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Instructional Leadership:

Professionalism and Collaboration

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Teacher and Family Communication

Communication between the school and families is a vital part of the success of the school in educating children. If there is unhealthy communication between these two parties, the students will be the ones to suffer. Parents are an important part of a child's education and should be an integral part of a child's school career. To help us better understand the topic of communication and how schools and families keep that line open, I interviewed Mark Newton, the principal at Neosho Heights Elementary School in Oswego, Kansas.

Listed below is a list of questions asked and Mr. Newton's answers:

**1. In your career as a principal, in what ways have you worked to improve communication with families?**

There are two levels in which he strives to work from. First, he tries to be as engaging and receptive as possible when the parents come to speak with him. He will rearrange his schedule to accommodate theirs. Despite the topic of the meetings, the party will not leave his office without a handshake. He tries to come to an agreement with parents, but in the instance where he and the parents do not see eye to eye, they will still leave his office with a handshake and “agree to disagree.”

The second level he strives for is more pragmatic. He is new to the school, so he has not implemented these tactics, yet, he does, however, want to begin them next year. He wants his teachers to maintain a log of all parent communication (both good and bad). He wants to be able to go online to a secure source to be able to monitor the conversations his teachers are having with the parents of the children in their classroom. Part of this is so he can ensure positive notes are being sent home. He said that teachers need to “bank positives.”

On top of these two levels, he is very technologically inclined. The school has a website, but over the summer he plans to develop his own so he can communicate with parents through. He also communicates over facebook, classroom websites, twitter, and newsletters.

**2. What were some of your successes?**

He basically said everything he has done to communicate has been successful. One of his biggest successes at a previous school were his teachers' “weebly websites.” With these, teachers can upload their lesson plans to the website so when students are absent, they can just jump on to see what they missed and what they need to make up. He also said some teachers began recording their lessons and uploading the recording to the sites so students who missed would not truly be missing out on the lesson!

**3. What were some of your biggest challenges?**

One of the biggest challenges he has faced with communication is to actually get some of the (old school) teachers to come around to the technology. They did not feel comfortable with the websites. On top of that, he had to constantly remind the teachers to maintain the sites. He did initial training at a staff meeting, but teachers had to be willing to set aside the time to upload lessons, put pictures on, and just do general maintance.

Another problem he has faced is parents not having internet at home. This is changing, however, since most parents now have smart phones.

**4. Have you ever been in a school where they did a communication audit? If so, how did that go?**

No. The resources in small towns do not really have the flexibility to lend itself to anything extra like a communication audit.

**5. Does the district have a communication department?**

No. There's nothing specifically for communication for the district. There are pockets of people who have taken on the role, but nothing officially set up.

I believe Mr. Newton has done a remarkable job in the short amount of time he has been at Neosho Heights in improving the communication between the school and the community. I also believe, however, there is always room for improvement. One way for this to happen is an explanation to new parents on what the school does and why they do it. For example, I did not know the school collected receipts from the local grocery store. 1% of what the community spends at the store can be paid back to the school! As a new parent, I had never been told this. A simple letter home explaining these small details could have made the school quite a bit of money. I wonder how many parents still do not know about that little piece of information!

Another simple way the school could improve communication is to create a small survey for parents to complete. This survey would help the school see areas in which the parents see communication is strong, and areas that need improvement. Some sample questions could include: Do you feel the school values your opinion? Do you feel comfortable approaching your child's teacher or administration if you or your child are having a problem with the school or other students? Do you feel the school does a good job in communicating expectations for your student?

A final source of information the school could make available for parents would be a piece of information containing resources, programs, and assistance for families. This could include resources the school offers, as well as from the community. For example, a local church has a food and clothing ministry. This ministry is a “no questions asked” source for the community. The school offers a breakfast program. It also offers a summer lunch program free to all children from birth to 18 years old. Providing families with this source of information will let the families know that they not only care about how their child is doing in school, but about the well-being of the entire family.

As mentioned above, communication is a critical part of a child's learning process. In order for the child to be the most successful, the entire family should be involved with the educational process. This must start from the school reaching out to the family. Opening up the line of communication is a key ingredient in gaining the trust of the parents and helping students succeed both at home and school.