

# 5 ways to build bridges with parents

How to improve communications  
with parents and guardians to support  
students' well-being



## Can K-12 educators build bridges with families to increase support for students?

Absolutely. They can and they should.

Decades of research shows that parent/guardian engagement in children's education is closely connected with improved academic performance, behavior and well-being.<sup>1</sup> That's why some federal and state funding programs actually require schools to have family engagement plans.

But it has become more important than ever for schools to work together with families.

Why? One reason is that schools need to recoup learning lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that children's reading and math scores have dropped across the country.<sup>2</sup>





Another reason is that children and adolescents are experiencing an unprecedented mental health crisis.<sup>3</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released shocking findings from its most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey.<sup>4</sup> Looking at high school students in 2021, the survey reveals:

**42%** — including **60%** of female students — experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

**29%** experienced poor mental health over the previous 30 days.

**22%** seriously considered suicide.

**10%** attempted suicide.

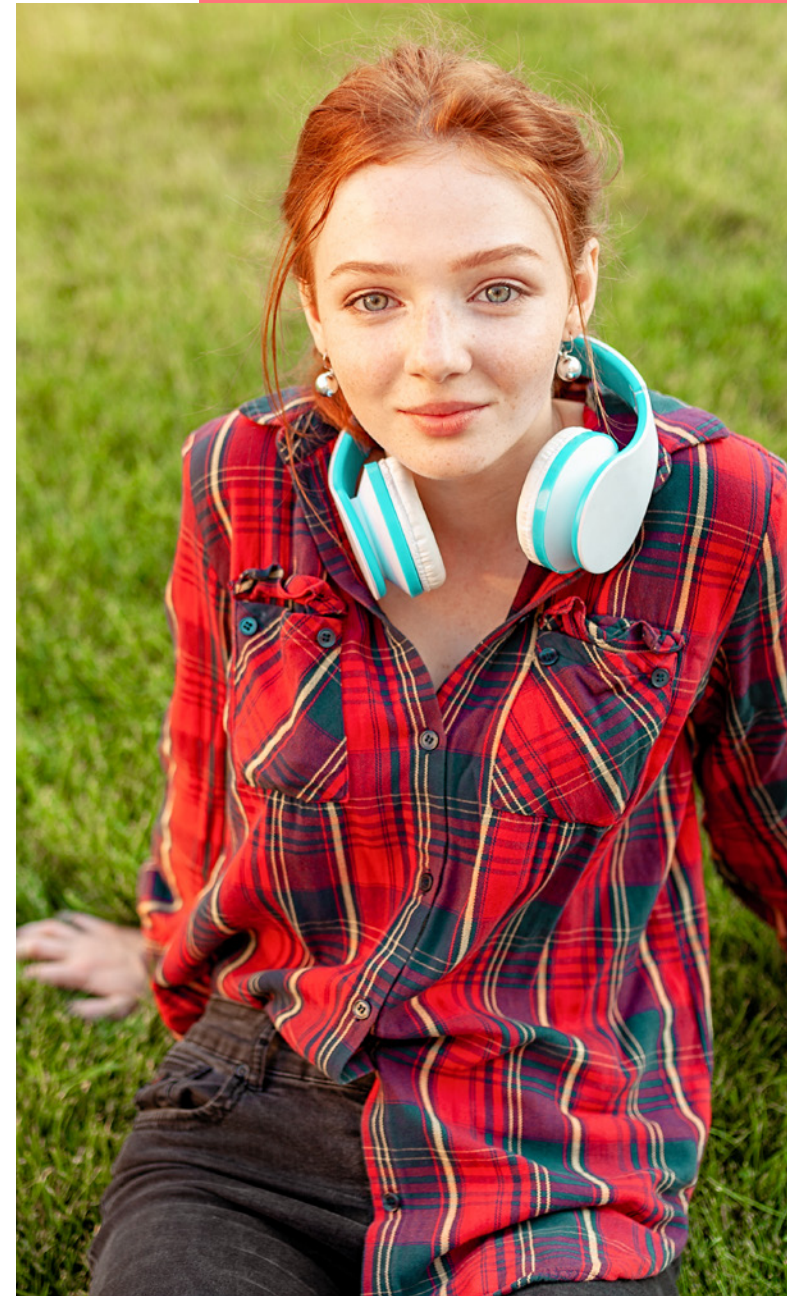
These represent disturbing trends, no doubt. But parents and educators can come together to develop and implement solutions targeting children's well-being.

And the good news is that schools and families *want* to partner with each other. **Nine out of 10 parents and teachers agree it will be essential for families and teachers to work closely together and trust each other**, according to a 2022 report from the nonprofit Learning Heroes.<sup>5</sup>

Given this foundational understanding, K-12 schools and districts have a great opportunity to build bridges with students' families to better support students.

