TIPS

FOR ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND FAMILIES:

HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

Harvard Family Research Project

TIPS | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "DATA"?

In these tip sheets, "data" refers to the combined set of information about students' achievements, strengths and challenges, areas of interest, and learning styles. These data include such traditional measurements of student progress as grades and test scores, but they also include such assessments as students' preparedness, problem solving ability, and critical thinking skills—important competencies for students to develop as they prepare for life and work in a global 21st-century society.

HOW ARE STUDENT DATA SHARED WITH FAMILIES?

The traditional ways that educators have shared student data with families—through quarterly report cards and during brief parent–teacher conferences—are valuable means of updating parents on their child's progress, but these data-sharing opportunities don't occur frequently enough to promote ongoing school–family communication and information sharing.

Recognizing the benefits of ongoing communication, educators and families have begun sharing information about student progress much more frequently than in the past, aided by technology tools that have opened up new ways to stay connected.

Educators are becoming more proactive in how they communicate with families by sharing information in between report cards and conferences. Parents are asking more questions about the data they see in progress notes or through online parent portals to get a better understanding of their child's learning. Parents are also seeking guidance about how to act on that information, such as by accessing academic support services to address challenges or finding learning opportunities in the broader community that build on a child's strengths and interests.

If your school or district has found a particularly effective method of sharing data, please let us know! Email us at **fine@gse.harvard.edu** with the subject line: Data Sharing Practice.

These actions allow educators and families to engage in discussions about student progress more regularly than in the past, which helps promote a sense of shared responsibility for supporting student learning.

HOW CAN YOU USE THESE TIP SHEETS?

These tip sheets help school administrators, teachers, and families identify the best ways to share student data in meaningful ways, on a regular basis, to strengthen family–school partnerships and promote student learning. Many of the tips represent small but significant—and often overlooked—steps in sharing data with families that can make a big difference in families' ability to access, understand, and act on information about their child's progress. While the tips can be used to guide the formal conversations that take place during parent–teacher conferences, they are especially designed to help promote less formal, ongoing communication about student progress among teachers, families, and students throughout the year. **Examples of site-based practices** illustrating the roles of administrators, teachers, and families in sharing data are included at the end of the tip sheets.

TIPS *For Administrators* | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

As superintendents and principals, you play key roles in helping your staff understand how to make data on student progress accessible, understandable, and actionable for families. You can work with teachers to develop strategies for sharing data with families in timely and appropriate ways and emphasize how data-sharing efforts help create meaningful opportunities to enhance parents' ability to support their child's learning.

Creating a Data-Sharing Culture Among Teachers

- Use your leadership position to help your staff build capacity for sharing data with families. Emphasize in your school's or district's strategic plan the importance of data sharing. Make use of professional development trainings to help teachers understand effective data-sharing practices. Identify ways to organize and communicate student data, such as by setting up an online student information system and parent portal.

- Set expectations for teachers about their roles in sharing data with families and helping families act on the data provided to enhance their child's learning. Help school support staff, including parent liaisons and guidance counselors, understand how they can help with data sharing. Ensure that all staff members respect student privacy and that they commit to using student data in appropriate ways to help address concerns and work toward goals.

- Encourage teachers to use a variety of means for sharing student data with families. These methods can include phone calls, emails, text messages, and online data systems. Help teachers understand the importance of updating online data on a consistent basis so that parents know how frequently they can expect to see information posted about their child's progress.

- Work with teachers to develop effective and culturally appropriate tools for sharing data with families. These tools, such as reporting forms, can be tailored to different grade levels or content areas and can serve as useful ways to help teachers save time when communicating with families.

- Collaborate with teachers to set appropriate response times for replying to emails and phone calls regarding families' concerns. Help to ensure that established time frames for responding to families' calls take into account both the importance of getting information to families in a timely manner and the many demands on teachers' time.

