



A Playbook for Clear, Effective & Meaningful School Communication

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-A few years ago, I picked my up three children from our neighborhood school and headed home. The kids threw their backpacks on the kitchen counter, unzipped them, and dumped out dozens of papers.



While they sorted the worksheets and crayon drawings, I turned my attention to the day's mail. In the pile, was a very serious looking letter from the school. I opened it and started to read:

In March, our school administered the Indiana Reading and Evaluation Determination (IREAD-3). Based on the Indiana Academic Standards, IREAD-3 is a summative assessment that was developed in accordance with Public Law 109, which requires the evaluation of foundational reading skills for students in grade three to ensure that all students can read proficiently before moving onto grade four.

Huh?

I plowed through the rest of the letter and it didn't get much better....

fluency, homographs, context clues...

Eventually, I threw it on a pile in a basket and, in the hustle of life, lost track of it.

Years later, I joined the world of education. I took a position with my local school district. My job was to help schools reach out and engage families.

I'll be honest, I faced a pretty steep learning curve. During staff meetings, I sometimes struggled to follow discussions and often Googled acronyms under the table.

Eventually, I got the hang of it but not before I had a realization:

We, educators, speak another language. It's a language full of acronyms like PBIS, FAFSA, and SAT and it's built on large words like post-secondary, co-requisite, and matriculation.

Knowing this, it's little surprise that families struggle to connect with schools. Half the time, they don't understand what we're talking about.

And, it's not just the language that's off-putting. Often, and sometimes without realizing it, we employ a very formal, very "teacher-y" tone that can be alienating, even disrespectful. And, usually we provide way more information than parents need. I mean, do parents really need to know that IREAD-3 was developed in accordance with Public Law 109? I don't think so.

Yes, teachers are experts in education, but parents and caregivers are experts in their children. And, the research is clear: in order to teach students, we need the expertise of both.

Yet, the way we communicate today creates significant barriers between our schools and families. The language we use may make us sound smart, and it may streamline conversations in the breakroom, but to parents, it's what I call "Mumbo Jumbo."

So, what do we do?

I have created this playbook to help you recognize the presence of Mumbo Jumbo in your own school communications and offer proven strategies to root it out. My sincere hope is that after reading this, you will begin to recognize Mumbo Jumbo in your own school communications. You'll see it everywhere. You'll be in conversations where you hear it, you'll be in meetings where you use it, and you will begin to delete it when you write it.

But once you delete it, what words do you use to replace it? How do you compose a letter that is not only free of Mumbo Jumbo, but family friendly, one that acknowledges the expertise of parents and brings them into the learning process?

All of the tips you're about to read make sense. This work is intuitive. It's just hard to put into practice. It's hard to take the concepts and use them to change your communications and the culture of your school.

I can help with that. If you're ready to take a hard look at what's working and what's not working with your school-home communications, or if you want to equip your team with the skills and confidence necessary to effectively communicate with parents, I'd be happy to visit with your district and provide training to effectively implement some of these strategies in your work. My contact information is below and at the end of this playbook.

Thanks again for downloading this resource. And, congratulations for taking the first step toward using your words to build precious relationships with families and create a kinder, more beautiful world.

Stay safe and well,

Patricia



Communications just got harder.

4 ways Covid-19 changed everything for schools.

If the events of the last several months have taught us anything, it's that communicating effectively with families is not just nice, it's necessary.

"The evidence around family engagement in education, much of which comes from the United States, shows that more trusting relationships between families and schools are an essential foundation for building productive partnerships. It also shows that parents and caregivers can be an important ingredient in children's achievement in school."

[BROOKINGS INSTITUTE](#), OCT. 21, 2020

As we look to reinvent education amid a global health crisis, we see obvious challenges, but also real opportunities, because:

1. **The pandemic has shown us how important it is to bring families into the learning process.**
2. **The pandemic has exposed weaknesses in our schools that we can no longer ignore.**
3. **The pandemic has created good will and mutual respect. Families now have a much clearer picture of what teachers face, and teachers now see just how much families want their children to succeed.**
4. **The pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for communication training and parent support.**

In the years ahead, data will emerge to support each of these ideas. Even now, there is powerful proof.



