

Engaging Parents Through Better Communication Systems

*New research shows that frequent,
personalized outreach to parents works.
How can schools support the practice?*

Matthew A. Kraft

When I was a teacher, I quickly came to appreciate how profoundly my students' experiences outside of school influenced their performance in the classroom. My daily work to support their learning was certainly important, but sometimes my best efforts in the classroom were not enough. On occasion, I would reach out to parents for help and to better understand what students were experiencing outside of school. Through these conversations, I was also able to give parents detailed information about how their child was doing in my class and suggestions on how they could support my efforts in the

classroom. In turn, parents gave me new insights into the specific circumstances and learning needs of their children. But because of the daily demands on my time and the lack of schoolwide support, I contacted parents less frequently than would have benefitted me or my students.

As a researcher, I've come to appreciate even more strongly the potential of schools' efforts to engage parents as partners in students' learning. A large body of literature dating back over a half century to the famous Coleman Report in 1966 illustrates how factors outside of school are the dominant influence on students' academic achievement (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004;). Simply put, while effective teachers and solid curricula are crucial, the role that parents play in shaping

students' educational experiences and supporting their in-school success cannot be overstated. When parents foster positive learning environments at home and are engaged in their students' schooling, kids have much better academic outcomes (Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Todd & Wolpin, 2007).

In light of this, it is essential for school leaders and teachers to better understand how they can engage parents and enlist their support. Recent field experiments offer some promising insights. For example, a small randomized-control trial that I conducted with researcher Shaun Dougherty during a charter school summer session found that frequent, personalized phone calls home immediately increased students' engagement in school, as measured by homework completion, in-class behavior, and in-class participation (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

For this experiment, we trained the teachers to use a conversation protocol that began with them updating parents about a student's academic progress and classroom behavior and alerting them about upcoming homework assignments and tests. We asked the teachers to end each call affirming that the student could be successful and suggesting one specific way the student could maintain or improve their effort.

In a follow-up experiment, behavioral scientist Todd Rogers and I asked teachers who were part of a high school summer credit-recovery program to write one-sentence individualized messages to each of their students' families every week, again including one specific thing students were doing well or could improve (see Figure 1). We found that these brief weekly messages reduced the percentage of students who failed to earn course credit by 41 percent (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). Other recent studies have documented similarly positive results from extended parent meetings with school leaders and panel discussions featuring experienced parents (Avvisati et al., 2014; Destin & Svoboda, 2017).

Together, these randomized control trials illustrate that providing parents with even brief but specific and actionable recommendations and advice can enable them to better support their children's learning.

Communication Breakdown

Of course, most educators already know that targeted outreach to parents can make a difference for students. The problem is that in many schools, as I discovered when I was a teacher, teacher-parent communication is infrequent, unsystematic, and not adequately supported.

Nationally representative data on the frequency and quality of school-initiated communication with public school parents show that communication in any form between schools, teachers, and parents is surprisingly rare (Noel et al., 2016). For example, in 2012, 59 percent of public school parents reported *never* having received a phone call home from their children's school during the previous year. The data also suggest there is considerable room for improvement in the quality of communication. About half of all parents were not "very satisfied" with the interactions they had with school staff.

Finally, overall trends across the previous decade suggest schools have not made much progress in improving the frequency and quality of communication with parents. Although the use of email as a form of school-to-home communication had risen moderately, this increase did not benefit all families equally. The percentage of parents in higher-income families who received an individual email communication increased from 56 to 59 percent between 2007 and 2012 but remained flat at 48 percent for families living at or below the poverty line. This gap is unlikely to have closed in more recent years given the large socioeconomic gap in access to broadband internet that persists today (Anderson, 2017).

What Schools and Teachers Can Do

Why is school-to-home communication so limited when we know it can help students, in some cases dramatically? Based on my own experience and research, three primary factors contribute to the low rate of teacher-parent communication: implementation barriers (including outdated or difficult-to-access contact information), the absence of schoolwide communication policies, and teachers' lack of non-instructional time. All of these factors point to a

general lack of coordinated attention to the issue.

Schools can best address the problem by creating and prioritizing systemic plans to improve outreach to parents. Drawing on the research base of effective practices, schoolwide plans should aim to increase the frequency and quality of parent-teacher communication, send parents frequent individualized information about their students' performance, and provide parents with guidance about how to support their students in school and enhance learning opportunities for them at home.

