
Chapter 1 Well Before School Begins...

Parent/ Student Communication



Summer is almost over. You having been preparing for your first classroom. Let's see, you have organized your classroom, gone to the teacher's store and purchased a welcoming bulletin board, name tags, some fall leaves, a lesson plan book, charts, colored pencils, magic markers, special rewards, paper, and planned some great themes to teach this year.

What are you leaving out? Something you can't buy, you can only earn. Respect of the parents in your classroom and the community. Throughout my teaching career I found out that parent communication is a must, especially if you want to earn their respect and trust. If parents are on your side, the year goes smoothly for both you and the student.

When I was a student teacher I noticed that my cooperating teacher didn't have any real solid relationship with the parents in her classroom. So I had decided early on that parent communication was a must for me to succeed as a first year teacher.

I went into school about three weeks to a month before school began to organize my classroom. (This avoided stress for me.) I met with the Principal. (This should not be your first meeting. When you got your job you should have called school and scheduled a meeting with him/her to introduce yourself.)

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So in meeting with the Principal I asked if it was possible to obtain my class list. It was early for this but I indicated that I was planning on calling each parent. I explained to him about how important it was to have a concrete relationship with my class and how important it was to have the parents know who I was and where I was coming from, especially since I was a first year teacher.

I needed to find out about each and every student, their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes. The Principal agreed and gave me the list. I looked up each phone number on the rolodex. I remember that I just couldn't wait to get home to begin calling my new families.

What was I going to say to the parents? I was a first year teacher and they would know it. I had so much anxiety. I knew I needed to have confidence in what I was going to say and do. So I took a deep, long breathe and wrote down some thoughts that were going to be important in the discussion.

1. Introduce myself
2. Give a list of supplies
3. Did your child like school last year? Why? Why not?
4. What are some of your concerns for the up and coming school year?
5. What can I do this year to make it an enjoyable one for your child?
6. Is your child allergic to anything? (Students today have lots of food allergies. Peanut allergies are on the rise. You need to be sensitive to the needs of parents and their kids.)
7. What is a challenge for your child?
8. Does your child wear glasses or have a hearing problem? (If they do please make sure they are seated near the front of the room.)
9. Is there anything of importance that we did not cover so far in our conversation?

I am providing you with an example of what a conversation might sound like. (Notice that I didn't mention it was my first year teaching. If they ask you, then it is fine to tell them. You should sound confident when you talk and reassuring.

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“Hello, Mrs. Smith this is Mrs. Stein and I am going to be Sarah’s Second Grade teacher. I am calling two-fold. One is to give you a supply list, since I know everything is on sale now and you will be able to beat the school rush while taking advantage of all the sales. Do you have something nearby that you can write down everything?”

“It is great hearing from you, Mrs. Stein. I am surprised that you called. No other teacher has ever done that before. “

“Mrs. Smith I felt it was necessary to talk with you before school begins so we can develop a relationship and help Sarah have a memorable year in Second Grade.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Thank you, Mrs. Stein. I am ready for the supply list.”

“Sarah will need: **three spiral notebooks** one for homework, one for journal writing, and one for writer’s workshop. Could you please label them and put Sarah’s name on them? She will need **4 pencils sharpened, crayons**, any size will do, a **large, sticky glue stick** not liquid, (they get messy) **scissors**, a **small plastic box** to keep those items in, and anything else your child wants is perfectly acceptable.(pencil sharpener, magic markers, colored pencils,, ruler) She will also need a **large backpack or schoolbag** with her name on the outside, a **lunchbox** with her name on the inside, a **“Take Home Folder”** with her name on the outside, and a **daily snack**. Please remember to always check the take home folder because important information from the school or classroom will always be put in there. This will help Sarah and make her more responsible for returning materials to school. “

“We have lunch at 1:15p.m. Kids get real hungry around 11a.m. so a **daily snack** is necessary. Do you have any questions about the supplies?”

(In the upper grades you might want to modify the conversation and supplies. But, it is still important to begin a relationship with your parents early on.)

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“The other reason I am calling is to find out a little about Sarah. School should be enjoyable for your child. When they come to my classroom I want my students to be happy as soon as they walk through the door. If they don’t want to be there they won’t learn.”

“Did Sarah enjoy school last year?”

“Mrs. Stein, Sarah had a difficult year last year. Her first grade teacher always yelled and she was afraid of her. She ended up not having any self-esteem.”

