

LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE ACTION RESEARCH ABSTRACT

Anne McCarthy
Dover Elementary School
West Contra Costa Unified School District

100% free and reduced lunch

70% Latino, 15% Asian/Pacific Islander, 10% African American, 5% Other

My classroom (22 students): 13 Latino, 6 Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 African American, 2 Other

Research Question(s):

What effect on student academic performance will there be with specific and consistent communication with parents?

Revised question: What type of specific and consistent parent-teacher communication is the most effective in assuring grade-level student academic achievement?

Re-revised question: What type of consistent and specific parent-teacher communication is the most effective in inspiring and maintaining parental involvement in a way that ensures grade level student achievement?

(By extension: What effect on student academic performance will there be with specific and consistent communication with policy makers?)

Context:

The idea of parent communication and involvement increasing student academic performance is a “no duh” statement, yet the majority of parents at Dover are not yet consistently and powerfully involved in the school in general nor in their child’s education specifically. Despite much discussion among teachers and administration, and despite our efforts at welcoming and clear communication, the majority of our parents are not consistently and, more importantly, effectively engaged in the academic success of their children. Why not?

In my classroom I want consistent, specific and *effective* communication.

How can I frame the conversation in such a way that it is easy – exciting even - for a parent to listen, understand and act upon communications from me regarding their child’s education? How can I ensure that what I choose to communicate will be effective in increasing the student’s academic performance?

*Note: while I understand that there are factors like language, socioeconomic status, race, culture, parental illiteracy, differing views of what success in education means, etc. that may be influencing my ability to communicate with parents, I have decided to ignore them since those factors are out of my sphere of influence. I don’t have control over them. I do, however, have control over *what and how I communicate* with the parents in my class, in any given year.

Findings and policy implications:

I did two main things:

1. I chose a group of 4 students from within my “strategic” group and I chose a specific goal (increase in sight word knowledge) for them. I chose sight words because I thought it would be easy for parents to understand, implement at home, and at which they would be successful (if I communicated well). It would also be easy for me to quantify. I tried different forms of communication to see what happened in my attempts to foster the parents in working with their kids on the sight words at home.
2. I sent home a survey to the parents asking them to help me to become a better teacher by informing me regarding the best way I can communicate with them (such that their child’s academic achievement increases).

Overall thoughts on the results:

1. Consistent and clear communication does increase student academic performance. All 4 students showed initial academic increases and 3 out of 4 maintained that increase when I turned the work over to their parents. 2 students increased their performance greatly, moving from strategic to proficient.
2. Clear communication of my intention is vital (e.g. – the survey).
3. Asking parents how I may best communicate with them seemed to encourage them to communicate with me. They started voluntarily putting out effort approaching the level of my effort.
4. My favorite form of communication (because it’s easiest and quickest for me), writing, is not the parents’ favored form of communication. I need to adjust to their favored forms of communication to increase student success.
5. Clear, specific, “doable” goals are necessary to motivating effective, consistent communication, but I also needed to follow up on making sure parents were clear from the beginning just how easy that initial success was/is to maintain. I needed to make sure that I gave them a reason to keep up the effort and to praise them for the result.

If I were framing my question(s) now I would rephrase them to ask:

1. What type of communication with parents is the most effective in increasing student academic achievement?
2. What type of communication with policy makers is the most effective in increasing student academic performance?

Based upon my research the answers would be:

1. My intention/goal needs to be clear to both me and the parent.
2. I need to let them know what I want, expect, and/or need based upon that intention/goal.
3. I need to speak to their listening. I need to make sure that I am communicating in a way that it is easy for them to understand me. They don’t need to hear me...I need to make sure that my message is heard.
4. I need to choose modes of communication that work for them.
5. I need to have a solution/action in mind that I suggest to them. I need to make sure that the solution gets heard.

6. Choosing “doable” goals is a good learning ground and (hopefully) creates early success.
7. Early success opens the door to trying to follow through in areas that need more work and therefore will be harder to create immediate success.
8. I need to invite them to work with me in a way that gets heard. It’s my job to get the invitation heard.

Next steps/future questions:

1. I’m going to go back and do it again implementing what I learned from my last attempt. This time I would choose a mode of communication that they prefer - a call or quick conference with them on what I’d like them to do. I would show them the results when I’d done whatever I’m going to ask them to do in class.
2. I would be strategic and specific in choosing my next request of them and I need to have a solution ready – what will they be able to do with their child that will specifically help to improve their student’s academic achievement?
3. I’ll put the “What’s the best way for me to communicate with you?” survey out at the beginning of the year and use the information gained as a way of creating an ongoing communication system throughout the year.
4. I’ll follow up with the parents of my four original students and try to find out why action had/hadn’t happened in the sight word arena (something I’d thought of doing but hadn’t done). What did they hear when I communicated with them?
5. I’d like to create a next step of action with those four students and their parents. A lot has already happened – e.g. homework class – but I’d like to set a new goal and/or improve on the sight word goal.
6. Again, this is all “no duh”...so why doesn’t it happen? Not just in my classroom, but school wide? How can we be strategic as a school in getting parents involved, speak to their listening, create visible success? How do I need to word my requests so that they get heard? Are we being as clear and specific as we think we are?
7. There are a couple of parents that didn’t respond even after all of this work. Why? Try the cycle again? Go to their homes?
8. Speak to people in parent advocacy/involvement and learn.
9. Speak to other teachers in my school and have the conversation about parental involvement again, this time including my “research”. See what comes up.
10. What types of policies on parental involvement are out there? Which have been effective in increasing student achievement?
11. What kind of policy would help to create a system of on-going, successful communication at my school? Even when I’m not there anymore? How can it become so easy, successful and embedded that no one would consider doing it any other way? How can successful parent communication become a “no duh”?
12. Is parental communication policy appropriate at my school? At all?
13. How do I get the more involved parents to help me on a grander scale – in the classroom, in the school, in communicating with other parents, in policy?
14. In relation to the policy maker piece, be aware of speaking to their listening. Have solutions ready and doable. Have specific intentions/goals. Be prepared to figure out how to make them be heard.
15. Create a sketch of my idea for teacher/parent committees in relation to communicating with each other and policy makers (when it’s necessary).

16. Research what type of communication with policy makers is most effective in effecting policy that improves academic achievement for kids.
17. I'm guessing, but just as the reporter said she needs to write an article that hits the most people possible, do policy makers only support policy decisions that work for most people? Our students aren't "most people"...what does that mean for them?
18. I could keep going. You get the idea.