For starters, schools should regu-

of non-instructional time in teachers' contractually obligated workdays, and even providing a designated block of time each week for parent-engagement efforts.) Indeed, school leaders play a significant role in promoting teacher-parent communication by making active outreach to parents a schoolwide priority and by dedicating resources to these efforts (Henderson et al., 2007). Teachers are busy and face a range of obstacles in attempting to communicate with parents. Without formal expectations combined with sufficient time and the necessary communication infrastructure, teachers may take a passive approach to com-

platforms for parents and teachers to communicate in flexible ways (often including translation features) via class announcements and individualized text messages. Teachers can use these platforms to update parents on students' performance and upcoming assignments, schedule parent-teacher conferences, create social networks among parents, and share educational resources. Such tools can also be leveraged to provide the kind of actionable, student-specific advice that research has found to be effective.

In addition, a growing number of student-information management systems and online gradebooks have the ability to send automated messages to parents, updating them about the student's performance, attendance, and missing assignments. Such one-way, real-time informational texts and alerts sent by schools have been found to serve as an important complement to two-way communication between educators and families, with a growing number of studies documenting the efficacy of efforts to better inform parents about their students' attendance and performance (Bergman, 2012; Bergman & Chan, 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2017).

Unfortunately, schools often inadvertently limit the efficacy of information-management systems by maintaining inconsistent practices around updating assignments and information. Many districts also rely on an opt-in approach for these messages or require parents to log in online to see updates. Such approaches generally result in very low levels of engagement and often fail to reach the parents of students who might most benefit from real-time information (Bergman & Rogers, 2017).

Finally, schools can partner with educational content providers or create their own academic- or child

School leaders play a significant role in promoting teacher-parent communication by making active outreach to parents a schoolwide priority and by dedicating resources to these efforts.

larly collect updated parental preferences about the time, format, and language they prefer for communications and provide teachers with clear conversation, email, and text protocols to build on. Some of this work can be facilitated through new technology and parent volunteers who serve as family engagement coordinators and translators.

Schools must also clarify expectations for how often teachers should reach out to parents, while finding ways to give teachers more time for this essential work. (Some options for the latter include relieving teachers of non-instructional responsibilities such as lunch duty, increasing the amount

munication as they shift their attention to other tasks. I often fell into this pattern when I was a teacher.

Digital technology must be an integral and purposeful part of schools' communication infrastructures. Unlike with broadband internet access, nearly every adult in the U.S. has a mobile phone, regardless of socioeconomic status. Texting and mobile apps provide opportunities to connect with families of all backgrounds as well as to increase the efficiency of regular outreach. A growing number of mobile apps, such as Bloomz, ClassDojo, Class Messenger, Edmodo, Livingtree, Remind, SchoolCNXT, and SimplyCircle, provide secure and reliable

development-related content to send directly to parents. Such messaging has also proved to be effective in boosting parent engagement and student achievement (Doss et al., 2016; Hurwitz et al., 2015; York & Loeb, 2014). These communications can take a variety of forms, such as guidance for literacy development activities, suggestions for topics to discuss with students about their schoolwork, or even mini-lessons about what students are learning in school. In my own research, we found that a summer text-messaging program for parents that focused on promoting literacy skills increased reading comprehension among upper elementary students as well as attendance at parent-teacher conferences (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017). Examples of organizations that specialize in educational content for parents include Learning Heroes, Great Schools/Great Kids, and Upraised Learning.

Parents can use the customized information to move conversations past the one-line responses kids often give to questions about their day at school. Remember, parents are busy people, too; a timely reminder to check in with their children about how things are going in school, along with some context and content-related tips, can help them engage in more frequent and enriching education-related conversations and activities at home.

Engaging Parents as Partners

The work of developing the hearts and minds of young people is too large and important of a task for schools to take on in isolation. New research has helped to illustrate how schools and teachers can expand their positive influence on students by engaging parents as partners in the education process. Now, it's up to schools to provide the infrastructure and expecta-

FIGURE 1. Instructions to Teachers in the Kraft & Rogers Study on Promoting Parent Engagement

We ask that you write two messages each week about each student's performance in class. One message will be an "encouragement" message, citing something positive the student has done. The other message will be a "need-to-improve" message, citing something the student needs to work on. Here are some sample messages:




Positive Information Messages:

- John was an active participant in class all through this week—great job!
- Kelly got an A- on her in-class quiz on cell biology—keep up the great work!
- Jamaal stayed focused in class all week—great improvement!