Did you know...

70%

of parents and caregivers say they **plan to get a better understanding** of what their children are learning in school, find more time to communicate with children about assignments, and seek a better understanding of where their children stand academically;

64%

of parents **plan to talk with a teacher** about their children's schoolwork during the school closures; or that

60%

of parents and caregivers are **likely to develop a stronger relationship** with their child's teacher than they've had in a past?

PARENTS 2020:COVID CLOSURES-A REDEFINING MOMENT FOR STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND SCHOOLS. BEALEARNINGHERO.ORG

Clearly, the window is open. Families are ready to "partner up."

And, with many schools holding virtual learning, in many cases, families must "partner up" in order for their children to succeed.

So, let's take the veil off of what we do and bring families into the process of improving our schools.

This work does not actually start with words.

It starts with your desire to change, your openness to listening, and your desire to enrich your life by letting parents in.

In short, it starts with heart.

So look inside yourself, take a deep breath, and let's get started.

What I hear from teachers all the time...

"I get the theory, now tell me, what do I need to do?"

"I know I need to make phone calls home, but what do I say?"

"Quit telling me I need to communicate better, show me how."

It can be frustrating to be an educator.

We are told all the time that we need to communicate better, but we are given few practical tools to do so.

I totally get it...

On the following pages you'll find some tips, tools, and techniques that you can use to improve your school communications starting today.

The words we use matter.

Why word choice is so important when engaging with families.



Be brief

Mark Twain was fond of saying, “Don’t use a 5-dollar word when a 50-cent word will do.” So what does that mean?

Below are a bunch of “5-dollar” words that educators simply love:

- Assessment
- Data
- Academic standards
- Curriculum
- Post-secondary

These words are what I like to call “inside baseball.” They are words that streamline communication with our fellow educators but they can be intimidating and off-putting for parents and caregivers.

Instead of using these “5-dollar” words, try using simple, “50-cent words” instead.

Here’s what that looks like.

\$5-word	50¢-word
Assessment	Test
Data	Information
Academic standards	What the state expects your child to know and be able to do by the end of the year
Curriculum	Learning materials, teaching materials
Post-secondary	After graduation

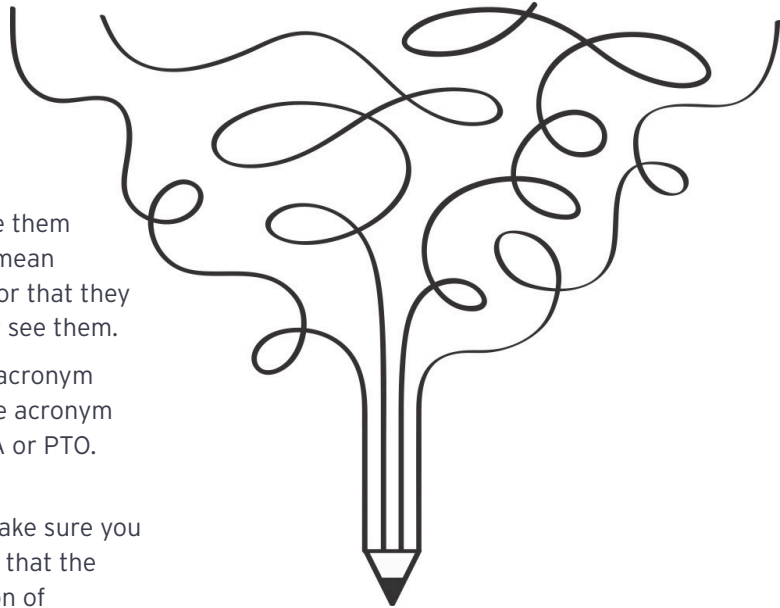
#2

Avoid acronyms

Educators love acronyms. We use them for everything. But that doesn't mean parents use the same acronyms or that they know what they mean when they see them.

Here's a good rule: Don't use an acronym unless you know for sure that the acronym is familiar to parents such as PTA or PTO.

If you do use acronyms in your communications with families, make sure you not only communicate the words that the letters stand for, but the definition of the acronym.



