

Communication between home and school

By Randy Ray

A quality education is a team effort that involves parents, school officials and students, and a key component of that is keeping the lines of communication open.

“Without good communications a child might not succeed,” says Cheryl Ward, director of the Heritage Academy, a school for Grades one to 12 that is open to all students, including those with learning disabilities. “A child may be missing deadlines or assignments and projects may be past due ... by communicating with parents we can put out the spark before it becomes a fire by meeting with parents and putting a plan into action.”

Cheryl Boughton, Headmistress at Elmwood School, an independent junior kindergarten to Grade 12 school for girls, agrees that poor communications have the potential to cost students their year.

“Communications at home are sometimes difficult because kids don’t want to talk in the car or at the supper table ... if you cannot count on those conversations it can be difficult for parents to know how their children are progressing at school.”

“A report card twice a year or three times is not enough,” she adds. “A good relationship with teachers is more likely to give parents a heads up on what is happening at school.”

Throughout the academic year most schools work hard to keep parents in touch with their children’s progress. However, they also encourage moms and dads to be active participants: rather than sitting back and watching, they urge parents to take part in parent-teacher interviews, visit the school whenever they can, and keep abreast of their children’s progress and ongoing school activities by reading paper and electronic newsletters and regularly visiting school Web sites.

At Elmwood School, a parent-teacher meeting is held early in the year to match faces and names and to encourage parents to get in touch with teachers whenever they have concerns. Teachers and parents are encouraged to communicate via email but if quick action on an issue is required, Boughton suggests a phone call to a teacher is best because her staff spend most of their time teaching rather than sitting at computers.

Parents are invited to a curriculum information night at the beginning of the school year, as well as two parent-teacher interviews and an open house. Some grades have “math mornings,” where parents can hear a presentation about the mathematics program and enter classrooms to take part in math activities with their daughters.

Elmwood offers monthly “coffee mornings” on the last Friday of every month, another opportunity for parents to meet with school officials, including the headmistress and her administrative team.

“At least once a month there is a reason to come into the school to see what kids are doing or what is going on.”

Parents should take advantage of these opportunities, says Boughton, and while at the school, ask questions and raise issues they might have about how their child is being educated.

“Our parents are as informed as they want to be but we realize not all can play a role, many are very busy,” she says.

Ward and her staff refer to their communications strategy as a “trifecta system” involving parents, teachers and students.

“Communication is absolutely crucial for students with different learning styles who can easily start to fall behind. As long as all three sides are aware of what is going on and how a child is doing, it is the best way to make sure they do not fail.”

Heritage Academy has a Web site where parents can find information, as well as teacher-run sites linked to the main site where moms and dads can access course information, each teacher’s philosophy, and information about upcoming tests and projects.

Information bulletins are sent to parents electronically and in hard copy to ensure vital information is not misplaced or overlooked. Some contain general information and others have class-specific material.

“It is one way we keep parents informed because when you are dealing with students with learning disabilities information does not always make it home, or is diluted or gets mixed up,” Ward says.

Heritage Academy has a meeting at the start of each year where parents get to know staff; there are also three parent-teacher meetings per year. If parents have questions or issues at anytime, they are encouraged to schedule a meeting with a school official.

The school also has a link on its website to a parents' steering committee where there is an opportunity to start a forum to discuss issues and learn what other parents are thinking.

“The parent’s role is to keep communicating with the school and, when action is required, to enforce what needs to be done as recommended by the school. If parents find out their child is not doing homework, we will ask them to sign off every day on the homework; parents have to do that ... it is a three-way partnership and if one of the team does not hold up their end, the team will not succeed.”

When good communication uncovers a problem, Ward says issues are usually solved quickly and often don't re-occur because students realize they are being closely scrutinized.

Boughton says strong communications between parents and schools send a signal to students that their parents are supportive and interested in their education.

“Engagement by parents in the school community is absolutely essential,” she says. “The key in the 21st century is connectedness, so parents who communicate with their school are demonstrating model behaviour to their children that shows they are active, involved and supportive. Kids who see that are more likely to be involved in school.’

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