

The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education

PULLING TOGETHER

What makes
for a good
parent–teacher
relationship?



EDITOR'S NOTE

Parents and teachers are partners



Lisa Everitt
Editor
The Learning Team

One of my most memorable learning experiences as a teacher came from my first year teaching in a suburb of Edmonton. I was new to the school division but not new to teaching, as I had taught for six years in the Northwest Territories prior to moving to Alberta.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten how hard it is for teachers to establish themselves with new students. I quickly found myself being challenged regularly by a group of Grade 11 boys who worked in co-ordination to disrupt my class, most often by strolling in at least 10 minutes late. It drove me crazy. I had experienced much more respectful behaviour from students in the NWT, and I was a bit flummoxed by the situation.

So, after addressing the issue directly with the boys a number of times, I placed calls home to ask for the parents' help with the ongoing choices the boys were making. Naturally, these calls were not easy to make. However, in the case of one of my students, while he was not happy that I had called his parents, he began to come to class on time. I thought to myself, "this is a good improvement, I should let his parents know." I called again.

The next day, the student came bouncing into my classroom. He was so pleased that I had taken the time to call his parents—it was truly delightful to experience. It reminded me that the parent-teacher relationship needs to be informed by positive feedback even in the face of difficult situations. As well, I was struck by the effect that this feedback had on my student—it is so easy to forget that young adults, with all of their bravado, need affirmation as well.

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Taking the time to call this student's parents also had an unanticipated benefit because, a few years later, I taught the boy's sister and, of course, she had heard all about what had happened, which helped lay the foundation for a positive learning environment right off the bat.

This edition of *The Learning Team* focuses on how parents and teachers might forge positive working relationships centered on helping children succeed in school. Under the *Education Act*, teachers have an obligation to evaluate and report student progress to parents and the school board on a periodic basis. However, teachers and parents know that this is the minimum requirement for communication, and we try hard to work as partners for students' benefit.

I hope this issue of *The Learning Team* will help readers to consider how best to collaborate with each other to help students succeed in school.

Lisa Everitt is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association.

READ MORE articles for parents and past issues of *The Learning Team* at www.teachers.ab.ca > Public Education > Resources for Parents.

Teachers share their thoughts

On communication and the parent-teacher relationship

Honesty in the parent-teacher relationship is important, but it can also be tough. Remember to try to be caring and thoughtful with each other.

Make a relationship with your child's teacher before you try to deal with difficult issues.

Be willing to listen. We care about your child and want what's best for them and to bring out their best potential.

—Nicola Hoag,
Grade 7/8 teacher, Ponoka

I want to join you on your child's team.

Our roles on the team will look different, but I want your child to succeed.

—Elisabeth Harrison,
learning support teacher, Coaldale

Don't be afraid to *reach out to your child's teachers*.

The behaviour you experience with your child at home may not be the same as what is observed at school.

—Kimberley Yearous,
Grade 10-12 teacher, Lethbridge

The use of agendas is an efficient and easy way for parents and teachers to communicate.

Take advantage of this excellent communication tool. Where digital portfolios are used, be sure to look at these. They provide first-hand insight into what your child is learning.

—Patricia Mosby, junior high literacy teacher, Edmonton

Remind can be a helpful app. If it's used by your child's school or teacher, be sure to take advantage of this.

Don't wait for us to come to you.

You are your child's first teacher.

—Elizabeth Chant, Grade 2 teacher,
Rocky Mountain House

During a teacher leadership course held over the summer, *The Learning Team* asked participants to comment on parent-teacher communication and relationships.

“Volunteer at your child's school.

This is an easy way to grow the relationship between you and your child's teachers.”

“When you email, call or text your child's teacher, remember they teach all day. It will not be possible for them to respond immediately.
Allow for a reasonable response time.”

“We are a team!”

“Don't wait for us, especially in high school.

Reach out to your child's teachers if you have questions.”

“Try to make sure your child gets enough quality sleep.

Being tired at school makes it hard to learn complex ideas.”

“You know what works with your child.

Do not be shy about sharing this with their teachers. It may be possible to adopt a similar approach allowing for consistency between home and school.”



A key point to remember is that you are a partner in your child's education.

The teacher needs—and wants—you to help make your child's year great!

Working with your child's teacher

Wendy Keiver
Executive Director
Alberta School Councils' Association

Whether you are a parent of a child in school for the first time, or a seasoned “pro” in the system, meeting and working with teachers can often cause feelings of stress and uncertainty. It may help to know that, quite often, many teachers feel the same way about meeting and working with parents!

