

Feb 21, 2017 by [Leslie Ferguson, MA, MFA](#)

The great Chinese philosopher Confucius professes, “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.”

It’s been proven time and again: students from low-income families are at higher risk for academic and social problems. We



We know that parental involvement is crucial to success in school. Let us remember our role as educators in garnering that involvement and take a look at 5 ways to encourage parental involvement at our schools:

1. Ditch stereotypical beliefs about parents and poverty

Lisa Montez Sullivan, a teacher in Detroit, reminds us, “For a great many [...] students, just making it to school every day is a triumph.” We must not forget that we are entrusted with the care of children who may not have access to many basic resources. We may take for granted our vast and appropriate wardrobes, full stomachs, and stable, safe lives. While we may not easily see which of our students are hungry, we have a responsibility to arrive in our classrooms every day with kindness and compassion. Too often, we are blind to our own stereotypical beliefs about students and families living in poverty. When we believe that parents of poor students care less than parents of the affluent, we do our students and society a monolithic disservice. Actually, studies show that parents of lower socioeconomic status “want to be involved in their...students’ education just as much as parents with higher incomes and more education” (“What Schools Need”). In order to best help our students, we must first relieve ourselves of inaccurate beliefs. Many teachers blame the lack of parental involvement on the parents themselves, reasoning that they just don’t care. If we operate on the assumption that parents *do* care, which represents the truth rather than steadfast opinions without merit, we can put professionalism and empathy at the forefront of communication. It doesn’t take hard work - it’s just connecting with another human at their level. Look for ways to engage parents with you first, as a stepping stone on the road to supporting their children’s education.

2. Connect with parents ASAP

Connecting with parents should happen as soon as possible in the school year. Don't underestimate the value of a personalized phone call, email, in-person conversation or letter home. According to a recent *Edutopia* article titled, "How Can High-Poverty Schools Engage Families and the Community?," - "Families living in poverty often work multiple jobs, may have limited English language skills, and in some cases have had few positive experiences with their children's teachers or schools." Because parents are busy and often overwhelmed, they may not initiate the conversation. Therefore, as the education professional, one thing you can do from the beginning is to initiate that first positive contact. According to *One Dream, Two Realities*, a project that examined attitudes about parental involvement in schools, "Schools should avoid waiting until there is a disciplinary problem to contact parents and should give parents opportunities for involvement early in the...process so that the first call they receive is not one telling them their child is in trouble."

A friendly message from the teacher fosters open, comfortable communication systems and mutual respect, and when helping students succeed becomes a group effort, academics and attitudes improve. You know the old adage: catch them doing something good! Then share it with their parents.

3. Offer services and events that bring parents into the school

A good way to welcome families to a school is to offer free classes and workshops that focus on topics of interest. According to Nate Nielsen, the support representative for Memberhub.com, "Teachers and/or outside speakers can discuss any number of topics [...], including family nutrition, child development, constructive and non-constructive ways for parents to help with kids' homework, the importance of quality sleep for busy kids, etc." Schools should aim to meet the needs of non-English-speaking parents as well as English-speaking parents. When schools actively encourage parental involvement, parents begin to feel welcomed, and their often negative preconceived notions about school begin to dissipate. Create a community of hope and trust -- show how much you care about your students beyond the classroom.

4. Publicize volunteer opportunities and student involvement

By outlining specific ways for parents to help in the classroom and at school in general, schools can draw parents into the learning environment. From inviting parents to watch group presentations to asking them to chaperone field trips, a direct call for volunteers is less daunting than a general statement about the importance of parental involvement. Samer Rabadi, Online Community Engagement Manager, recommends creating a list of different ideas for involvement that will draw parents in who may be hesitant to boldly presume their specific services are appreciated. Keeping options open to parents and communicating classroom needs will

foster a comfortable relationship between the school and parents for maximum involvement.

Another way to get parents to come to school is to showcase what students are learning and accomplishing. Inviting parents to stroll through the halls to view their children's artwork on display, or asking them to sit in the audience during a pep assembly will guide parents proudly to students' successful efforts. To broaden the involvement process and build on the idea of community, the principal can be encouraged to meet and talk with parents, and students can write and send thank-you notes to the parents for attending (Rabadi).

5. Ask parents for their ideas

Schools can include parents by regularly asking for feedback regarding issues of concern. Education consultant and author, Tom Whitby, suggests that, before Back-to-School Night, teachers elicit questions from parents about potential discussion topics. Asking parents to pose topics of interest makes them feel valued and garners interest in an unexpected manner. Instead of opening a dialogue with teachers and administrators only during times of dissatisfaction and frustration, parents will feel more empowered as they begin to genuinely understand their child's specific academic journey. They may appreciate the opportunity to be directly involved with their child's school experiences, and a culture of common understanding will begin to thrive.

Confucius told us over 2000 years ago that involvement is the key to understanding. We see that his words still hold value, and as educators ourselves, may we always strive to build a bridge to understanding, for therein lies the greatest hope for our students and for humanity.

References:

[Educating Parents about Education](#)

[10 Things I Never Thought I Would Hear as an Inner City School Teacher](#)

[How Can High-Poverty Schools Engage Families and the Community?](#)

[Road Tested / Three Ways to Engage Parents in High-Poverty Settings](#)

[19 Proven Tips for Getting Parents Involved at School](#)

[What schools need to do to get low-income parents involved in children's education](#)