“Mrs. Smith, first let me assure you that I do **NOT** yell. I believe that students need a lot of confidence in what they do. I will constantly be reinforcing that and think of new ways to build self- esteem in my classroom. I can promise you that with you and I working together, Sarah will be very happy. “

“If something happens at home, please e mail me or call me, I will give you my home phone number.”

This part actually stuns parents. Imagine trusting them enough to give them your phone number. I have had parents call me with trivial things and some with monumental problems. I was always there for the entire family. I have counseled both parents and students. Some were because of family problems, going through divorce, and one was a unique situation. A parent told me that her daughter, Katie was a terrible eater and thought perhaps I could help her since she trusted me. I sat down with Katie and we wrote down things that she liked and didn’t like. Even some foods she might be willing to try. I discovered that she never ate a hamburger before. She just wouldn’t try it. So we made a pact. If she began changing her dietary habits I would bring her to Burger King for lunch. After three months, Katie’s diet seemed to have improved. I kept in touch with Mom on a daily basis.

One Saturday I drove up to Katie’s house and she was there waiting to greet me. Katie’s face was just radiant. Her smiles and excitement just couldn’t be hidden as we drove off to Burger King. We sat down together and I watched Katie nibble on her very first hamburger! How special she felt.

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Katie continues to enjoy eating hamburgers with her family and friends. When she came to visit me, not so long ago, she reminded me of this story

“A happy student is one that will always try their personal best.” (I explain that to the parent. I also say that each student has a different level of personal best. All I ever ask is that they try theirs!)

“If Sarah is sad because a pet died or grandma is ill, or another student in the class or school is bothering her, I need to know about it. Please call me and let me know.”

“I will then plan to take her aside and discuss it with her. I’ll always talk privately to the students so others may not hear. I usually take them outside of the classroom door so we can speak honestly and openly. “

“I give plenty of hugs and I’ll make sure the day turns out happier for her if a problem arises. Take down my phone number and call me, even on weekends, my phone is never shut off. If I’m not at home I will always call you back.”

“Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

If not just add, “I so look forward to meeting you at Back to School Night.” There should be a positive response to that!

“I would love to speak with Sarah, is she there?”

Speaking to the student is easy. You can ask:

1. How did your summer go?
2. What types of activities did you do?
3. Did you read over the summer?
4. What did you read?

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5. What is your favorite subject? Why?
6. What subject do you not enjoy? Why?
7. Are you nervous about school starting? If they say yes, admit that you are also. Sometimes bringing a familiar object to school can make the students feel more comfortable, especially for the younger grades. (A teddy bear is always a good choice. I then bring mine.)
8. "Would you like to know who is also in your class?" I then read down the roster of names. That definitely makes them feel secure and happy.

This was a typical phone conversation. I always gave out my phone number. Only once in 34 years was it abused. That never stopped me though. If you are teaching in an area that you do not feel comfortable, giving out your phone number then give out an e mail address instead and send home the letter I have given you in the Letter Section of this book.

The only problem I ever had with calling parents is that the Secretary received phone calls from other parents wanting to know who their child had. So I would suggest that you tell her that you will be calling the parents. Ask the Secretary what day would be a good day for you to begin calling. (Since you are a first year teacher you certainly don't want to step on any toes.)

I would plan on **buying cookies or crackers** for the first few weeks of school until all the students remember to bring in a snack. I even went as far as to have a cookie jar in the room. If someone forgot their snack they were always allowed to take two or three from the jar. Students also began sharing their snacks with one another. I gave them 10-15 minutes to eat, talk to one another, or eat and read a book on the rug. Sometimes if we were working on something, I gave them a working snack. The working snack, for some reason, was always one of the most popular. I guess because it involved a lot of cooperative groups.

Calling parents takes up plenty of time. I tried to call three a day. I did this for my entire career and the parents all waited for Mrs. Stein to call during the summer!

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What have you learned so far?

1. You spoke to the Principal and he/she learned how sincere you are, willing to go that extra mile, and what you plan to do on a positive note with your parents and your class.
2. You have spoken to the Secretary, which she appreciated, and set up a working relationship with her. She knows she is important to the running of the school.
3. You have communicated with each and every parent, when possible, and expressed your concern and willingness to help their child.
4. You have provided a means for them to contact you if there is a problem.
5. You now have secured a place in their hearts where they feel comfortable leaving their child with you.
6. You have spoken to the student and he/she will feel very relaxed entering your classroom.

Look at all you accomplished...and school hasn't even begun yet!