A key point to remember is that you are a partner in your child's education. The teacher needs—and wants—you to help make your child's year great!

Tips for a successful partnership:

- Tell your child that you are working with the teacher—you are a partner—to help them have a great school year; show your child this by being actively engaged.

- Share information, observations and perspectives about your child and family at meetings and throughout the year.
- Discuss ways to openly communicate (in person, phone, text, email, student agendas, etc.) on a regular basis.
- Decide how you will inform the teacher about situations, circumstances and events that may change how your child behaves or learns.
- Express concerns directly to the involved individuals only, and always in a respectful manner, seeking a reasonable solution.
- Listen carefully to concerns and comments from your child or the teacher; ask questions until you completely understand the issues and expectations.
- Be positive about your child's teacher, school and learning—especially in front of your child!

- Use your school council to learn more about the education team at your child's school, and how all parents can contribute to the success of all students.

As a parent, you have the right and responsibility to make informed decisions about the education of your child. Working closely as a partner with your child's teacher and the whole school community will go a long way in helping you to do this.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about being actively engaged in your child's learning, talk to your child's teacher, principal, or school council chair or contact the Alberta School Councils' Association.

Electronic communication poses ongoing challenges

Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

I'm a bit of a Luddite when it comes to electronic communication. I still do most of my personal email on a computer, typically catching up on daily correspondence in the evening while relaxing with my laptop.

I learned just how disconnected I am from modern mobile-driven ways one evening last year when I sent an email to my kid's teacher. I expected that he would get my message the next day at school and possibly respond then. I was surprised when his response landed in my inbox within minutes.

“Being contacted for work-related matters outside of regular/normal working hours may interrupt and reduce time for recovery from work-related strain...”

—Anna Arlinghaus and
Friedhelm Nachreiner

“Why is he checking his work email at night?” I wondered.

There is a growing body of research showing that after-hours electronic communication can have an adverse effect on a person's well-being.

“Being contacted for work-related matters outside of regular/normal working hours may interrupt and reduce time for recovery from work-related strain and could potentially

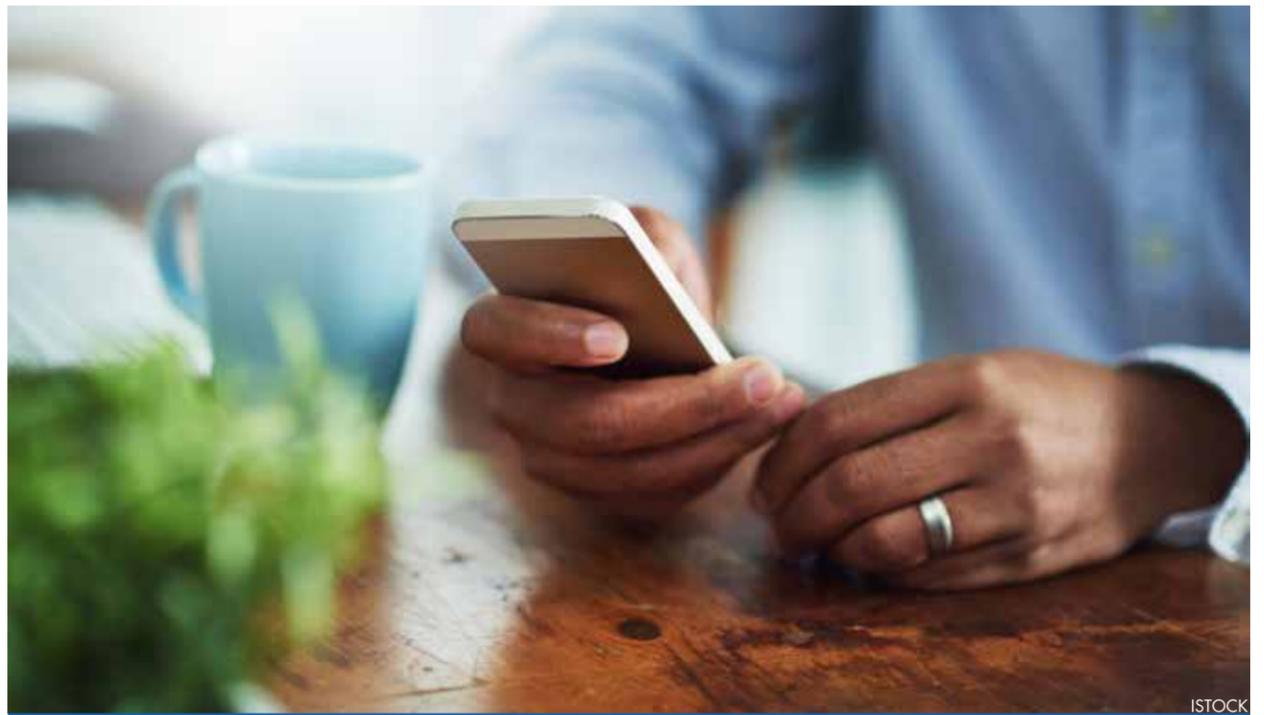
interfere with biological and social rhythms needed for recovery, sleep and social participation, depending on the time the contact occurs.”