Still, school leaders and educators may wonder how best to engage families. And how best to do so amid staff shortages, educator burnout, tight budgets, the need for increased mental health services and other challenges.

This playbook will show you five practical ways to build bridges with parents and guardians. In doing so, you can come together with families to increase support for students' well-being.





## #1: Prioritize positive communications

While teachers “predominantly communicate with parents when there is a problem,” a national survey of parents concludes,<sup>6</sup> the most successful districts prioritize positive communications with families.

Dr. PJ Caposey, Illinois’ Superintendent of the Year for 2022,<sup>7</sup> makes this point. “As a superintendent, a principal and a teacher,” Dr. Caposey says, “I have learned two crucial points about communicating with parents and guardians. First, the communication should be about the individual child as much as possible.

We can’t simply blast out school- and class-wide announcements. Second, we need to send at least as much positive communication home as negative communication, and probably a lot more.”

Nationally Certified School Psychologist Deb Grill agrees. “We know that in any relationship, positive communication has to outweigh the negative,” she says. Indeed, research shows that in both professional and personal relationships, the “magic ratio” of positive to negative feedback is about 5:1.<sup>8</sup>



“We need to send at least as much positive communication home as negative communication, and probably a lot more. Create a mindset of ‘catching kids being good.’”

**Dr. PJ Caposey, Illinois Superintendent of the Year**

School communications should not focus on academic achievement alone. For instance, Grill says, “Maybe you reach out because you want to let parents know you saw their child be a good friend to another student, or you noticed them working hard to understand an especially challenging topic.”

Dr. Caposey calls this “creating a mindset of ‘catching kids being good.’” He gives an example: “I once supervised a junior

high girls’ basketball game. I wrote three quick notes: one to the star player, one to a player who didn’t play much but cheered the team on the entire game and one to a student in the crowd who supported their friends. The next day I had my assistant mail the notes to the kids’ homes. It took me no time at all; I was at the game already. It’s simply about noticing, and then sharing what you see with families.”



## #2:

# Establish and maintain open lines of communication

Although almost all parents and educators want to work together, they face obstacles to achieving that goal.

Parents report that educators seem too “stretched thin” to communicate consistently. Meanwhile, **70% of K-12 teachers worry that students don’t receive “the academic support they need from their parents/guardians.”**<sup>9</sup>

Schools can build trust with families by establishing regular communication.<sup>10</sup> “That trust is foundational,” Grill says. When you communicate consistently with parents and guardians, “you show them that you care about these kids and want what’s best for them.”

Effective communication involves meeting parents and guardians where they are. Some parents want to receive emails; others want text messages; still others rely on notes sent home with students. Many schools also use online classroom management and communication tools, such as ClassDojo or Google Classroom. Social media plays an important role in school outreach as well.

Of course, schools need to ensure equitable communication. More than one in five U.S. households lack internet access.<sup>11</sup>



Beyond the equity issue, schools that rely on blast communications can miss opportunities to deepen relationships with families. Sometimes there is no substitute for a phone call or a face-to-face meeting.

Dr. Caposey makes his cell phone number publicly available. “Every weekend I get calls and texts from parents about issues big and small,” he says.

His goal is to “humanize the superintendent position.” He explains: “A lot of times people see district offices as this monolithic entity. I want families to know who I am and to feel comfortable coming to me if they have an issue. I encourage our principals to do the same.” That way parents see “that we care and that we’ll try to address whatever problem arises.”

Grill emphasizes the importance of openness, too. She advises districts to make educators’ email addresses public and easy to locate.

She also encourages school and district leaders to “remove things from teachers’ plates so they can prioritize strengthening relationships with families.” That’s no small task, especially as schools contend with staff shortages. But creative plans to leverage parent volunteers can free up educators to make phone calls and send personalized messages.<sup>12</sup>

Such an open approach pays dividends in the long run, Grill adds. “When you are engaged with your families, issues such as certain behavioral challenges or work completion can be supported at home,” she says. “Additionally, having a trusting relationship with families can help avoid some student crises. For example, if a parent is comfortable sharing that a change or challenge is occurring in the family, the school can proactively support the student. Early identification and intervention can help avoid larger-scale needs down the line.”

“Building trust with families is foundational. Through clear and consistent communication, you show parents you care about these kids and want what’s best for them.”

**Deb Grill, Nationally Certified School Psychologist and assessment consultant at Pearson**





## #3:

# Offer personalized communications that allow for collaboration

Even as parents express concern that they don't know enough about what's happening with their child's education, they complain that they can't keep up with all the information the school sends them.<sup>13</sup>

What explains this seeming paradox?

A few factors:

1. Families receive a flood of announcements — about school picture day, field trips, fundraisers, forms that need filling out, and on and on. With so many communications, or so much information packed into a single email or newsletter, parents can miss crucial or time-sensitive items.<sup>14</sup>

2. Such communications, as necessary as they may be, contain nothing specific to a given child's academic progress or well-being.

