

4. COMMUNICATION

Sameena Eidoo: Moving to Canada is not without challenges, upon relocating to this new place there exist many complex pressures, worries and barriers for newcomer families. Often topping the list of worries is that of the welfare of ones children, providing for them and their successful futures is often an essential priority of immigrant parents. This being said, schools can ease the worries of caring parents simply by opening the lines of communication to newcomer families and by creating an atmosphere in which regular communication is encouraged and promoted.

Urdu Speaking Parent: The biggest tension we have is that of finding a job, that we should find a job soon and a good place to live. After that we think of paying attention to our children's school. And if the teachers' behaviour is good in the school, we are relieved and get involved in a job, if we find a job then all the problems are solved. If we do not have proper contact with the school, if there is a problem about the children's admission, and there is a problem finding a job, and there is an issue about finding a place to stay, when all these things add up and it increased tension. If these things are resolved even in small ways, one is satisfied.

Sameena Eidoo: Communication between the home and the school is beneficial and results in families feeling relieved and more secure about matters relating to their child's education. When communication is overlooked or not prioritized parents may feel as though their role and concerns regarding their child's education are regarded as trivial or inconsequential.

Russian Speaking Parent: I had a problem with one of the teachers. She called me and said that my daughter hadn't submitted an assignment on time. After we talked to her, we completed all the work that was required, and we called the teacher to ask her what we needed to do to solve the problem, to prevent my daughter from losing time, points, etc. She told us what to do, and later she said that everything was fine. We requested a meeting with her and we were negotiating the time for about a week and a half, but she couldn't find any time for us in the end.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Our problem was that they wouldn't listen to us. The school where the assessment folks sent us did not give admission to my children, and sent them to another school. They wouldn't listen to us.

Caribbean Community Parent: I will give them an advice, I was keeping contact with the parents. I know one teacher, they always call, but some won't call. You know, just, even once a month, you call up and say well, "I am so and so, Johnny's teacher and I would like to know... I called to say hi". And the parents should also sometimes go to the school and say "Hi, how is my son doing? Is he behaving?" Because in your case they might say yes, sometime they do something and the teacher don't even bother to tell you because they're fed up, but you know if you keep in touch with each other. Sometimes a little phone call, you know, five minutes. Everybody's busy, five minutes won't hurt.

Sameena Eidoo: The structural environment of the school as a significant impact on parent-school communication. When comparing communication at the different school levels an observable pattern presents itself. At the elementary school level there is much more effort placed on involving and communicating with parents. While at the secondary level it seems as

though communication is limited to formal meetings such as parent's night or whenever there are problems that need to be addressed.

Somali Speaking Parent: Yes there is a difference. I went through all three stages, some of my kids are in high school and some others are in college. When my kids were in Elementary school, I was feeling more welcomed and I used to frequently meet with my daughter's teachers without making an appointment to see him and ask about my son or daughter. In middle school I was confined to the office. In high school you need to have an appointment. I do not know the reason why. Perhaps because they want to protect the privacy of the students? Elementary schools are more welcoming, Middle schools are not as open as the Elementary schools, and you can not go to the classroom of your child directly without passing by the office. High schools are even more difficult to communicate with.

Sameena Eidoo: Some parents are only contacted when there's a problem, and their only communication with their child's teachers is when they receive negative news. This creates a negative relationship with perpetuates worry, insecurity and often even fear.

Educator: If they're hearing the same messages at home and at school I just see it as twice as likely the messages are going to take and serve kids. So I think that, and I think probably the other reason that a lot of high schools get lost when it comes to parental involvement and tend only to involve parents when there's trouble tends to be the size of them. I mean, if you look the majority of high schools, you know some of them are 2000 kids, that's pretty tough. And as we've said here we're a relatively small high school with around 700 kids.

Sameena Eidoo: Parents overwhelmingly want to get involved in their children's education, they want to communicate. While some parents have the ability and confidence to seek out, initiate and maintain communications, others do not. The issue for many parents is they often believe their child's success is their responsibility, they take their role in the process very personally. We must actively open the lines of communication. To assist them to get involved there has to be an active effort by teachers and the entire staff to make the school a comfortable place for parents and teachers to communicate.

Educator: I find that at the school where I am the secretary will take them around to the class for the first day, the child and the parents, so they know where it is. And I assume that happens in other elementary schools too. So they're quite comfortable and I always tell them that I'm there to interpret and that it's very important that the teachers are welcoming if they want to know about something. And so that brings them into the school so they're able to go to the child's teacher and find out more about what's going on, you know, if they're getting their agenda, or not doing their homework. And definitely calling them and informing them that I'm there for them for interpretation for parent teacher interviews, especially the ones in November, which I think are the most important ones.

Sameena Eidoo: It is important that teachers and staff encourage parents to get involved with the school. Both parents and school personnel need to work together to build a relationship, both need to work on opening the lines of communication and getting the relationship rolling.