- Stress the importance of parent–teacher conferences as a communication tool to support student learning. Emphasize that these meetings provide families and teachers with an opportunity to develop positive working relations as they discuss student performance and co-create an action plan to help students achieve goals.

TIPS For Administrators | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

- Allow time during faculty meetings and in-service trainings for teachers to discuss any challenges they have had in sharing data with families. Even with good planning and helpful processes in place, teachers will occasionally encounter obstacles to sharing data with families, and it can be helpful for them to get ideas from one another about how to work through these.

Helping Families Make Use of Data

- Provide families with an orientation about student data. This orientation should cover how to access and understand data such as standardized test scores and "credit units earned," as well as how to log onto online parent portals and make sense of the information that families see posted about their child.

- Make sure that families are aware of any new education reform initiatives that will impact their child's learning, especially when state or district assessments change. For example, as states adopt the Common Core Standards, many families are finding that they need help in understanding what skills and knowledge their child will need in order to do well on tests aligned with the new standards.

- Help families understand how teachers and others in the school use student data and why this information is valuable. For instance, explain to families that teachers use data to adapt teaching strategies to students' needs as well as to help students work toward specific learning goals. Knowing how teachers use data helps reassure families that the data are used in meaningful ways and that their child is not seen as just a set of numbers.

- Ensure equity in families' access to student data. Whenever possible, make certain that families have access to information in their native language. Also, designate certain computers in the school for families to use to access online parent portals. Partner with community centers and libraries to establish computer kiosks where families can access the portals.

- Ask families if the student progress notes or school-wide data reports that they receive are easy to understand. Find out what information parents find valuable, and ask if there are other types of data that they would like to receive in these reports. To gather more feedback about their ideas and needs, consider holding a parent focus group or conducting a parent survey.

- Involve the larger community in reaching out to families to help them access, understand, and act on student data. Work with community partners and parent leaders to help families understand the importance of attending orientations, open houses, and parent–teacher conferences. Families can learn about the school's data-sharing practices at these events and can also learn how to use data to support their child's learning.

Click here for examples of effective data-sharing practices.

TIPS For Teachers | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

As a teacher, you are in the best position to assess student performance, and therefore, you play a particularly important role in using data to create family–school partnerships focused on identifying students' strengths and addressing challenges. You can help both families and students understand what student data mean and then work with them to develop a joint action plan to achieve learning goals.

Preparing to Share Data With Families

- Approach sharing data with families in the context of the whole child. Be prepared to reassure parents that their child's progress is more than the sum of test scores or attendance records by supplementing this information with daily classroom observations. These might include the child's social and problem solving skills and contributions to class discussions.

- Be sensitive to families' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and recognize that these can influence the ways that you communicate with them. Ask parent and community liaisons or other staff about using culturally and linguistically responsive ways to connect with families.

- Maintain accurate and timely data on student progress, and ensure that this information is accessible to families. Provide parents with a brief definition or explanation of data that have been sent home or posted on an online parent portal. Doing so will help clarify what that information really says about their child's progress.

- Talk with other teachers to determine the best ways to share different types of data with families. Determine which data are best discussed in a personal meeting, which data can be shared during a phone conversation, and which data can simply be posted online.

- Review the data directly with students, if it is developmentally appropriate to do so, and tell them that you plan to share the information with their family. This approach gives students an opportunity to talk to their parents about the data—such as a test score or a disciplinary citation—before their parents see them on a portal or in a progress note, and allows students to develop a greater sense of responsibility for their school progress.

- Identify support staff, including parent liaisons and guidance counselors, to work with families when needed. These staff might help with translation assistance and referrals for academic or other support services in the community. These individuals can also help facilitate parents' ongoing use of resources such as online parent portals and assist parents with implementing action steps to advance their child's learning.

TIPS For Teachers | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

- Take time to develop a trusting and respectful relationship with families. Establishing a sense of trust will help families feel comfortable talking with you about their child's progress and help them be open to suggestions about how to address challenges.