This is the conclusion of psychological scientists Anna Arlinghaus and Friedhelm Nachreiner in an article appearing in the journal *Chronobiology International*. The pair analyzed data collected from nearly 24,000 employed workers in 31 European countries.

Other research has linked overwork with health conditions ranging from increased risk of heart attacks to trouble sleeping.

At Chinook's Edge School Division (based in Innisfail), officials were troubled by evidence suggesting that a growing number of staff were “plugged in” for up to 18 hours each day. So last year, the division implemented “Weekdays 'til 6,” a new practice that confines outbound non-emergency emails and texts to before 6 p.m. on weekdays.

This means no more evening or weekend electronic communication from the school to parents or from school administrators to staff. The division also asked parents to adhere to this time restriction in their communications to division staff, including teachers, and asked teachers not to



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respond to after-hours communications until the next day.

The change has largely been positive for families, teachers and school administrators.

“We've had a remarkable decrease in the number of emails. It's been good for all of us,” says Ray Hoppins, the division's associate superintendent of people services. “Parents are very appreciative that we do not send and bombard them with a bunch of communications evenings and weekends.”

The change has provided more down time to division staff, which has helped them bring more energy to their practice when they are working, Hoppins said.

However, the change hasn't been without difficulties.

“Anyone who's addicted to technology has found this challenging,” Hoppins says. “For some of our colleagues

and some of our staff members, it's been very difficult.

That's what they do from nine o'clock to midnight every night ... they send and receive electronic communications. It's become part of their life.”

Getting back to my anecdote about my kid's teacher and evening emails, after I wondered why he was checking his email at night, I then wondered about my own role in the exchange. From his point of view, did my email carry an implicit expectation that I was demanding a response right away? This certainly isn't what I'd meant, but I realized that he may have had a different interpretation.

As a result of this experience, I now operate under the assumption that email recipients may read my message whenever I hit “send,” so I've become more mindful of when I do this.



ISTOCK

Report cards

They're here to stay but changing with the times

Historically, a certain communication tool has occupied a prominent position at the centre of the teacher–parent relationship: the report card.

Sherry Bennett is executive director of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, a nonprofit organization that advocates for sound classroom assessment practices. In this Q&A, Bennett outlines the purpose of the ever-present report card and how its role has evolved over the years.

What are report cards for?

Report cards, sometimes called progress reports, provide written records of student performance on curriculum outcomes over a period of time. An effective report card is a document that can be easily understood by those for whom it is intended—parents and students. The report card should provide straightforward information about what a student knows and can demonstrate relative to the graded curriculum. It should acknowledge actions that all the partners in learning can take: students, parents and teachers.

What are they NOT for?

A report card cannot possibly share all the information that a teacher knows about a student's learning. Because report cards report on student performance at a specific period of time, they are not able to report on student growth, except through teacher comments. Report cards are not intended to compare students against each other, or one class of students against another class.

Who decides on the format or system used?

Within some very broad provincial regulations around reporting student progress to students and parents, decisions regarding report card format and frequency are left to school jurisdictions. In some jurisdictions, individual schools are able to design their own report cards. While this variety can be helpful in meeting the needs of the local community, it can cause challenges when students move from one jurisdiction to another.

To what extent do report card formats vary across the province?

The format of report cards varies widely across the province. In many cases, schools are using a form of parent/teacher/student conference in addition to the formal report cards. Some schools are scheduling conferences in advance of the report cards so that the report card truly is simply a formal communication of information that is already known. With the availability of digital parent portals, some jurisdictions are no longer even sending the report card home as a document.