I-STEP

I-STEP is a yearly test we give to students in grades 3-9. It measures whether students have learned important skills in reading, math, social studies, and science. ISTEP stands for Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress.

DIBLES

DIBLES are short tests we give students in grades K-2. These tests measure skills that children need to develop to become strong readers. DIBLES stands for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.

PBIS

PBIS is a system of teaching and rewarding students for their positive behavior and positive choices. PBIS stands for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

#3

Exercise the power of 'you'

Always use "You," "Your child," "Your student," and "We."

This might seem subtle enough. But parents need to know that you are talking to them, not at them.

Using the word "you" not only gets parents' attention, as in "Hey, you...", it gives parents the sense that you know them and that you see them. It makes parents feel special. When used correctly, phrases like "your student" or "your family" make any conversation feel more personal.

"Parents can pick up their students after the event."



"You can pick up your child after the event."

"The school works to help every student succeed."



"We work to help your student succeed."

Notice the difference? Now, close your eyes and ask someone to read them aloud to you. You may feel a physical difference. That emotion and that feeling is your connection to the communication.

Pretty cool, huh?

What we share matters, too.⁴

Why it's important to think about the information we share and distribute.

Remember our example from the beginning of this playbook – the letter I received from my school district?

In March, our school administered the Indiana Reading and Evaluation Determination (IREAD-3). Based on the Indiana Academic Standards, IREAD-3 is a summative assessment that was developed in accordance with Public Law 109, which requires the evaluation of foundational reading skills for students in grade three to ensure that all students can read proficiently before moving onto grade four.

Is it really important that parents know the assessment was established “in accordance with Public Law 109?”

No.

What they do need to know is what the test is, why it matters and if their child passed.

It is as simple as that.

So how do you decide what to include, and what not to include in your communication home?

Ask yourself these questions:

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- **What is the purpose of the communication? That purpose will help you naturally pare down your communication.**
-
- **What are the two or three things you want your families to remember, understand, or do as a result of understanding this? Focus on communicating those things.**
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- **What information is necessary for parents to know? And what information is a “bonus” for parents who want to know more?**
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- **Will your communication help you form stronger relationships with parents or help parents understand learning?**
-

How you answer these questions will help determine what you need to include in your communications.

It's not always what we say, but how we say it.

Why it's important to strike the right tone with parents.

Tone is the attitude or emotion you convey through your communications. It's really more about you than your students' parents. No matter what you say, or what words you use, your tone will determine how families receive your message.

Here are three quick suggestions to help improve your tone when engaging with families:

#1

Don't forget to take off your 'teacher hat'

All day long, we educators are responsible for the students in our care.

At a basic level, it's our job to keep them safe.

Beyond that, we spend the majority of our day saying things like, "Your homework is due tomorrow," or "Remember, we walk on the right side of the hallway," and "Here's the formula for the equation." In other words, we're in charge.

It's easy to see how this same "teacher" style of communication might slip into conversations with families.

The only truly symmetrical or equal form of communication is dialogue, where there is a real exchange of ideas.

So, when you sit down to start writing an email, send a text, or make a phone call, be sure to exchange your figurative "teacher hat" for your "partner hat."

#2

Always check your emotions before you communicate

Schools can be fast-paced, stressed-out places, especially now. The emotions we feel during the day can bleed into our communications with families.

Before we interact with families, before we send a note, or make a call, we need to simply stop and take check of our emotions.

Before you fire off that text or email message to that parent, ask yourself:

Are you stressed out or upset?

Did that last conversation with the principal get to you?

Did you sleep okay last night?

Have you had lunch? Are you hungry?

All of these things, believe it or not, affect how we come across to others.

Pausing to reflect before we speak or write is crucial to our success in communicating with families.

Remember, these families don't know what your day was like or what challenges you might be facing. All they know is how you come across, and how you make them feel. Parents are likely to interpret your stress as something negative directed at them. This feeling will not produce the kind of positive connection or emotion required to communicate effectively and form a productive relationship.