Talking With Families About Student Data

- Be mindful of privacy when meeting with families to discuss their child's progress. The most meaningful discussions will occur when family members can talk about their child's progress openly and honestly, so be aware of whether others can overhear conversations that might involve sensitive topics.

- Give families a voice. Don't feel the need to provide all the data or answers to student learning issues yourself—invite families to share their own data and observations of their child to make them active partners with whom you share a clear objective.

- Find an appropriate time during parent–teacher meetings to specifically discuss test scores and other formal performance results. Starting off with these data—which can seem more impersonal than other observations of a student's classroom functioning—may not be the best place to begin a conversation.

- Be sure to share a range of data, including test scores as well as day-to-day observations of the student's behavior and performance. Present samples of the student's work to illustrate progress and to move the conversation beyond numbers and percentages. Help families understand what the data suggest about their child's overall academic progress and any learning challenges that need to be addressed.

- Avoid as much education jargon as possible, including acronyms or terms such as "stanine" and "formative." Keep in mind that people not directly involved in an education setting are often unfamiliar with many of these terms. Create a glossary of the most commonly used words and phrases to help families understand those "edu-speak" terms related to assessment and performance that they are likely to see in print and online.

- Focus conversations on the potential for growth and improvement. Use the student's progress data to co-develop an action plan for growth, and discuss the specific roles that you, the parent, and the student will play in achieving goals.

- Provide families with resources to enrich their child's learning, and help them understand the best way to use the resources. These resources may include websites, activities, and lists of afterschool programs. Giving families a variety of resources is helpful, but try not to overwhelm them with too many—focus on those that are most relevant to their child's needs.

Click here for examples of effective data-sharing practices.

TIPS For Families | HOW TO SHARE DATA EFFECTIVELY

As a parent or other family member, you can support your child's learning in a number of ways. You can provide teachers with information about your child's interests and challenges, and you can talk with teachers about data related to your child's academic progress. These conversations can help you and your child's teacher co-create action steps to help promote your child's learning in the home, school, and community.

Preparing to Communicate With Teachers

- Get to know the staff at your child's school. Attending orientations and open houses is a great way to meet staff and understand the different roles that teachers, support staff, and other people play in supporting your child's learning. Obtain contact information for relevant school staff so you know how to reach them if you ever have questions or concerns.

- Give your child a voice in the data-sharing process. Ask your child to describe his or her own strengths, challenges, and interests. Share this information with teachers when you meet with them. This information helps teachers individualize action plans to help your child achieve success.

- Ask your child to see samples of his or her class work, such as graded math homework or spelling tests. Looking over this work can help you develop specific questions for teachers about how to build on areas of strength or find support services to address areas of concern.

- Find out if your child's school uses an online parent portal to provide access to student data. If you do not have a computer at home, find out if there are computers you can use in the school, the public library, or other community locations. If needed, ask for help with setting up an account and logging in to see your child's data. Find out whom you should contact if you have questions or need technical support using the portal.

- Ask about any special features of your school's parent portal that can provide you with detailed data about your child's progress beyond his or her class average. Ask, for example, if you can see information on individual homework, quiz, and test scores to identify patterns in your child's performance, or if there is a section in the portal where teachers post comments about class participation or collaborative group work.

- Strike a balance between monitoring data and allowing your child space to make progress at his or her own pace. Avoid constantly checking online portals, also known as "e-hovering."

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Talking With Teachers About Your Child's Progress

- Ask the teacher to show you samples of your child's work to get a full understanding of your child's performance. Find out how the assignments show what your child knows or is able to do. This information will help you see whether your child is on track to achieve learning goals.

- Ask for explanations for any unfamiliar terms. Teachers often get used to using "buzz words" in their work, particularly when discussing tests and other assessments.

- Find out from the teacher what the time frame is for posting student data online and responding to parents' questions. Knowing this will help you understand what to expect regarding communication with school staff. Keep in mind that some information, such as homework or attendance, might be posted more frequently than others and that teachers will be able to respond more quickly to some requests than others.