What trends have you noticed in report cards in recent years?

Over the past decade, there has been a movement towards outcomes-based reporting. However, this term can mean different things to different people.

In any report card, there are two dimensions. One dimension is what is being reported and the other

dimension is the level of quality of the performance, sometimes called a performance scale.

Concerning what is being reported, conventional report cards reported by subject, such as mathematics, science, English language arts and so on. In recent years, educators have determined that it can be helpful to break these large subject areas down into smaller components and report on smaller units or skills. This can provide parents with information about where within these subject areas students are experiencing success, and where they may need more help.

Regarding the performance scale, conventional report cards used percentages or letter grades. While both of these are still in use today, many school jurisdictions are starting to use performance descriptors to describe a level of performance. A wide variety of descriptors are used throughout the province. Because Alberta Education still uses percentages for high school courses, most high schools continue to use percentage grades.

Often when a jurisdiction renovates its reporting system, changes are made in both dimensions. As a parent, if you have questions about how the report card is designed and what it is intended to communicate, schedule a meeting with your child's teacher.

What are the challenges for teachers around report cards?

The most difficult challenge for teachers is to condense all they know about each student's learning into a single mark, whether that be a percentage, a letter grade or a performance category. As such, it is important for parents and teachers to remain in open and ongoing conversations about each student's success and challenges. However, there needs to be balance so this process does not become overwhelming or burdensome for either teachers or parents.

There should be no surprises on a report card. Teachers have a responsibility to communicate concerns early enough that corrective action can be taken; parents have a responsibility to acknowledge information that is shared by the teacher and to work to support their child as best as they are able. Report cards and conferences are times for productive conversations about how to support students.

What are the challenges for parents?

It is important that parents (and grandparents) see the report card as simply one method for communicating student performance. With improved technology, teachers are able to stay in much closer communication with parents than has ever been possible in the past. As such, the report card is often simply a formal way to communicate information that has already been shared among teacher, parent and student.

The marks on the report cards may not mean the same thing as they did a decade or two ago. It is important that parents understand what the marks mean. Be sure to schedule a meeting with your child's teacher if you have questions.

Communication the key to making homework workable

Lisa Everitt
Editor, *The Learning Team*

Homework is one issue that is fraught with potential for disagreement between parents, teachers and students. Interestingly, homework is also a source of debate within the field of educational research. In a 2007 study, researcher Harris Cooper noted that, since the turn of the 20th century, "homework controversies have followed a 30-year cycle with public outcries for more homework or less homework occurring about 15 years apart." Questions that preoccupy discussants include

- How much homework should be assigned at each grade level?
- What is the impact of homework assignments at home?
- What do students think of homework?
- Is homework valuable for helping students learn?

It is one thing to follow the debates around homework, but it is another thing to live the homework debate with students. I have lived this debate as a student, as a parent and as a high school teacher.

One of my strongest homework memories dates back to when I was a Grade 6 student and was assigned a book report that required me to go to the library and do some research on a topic of interest. My topic, and I have no idea how I landed on it, was rats. I was very fortunate to have a mother who loved the library and who was able to help me get to the Calgary library to find books about rats. I also learned that librarians at the library could also help in identifying good research materials. It turned out that rats are pretty resilient and intelligent animals, but that they had not yet been able to cross the border into Alberta.

It is important for parents and teachers to communicate with each other to ensure that learning is supported and that relationships do not break down.

Obviously, in this case, my homework was a valuable assignment as it set the stage for future research projects. However, as teachers, we know that this type of assignment might also cause a litany of problems for students and families that are not familiar with how to do research and who do not have the time or resources to take their children to the library. Therein lies an important component of the homework debate.

Homework is an activity that spills out of schools and into the family. While homework assignments can facilitate opportunities for parents and their children to come together, for example over a great book to be read aloud, it can be a source of tension between parents and their children and cause problems at home.

Teachers assign homework with the intention that it will support learning, but not every teacher will understand the impact this will have on a family. In these cases, it may become important for parents and teachers to communicate with each other to ensure that learning is supported and that relationships do not break down. Perhaps there are simple adjustments that can be made at school or at home to help deal with the issues at hand. The solutions you find may not be perfect, but it is important to try to bridge potential gaps that may develop as a result of homework assignments.

Reference

Cooper, H. 2007. "Finding the Common Ground." In *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, 3rd ed, 1–16. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press. doi: 10.4135/9781483329420.n1