When I was a teacher, I quickly came to appreciate how profoundly my students’ experiences outside of school influenced their performance in the classroom. My daily work to support their learning was certainly important, but sometimes my best efforts in the classroom were not enough. On occasion, I would reach out to parents for help and to better understand what students were experiencing outside of school. Through these conversations, I was also able to give parents detailed information about how their child was doing in my class and suggestions on how they could support my efforts in the classroom. In turn, parents gave me new insights into the specific circumstances and learning needs of their children. But because of the daily demands on my time and the lack of schoolwide support, I contacted parents less frequently than would have benefitted me or my students.

As a researcher, I’ve come to appreciate even more strongly the potential of schools’ efforts to engage parents as partners in students’ learning. A large body of literature dating back over a half century to the famous Coleman Report in 1966 illustrates how factors outside of school are the dominant influence on students’ academic achievement (Altonji & Mansfield, 2011; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004;). Simply put, while effective teachers and solid curricula are crucial, the role that parents play in shaping
students’ educational experiences and supporting their in-school success cannot be overstated. When parents foster positive learning environments at home and are engaged in their students’ schooling, kids have much better academic outcomes (Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Todd & Wolpin, 2007).

In light of this, it is essential for school leaders and teachers to better understand how they can engage parents and enlist their support. Recent field experiments offer some promising insights. For example, a small randomized-control trial that I conducted with researcher Shaun Dougherty during a charter school summer session found that frequent, personalized phone calls home immediately increased students’ engagement in school, as measured by homework completion, in-class behavior, and in-class participation (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

For this experiment, we trained the teachers to use a conversation protocol that began with them updating parents about a student’s academic progress and classroom behavior and alerting them about upcoming homework assignments and tests. We asked the teachers to end each call affirming that the student could be successful and suggesting one specific way the student could maintain or improve their effort.

In a follow-up experiment, behavioral scientist Todd Rogers and I asked teachers who were part of a high school summer credit-recovery program to write one-sentence individualized messages to each of their students’ families every week, again including one specific thing students were doing well or could improve (see Figure 1). We found that these brief weekly messages reduced the percentage of students who failed to earn course credit by 41 percent (Kraft & Rogers, 2015).

Other recent studies have documented similarly positive results from extended parent meetings with school leaders and panel discussions featuring experienced parents (Avvisati et al., 2014; Destin & Svoboda, 2017).

Together, these randomized control trials illustrate that providing parents with even brief but specific and actionable recommendations and advice can enable them to better support their children’s learning.

Communication Breakdown
Of course, most educators already know that targeted outreach to parents can make a difference for students. The problem is that in many schools, as I discovered when I was a teacher, teacher-parent communication is infrequent, unsystematic, and not adequately supported.

Nationally representative data on the frequency and quality of school-initiated communication with public school parents show that communication in any form between schools, teachers, and parents is surprisingly rare (Noel et al., 2016). For example, in 2012, 59 percent of public school parents reported never having received a phone call home from their children’s school during the previous year. The data also suggest there is considerable room for improvement in the quality of communication. About half of all parents were not “very satisfied” with the interactions they had with school staff.

Finally, overall trends across the previous decade suggest schools have not made much progress in improving the frequency and quality of communication with parents. Although the use of email as a form of school-to-home communication had risen moderately, this increase did not benefit all families equally. The percentage of parents in higher-income families who received an individual email communication increased from 56 to 59 percent between 2007 and 2012 but remained flat at 48 percent for families living at or below the poverty line. This gap is unlikely to have closed in more recent years given the large socioeconomic gap in access to broadband internet that persists today (Anderson, 2017).

What Schools and Teachers Can Do
Why is school-to-home communication so limited when we know it can help students, in some cases dramatically? Based on my own experience and research, three primary factors contribute to the low rate of teacher-parent communication: implementation barriers (including outdated or difficult-to-access contact information), the absence of schoolwide communication policies, and teachers’ lack of non-instructional time. All of these factors point to a
School leaders play a significant role in promoting teacher-parent communication by making active outreach to parents a schoolwide priority and by dedicating resources to these efforts.
development-related content to send directly to parents. Such messaging has also proved to be effective in boosting parent engagement and student achievement (Doss et al., 2016; Hurwitz et al., 2015; York & Loeb, 2014). These communications can take a variety of forms, such as guidance for literacy development activities, suggestions for topics to discuss with students about their schoolwork, or even mini-lessons about what students are learning in school. In my own research, we found that a summer text-messaging program for parents that focused on promoting literacy skills increased reading comprehension among upper elementary students as well as attendance at parent-teacher conferences (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017). Examples of organizations that specialize in educational content for parents include Learning Heroes, Great Schools/Great Kids, and Upraised Learning.

Parents can use the customized information to move conversations past the one-line responses kids often give to questions about their day at school. Remember, parents are busy people, too; a timely reminder to check in with their children about how things are going in school, along with some context and content-related tips, can help them engage in more frequent and enriching education-related conversations and activities at home.

Engaging Parents as Partners

The work of developing the hearts and minds of young people is too large and important of a task for schools to take on in isolation. New research has helped to illustrate how schools and teachers can expand their positive influence on students by engaging parents as partners in the education process. Now, it’s up to schools to provide the infrastructure and expecta-

References


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