#3

Don't forget to be friendly

Everyday, we educators are bombarded by conversations with parents. If we're being honest with ourselves, we often listen halfheartedly. However, research shows people are more likely to pay attention and engage in meaningful conversations when greeted or received by a friendly voice.

So, even if you don't feel friendly, you need to develop a friendly voice.

Here's how:

- **Think about being friendly**
- **Smile when you speak**
- **Include friendly greetings at the beginning and end of your emails**

When you use a friendly voice, you start to feel friendly too.

#4

Try the 'best friend' test

As a former television broadcaster, I was taught to check my communications by using the "best-friend" test. The idea is simple: communicate to the viewer in the same way that you would communicate with your best friend over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. The best-friend test is a good measuring stick for clear, concise, meaningful school communication.

As you think about conversations with parents, think about how you would convey the information to your best friend. Heck, it doesn't have to be your best friend, it can be your grandma, or your aunt, or your hairdresser.

Thinking in terms of communicating with your "best friend" puts you in a casual, conversational frame of mind and promotes the use of simple language and information.

Sounds good.

So, where to begin?

As you think about ways to improve the quality of your school communications, especially with parents, consider trying these tactics. I've used them for years in my own work, as well as in the professional development I provide to school districts, and the results have been tremendous.

#1

Read it out loud



By reading your work out loud, you will catch the clumsy language and sentence structure, you'll hear the big words and acronyms. And, you'll hear if your tone is friendly, approachable, and respectful.

#2



Start a sounding committee Hear it from the experts!

Assemble a test committee of parents or community members and ask them to help you with your communications, like a sounding board. These committee members can look over your newsletters and emails, they can point out words they don't understand, and they can tell you if the information you plan to share feels overwhelming.

#3



Check by asking questions

When you finish conversations with families, invite questions. Don't ask, "Do you have any questions?" This can put parents on the spot. Instead, ask in an informal way. Try something like, "Are we all good?" or "I'm sure I didn't do a very good job explaining that... what questions do you have?"

Pro tip: When parents do ask a question, start your reply with, "Good question." This phrasing encourages parents to ask more questions and builds rapport.

#4



Reflect before and after conversations

When you are done with a parent meeting, or after talking with a parent on the phone, spend a little time thinking about the conversation. Think about how you came across, think about the information you provided, think about the words you used, and think about your tone. The minute or two you'll spend reflecting is a small investment that will pay off big in improving your conversations with families.

It takes commitment – and hard work, but it's worth it.

This playbook offers several ideas to help you communicate better with families. But these tips alone won't get the job done. To be successful, you have to want to communicate. You have to believe in your families, and you have to want to engage with them. When you commit to having genuine, meaningful conversations with families, you commit to listening to what people in your community have to say. Perhaps more importantly, you commit to be open to change.

Is this all rocket science?

Hardly.

It's basic stuff...just nouns, verbs, and smiles.

Basic, but powerful.

Because in the end, those words and smiles have the power to build relationships, help kids succeed at school, and make positive changes in our local communities and in our world.

Want to make family engagement and communication a priority for your school or district?

If you're ready to commit to listening and communicating more effectively with families, my custom professional development workshops help school district leaders and their teams change their culture and build stronger parent relationships.

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About Patricia

Patricia Weinzapfel has worked in the educational field of family engagement for almost a decade. She is the author of *No More Mumbo Jumbo: Bridging the Communication Gap Between Educators and Families* ([available on Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1604264444)).

Patricia holds two degrees from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University: a Bachelor of Science in Journalism/Social Psychology and a Master of Science in Broadcast Journalism with a concentration in Economic/Business reporting. Prior to becoming a part of the world of education, Patricia was a field producer, off-air reporter, show producer, and special projects producer for WTHR-TV in Indianapolis, a reporter at WFIE-TV in Evansville and a writer/producer for WSBT-TV in South Bend. Patricia has also taught broadcast journalism and writing at the University of Southern Indiana (USI).

Over the years, Patricia has honed her multitasking skills as a mother to three children born less than 2 years apart. Nathaniel and twins, Benjamin and Eleanor, are now in college. Patricia credits her rescue dogs, Addy and Archie, with saving her during those early years and with helping her adjust to her empty nest.

