children's book lists compiled by public libraries nationwide: www.bookspot.com/readinglists/childrens.htm

The following sites focus on poetry. Some include poems to read, while others help children write poems.

www.gigglepoetry.com

www.poetry4kids.com

http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/index.htm

Encourage parents to explore these websites with their child. It gives them an opportunity to read, write, and learn together in an enjoyable setting. Parents are encouraged to share with the class appropriate websites they have found, but always check out these websites yourself before you pass them along to other teachers and parents. Be sure to publicly thank the parents who suggest the sites.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Working with parents can be one of the most challenging pieces of the teaching puzzle. However, the benefits for children are great when parents become involved in their children's education at school and at home. Parents can be very helpful to teachers by offering ideas and resources. It is important to remember that parents and teachers share a common goal: they want the child to succeed in school and to remain a lifelong learner.

Reflective Learning — PARENT VOLUNTEERS

Scenario. Ms. Green is a first-year, first-grade teacher who wants the parents of her students to be a part of their learning. At the open house during the second week of school, she encourages parents and caregivers to become involved with their children's learning at home and at school. She shares a list of things they can do with their children at home, such as provide a quiet space for reading and other homework, provide healthy snacks and meals, set a consistent bedtime, and talk to them about their school day.

Ms. Green also invites the parents to volunteer at school by organizing the classroom library, listening to children read, and copying learning materials. She is quite pleased when one mother comes up to her after the meeting and says she would love to volunteer in the classroom and would be there in the morning.

The first morning the mother helps out by organizing the bookshelves; by the afternoon she is talking to Ms. Green about her child's progress and what Ms. Green should do to help her son. Ms. Green wants to be friendly so she accepts the advice with a smile. But as the days progress the mother becomes more aggressive, insisting that Ms. Green treat her son differently by giving him extra help and not being as strict with him as she is with the others. Ms. Green does not know what to do, but she continues to take the advice with a smile and does give some extra help to the mother's son. Then one day Ms. Green discovers the mother in the teachers' lounge talking about Ms. Green's inadequacies. Of course, Ms. Green is crushed.

QUESTIONS:

1. What should Ms. Green do?
2. What could Ms. Green have done differently to avoid these complications?