- Share your own information about your child with teachers. Let them know, for example, what activities your child is involved in after school. Tell teachers about any specific behaviors or interests you have observed that seem to affect your child's learning and growth. You might also want to share relevant medical or psychological information that could impact your child's classroom performance.

- Talk with the teacher about how to use your child's data to set short- and long-term learning goals. Work with the teacher to co-create an action plan outlining what roles you, the teacher, and your child should play in achieving these goals. Ask the teacher for activities or resources to support your child's learning goals. Be sure to ask about the best way to use these resources.

- Think about bringing your child with you to meetings with teachers and other school staff, such as parent–teacher conferences, if the school allows this. Letting students play an active role in discussions about their progress can help foster their sense of ownership over their learning and enhance their motivation to succeed.

Engaging With Your Child

- Talk with your child on a regular basis about data related to his or her school progress. Demonstrate your support in a nonjudgmental manner, even if data show that your child is experiencing challenges in certain areas. Doing this shows your child that you want to be a supportive learning partner rather than just a "monitor" of grades and other data.

- Stress the importance of "sticking with it" if the data show areas needing improvement. To help your child persist when challenges arise, work with him or her to identify resources to overcome difficulties. This will help motivate your child to succeed.

Click here for examples of effective data-sharing practices.

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Examples of Effective Data-Sharing Practices

Making Numbers Meaningful

To address the problem of low student attendance, a Boston-area elementary school created a bulletin board in the main lobby to show parents the impact of students' attendance on reading achievement. The school then sent parents letters that indicated both the number of days their child had been absent over the past three years and the total number of hours of missed instruction these absences represented. The principal reported that this information was a wake-up call to parents: "You can say somebody's been absent 50 days, but 300 hours (of missed instruction) looks different." Attendance rates have steadily increased since the school launched this campaign.

Example drawn from Marshall elementary school: Waging a campaign to improve attendance. (2011, February). ***FOCUS Newsletter for Boston Teachers***. Retrieved from http://www.bpe.org/files/FocusMakingDataPublicFINAL.pdf

Transforming Parent–Teacher Conferences

The Creighton Elementary School District in Arizona adopted an entirely new approach to parent–teacher conferences. After determining that holding 15-minute meetings with individual families twice a year was not sufficient, the district piloted and later expanded the Academic Parent–Teacher Team model. This approach includes scheduling one 30-minute individual parent–teacher conference, along with three other 75-minute meetings that include all classroom parents. In the group meetings, parents have more time to understand class material and student performance. Teachers explain core subject area learning goals, and each family receives data on student progress. Teachers encourage families to share strategies that work well for promoting particular skills, and families set 60-day learning goals for their child. Teachers provide families with relevant materials and demonstrate at-home learning strategies so that they can help their child achieve learning goals.

Example drawn from Paredes, M.C. (2010). Academic parent–teacher teams: Reorganizing parent–teacher conferences around data. ***Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter,*** *2*(3). Retrieved from www.hfrp.org/ReorganizingConferencesAroundData

Engaging Students to Assess and Share Their Progress

At a Massachusetts elementary school, a first-grade teacher invites students to help lead parent–teacher conferences. This student-led conference approach helps bring children directly into the conversation about their learning and growth. The teacher helps students maintain portfolios that contain work samples and self-evaluations from different points throughout the year. The students use these self-evaluations to create progress reports for themselves in areas such as reading, writing, math, social studies, and personal growth. Students come to conferences ready to share their progress using their own growth as a measure of achievement. The self-evaluation process also provides an opportunity for students to develop goal-setting skills in working with their families and their teachers to identify action steps toward achieving success.

Example drawn from pages 95-97 in Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). ***The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other***. New York, NY: Random House.

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hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu

Harvard Family Research Project
3 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

www.hfrp.org
Tel: 617-495-9108

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