3. The messages don't afford parents the opportunity to ask questions or give feedback.

Taking time to personalize communications and share specific, positive feedback about students will help address the first two points. So will pausing to ensure that the information you share "is really relevant to the parents you're addressing," Grill says.

To overcome the third issue, you must take care not to *talk at* parents too much.





“When parents trust schools enough to provide background knowledge on their child, educators can be attuned to signals that the student might need extra support.”

**Deb Grill, Nationally Certified School Psychologist and assessment consultant at Pearson**

Instead, foster two-way communication. Provide parents and guardians the opportunity to ask questions and provide input.

Grill served for years as a psychologist in public schools and now consults with K-12 districts for education publishing and assessments provider Pearson. She explains, “By working with families, schools can provide students with well-rounded support at home and at school.”

Grill continues: “When a parent develops a trusting relationship with a school, they are more likely to feel

comfortable saying to the teacher, ‘Listen, some stuff is going on at home. Can the school counselor check in with my child?’ At the same time, when parents provide background knowledge on a student, educators can be attuned to signals that the student might need extra support. Schools and families can collaborate to support kids’ well-being.”

Parent feedback matters on a broader scale, too. Grill mentions that schools can solicit parents’ views through surveys, recruit engaged parents to serve on committees and more.



## #4:

# Define success for your district to guide interactions

If you're going to build bridges with families, both parents and educators need a clear vision of your district's goal and what successful bridge building will look like.

Dr. Caposey says: "The number one thing is to define what success looks like collectively. How do I make the school system work for as many kids as possible? If we're doing our job right, I can tie every decision we make back to that goal. And when we decide what success looks like, we can clearly communicate to families how their child fits into it."

Even then, many parents need help learning how best to engage with schools. In the words of one influential

study, "Families care about their children's success, but most parents need more and better information from schools and communities to become and remain productively involved in their children's education."<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Caposey gives an example: parent-teacher conferences. "What do your child's grades mean? What standards are they tied to? What can the family do at home to support the student's learning? Most parents don't know the right questions to ask."







Dr. Caposey's district has filled that gap. "We give parents and teachers a script laying out the right questions," he says.

Educating the teachers proves just as important. "Once parents are prepared to ask probing questions at conferences, teachers must be prepared to *answer* those questions," the superintendent explains. "The demands increase for both parents and teachers. But the result is a richer and more honest conversation. That allows the two sides to come together to support the student better."

"Most parents need more and better information from schools and communities to become and remain productively involved in their children's education."

Joyce L. Epstein, PhD, Johns Hopkins University Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships

## #5:

# Trust the trust — let the bridges you build with parents carry you through difficult conversations

Inevitably, no matter how well you do your jobs, you and your fellow educators will have some difficult conversations with families. But the trust you have built through clear, consistent and positive communication should help you navigate these challenges.

For instance, districts across the country face concerns about programs to support the mental and emotional health of students, such as universal mental health screening.<sup>16</sup> Mental health experts recommend that K-12 schools adopt such screening, but some parents express reservations.

The Hopeful Futures Campaign, a coalition of national organizations focused on supporting mental health,

says that “partnering with and effectively engaging families” is “vital to successfully implementing and sustaining a comprehensive school mental health system.”<sup>17</sup>

Grill and Dr. Caposey echo this advice. When it comes to mental health screening, they suggest that school leaders should:

- Engage parents before rolling out a screening program.
- Inform families about the many benefits of universal screening for their children.
- Listen to families’ questions and concerns.





- Be clear about the parameters of the program — in Grill’s words: “Here is the goal of the screening. Here is exactly what we will do and what we won’t do. Here are the questions we’ll ask. Here is how we’ll manage the data for student privacy.”
- Develop an implementation plan that parents can get behind.

Again, it comes down to doing your best to serve students.

Dr. Caposey concludes, “If I could give a single tip to administrators going through difficult conversations with families, I’d say to remember: *It gets better.*”

When it comes to contentious issues, he says, “The situation may seem a little volatile at the beginning, but remember, you’re acting in accordance with what you think is in the best interests of children. That conviction will

help you stay the course. And in my experience, when you maintain clear, honest communication, most people come around.”

Similarly, Pearson’s Grill comes back to putting trust at the foundation of your relationships with parents and guardians. “We’re talking about a partnership between schools and homes,” she says. “And when you build that trusting relationship, you can address students’ mental health and well-being needs.”

Trust, clarity and consistency: by holding to these values, you can serve your students and families alike.



For more information on mental health tools and assessments for your school or district, visit:

[PearsonAssessments.com/MentalHealth](https://PearsonAssessments.com/MentalHealth).

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