Needs Improvement Messages:

- Kirk was easily distracted in class this week—it is important he try his best to stay focused.
- Tina missed two homework assignments this week—I know she can do better.
- Tom fell asleep in class twice this week—I need more from him.

tions, and to teachers to advocate for the time and support necessary to do this work. 

References

- Altonji, J. G., & Mansfield, R. K. (2011). The role of family, school, and community characteristics in inequality in education and labor market outcomes. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity* (pp. 339–358). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Anderson, M. (2017, March 22). Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/22/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption
- Avvisati, F., Gurgand, M., Guyon, N., & Maurin, E. (2014). Getting parents involved: A field experiment in deprived schools. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 81(1), 57–83.
- Bergman, P. (2012). The more you know: Evidence from a field experiment on parent-child information frictions and human capital investment. Unpublished
- UCLA, Los Angeles, CA.
- Bergman, P., & Chan, E. W. (2017). Leveraging technology to engage parents at scale: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial. Retrieved from www.columbia.edu/~psb2101/ParentRCT.pdf
- Bergman, P., & Rogers, T. (2017). Is this technology useless? How seemingly irrelevant factors affect adoption and efficacy. Retrieved from www.columbia.edu/~psb2101/BergmanRogerstechnology.pdf
- Destin, M., & Svoboda, R. C. (2017). A brief randomized controlled intervention targeting parents improves grades during middle school. *Journal of Adolescence*, 56, 157–161.
- Doss, C., Fahle, E. M., Loeb, S., & York, B. N. (2016). Supporting parenting through differentiated text messaging: Testing effects on learning during kindergarten. Working Paper. Retrieved from <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/supporting-parenting-through-differentiated-and-personalized-text-messaging-testing-effects-learning-during-kindergarten>
- Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school*

partnerships. New York: The New Press.

Houtenville, A. J., & Conway, K. S. (2008). Parental effort, school resources, and student achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43(2), 437–453.

Hurwitz, L. B., Lauricella, A. R., Hanson, A., Raden, A., & Wartella, E. (2015). Supporting Head Start parents: Impact of a text message intervention on parent-child activity engagement. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(9), 1373–1389.

Kraft, M. A., & Dougherty, S. M. (2013). The effect of teacher-family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 6(3), 199–222.

Kraft, M. A., & Monti-Nussbaum, M. (2017). Can schools empower parents to prevent summer learning loss? A text messaging field experiment to promote literacy skills. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Advance online publication. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/mkraft/publications/can-schools-empower-parents-prevent-summer-learning-loss-text-messaging-field>

The work of developing the hearts and minds of young people is too large and important of a task for schools to take on in isolation.

Kraft, M. A., & Rogers, T. (2015). The underutilized potential of teacher-to-parent communication: Evidence from a field experiment. *Economics of Education Review*, 47, 49–63.

Noel, A., Stark, P., Redford, J., & Zuckerman, A. (2016). *Parent and family involvement in education, from the national household education surveys of 2012*. Washington, D.C.: National

Center for Education Statistics.

Nye, B., Konstantopoulos, S., & Hedges, L. V. (2004). How large are teacher effects? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 26(3), 237–257.

Rogers, T., & Feller, A. (2017). *A randomized experiment using absenteeism information to nudge attendance*. Manuscript in preparation.

Todd, P. E., & Wolpin, K. I. (2007). The production of cognitive achievement in children: Home, school, and racial test score gaps. *Journal of Human Capital*, 1(1), 91–136.

York, B. N., & Loeb, S. (2014). *One step at a time: The effects of an early literacy text messaging program for parents of preschoolers* (No. w20659). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Matthew A. Kraft (mkraft@brown.edu) is an assistant professor of education and economics at Brown University. He previously taught middle and high school humanities in Oakland and Berkeley, California, public schools. Follow him on Twitter at @MatthewAKraft.