Educator: He was very approachable and he would spend time doing all kinds of social events to get the parents to come in and actively get the community involved. For example, he would ask their great-grandparents and their aunts and uncles that come in and they would, for those occasions I remember, they were making egg rolls in the kitchen and helping with the lunch program and it was very free and open. So they felt really wanted and needed and they participated in a lot of these activities that he had promoted for the community. So it was, remember we had those little fun fairs, but it was for the community and all the parents participated in it. They took some onus to help run the programs, so that was really sort of a relaxing and sort of a happy time that the entire family would enjoy and that's where the open doors policy made it really comfortable for all the parents that would come in, the immigrant parents. So that was important in that respect because he welcomed everyone, and we had what we called a welcome for the parents who did not speak the language and he would get interpreters from the settlement and everywhere to come in.

Educator : I guess one thing that we've worked hard on is to have volunteers within our school. We've encouraged many, particularly moms, to work within the classrooms in whatever capacity they can and what we've found is that some come with very little English but will do whatever you ask them to do, and it's an opportunity for them, they're actually learning English while they're here and they're becoming more familiar with the kinds of schooling that their child is experiencing. And much like you would think anywhere else, it encourages, they go back and say "Oh you should come it's quite good", and so over the years our volunteers have really increased because they're finding it a good place for them to be and for them to learn.

Educator: About the difference between education system, for example in Russia or Israel, from Canada makes some kind of difficulties for parents to understand how to take control of their kids. Because for example in Russia, all parents they receive some kind of weekly report from teachers about student marks, about the behaviour and they feel updated and they feel that they can influence every single day to their kids. Here they experience the different system and they would like to take control but they can't get enough information. This is the main problem.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: Later that Kindergarten teacher told the Grade One teacher what I hoped for my daughter. The teacher was very upset. She said, "Why didn't you come talk with me directly when you had a question?" But the teacher felt, "Why didn't you tell me?" So for a while I felt very embarrassed when whenever I saw the Grade One teacher. I tried to explain that was not what I meant, but it was very hard to get the message through. Maybe it was because of the language, I found it hard to explain to her what I really meant. She called me and asked me to see her at school. So I did. It was because I had talked with the Kindergarten teacher, so this teacher was very upset. I could see that. She said, "I hope you can tell me directly if there is any issue." She did not understand and did not give me any chance to explain what I meant. I find this is the cultural difference. Unfortunately she misunderstood me. She felt I was complaining about her to the other teacher. That's how I felt. And also it was impossible to communicate. I couldn't get my meaning across.

Sameena Eidoo: From the school perspective, communicating expectations to parents is key.

Parents new to a society which they may know little about and sending children to a school which they know little about, the school needs to explicitly inform parents of the different expectations, roles and responsibilities that they have as families and explain what parent involvement means.

Somali Speaking Parent: For example, parents did not get involved in the school system back where I come from. When we came here, we were not getting involved because we assume it is like the system back home and there is no need for parental involvement.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: In China there is a coordinating teacher for each class. The coordinating teacher knows every child in the class from top to toe. He or she knows the strengths and weaknesses of your child and what they need to improve. Here they do not have coordinating teachers. They have homeroom teachers. Homeroom teachers are totally different from coordinating teachers. They have to teach all the subjects. They do not have time to communicate with you. The only way we can communicate with the teacher is the Parent meeting or Parent Night. But it is only ten to twenty minutes long.

Sameena Eidoo: Communication must also be two way, that is, effective communication includes validation. Specifically it involves listening and trying to work with parents to alleviate their fears, work through their concerns and assist them in assisting their children.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: She said at school they had their curriculum and their teaching plans. She told me, "Don't worry we understand what you newcomers think. You newcomers all think like this and make the same mistakes. But we have to take time. Your child will learn what is needed in our school." They said they had their teaching plans. What do you parents expect your child to achieve? Whenever I talk to my child my landlord would say, "Ah your daughter is perfect. Don't worry. If you worry too much, you don't have your own life." "She is already so good. Look. She is doing well at school. She does her homework. She plays the piano. No problem. For sure she will have a good future." His own daughter skipped classes and wouldn't do homework. He said, "She will be ok gradually." He thought she would behave well gradually. So we have completely different feelings about it. We are so worried, but they are not.

Sameena Eidoo: What advice might you give to a parent who seeks you out because he or she is having difficulty relating to the teacher of his or her child?

Caribbean Community Parent: I would ask for a meeting one on one to sit and talk about it. And then if that didn't work I would go to the principal and see how it pans out.

Caribbean Community Parent: You have to learn to listen, like probably some people can't get across because as soon as the teacher, the principal say something that heats them they don't wait until the person is finished, they start to talk, so you know it can cause a problem. So like, sit and listen to what the person have to say and then the person will listen to you. Then I think you'll get whatever you have to say will come across better and you'll understand each other. And talk calmly, don't get upset because when you get upset you never say anything nice. So you always end up not getting what you went there for.

