

edutopia  
*presents*

# HOME-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS GUIDE



**TIPS,  
TECH TOOLS,  
AND STRATEGIES  
for  
IMPROVING  
FAMILY-TO-SCHOOL  
COMMUNICATION**



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# Tips, Tech Tools, and Strategies for Improving Family-to-School Communication

**WE ALL KNOW THAT COMMUNICATION** between home and school is good for kids. Keeping families up-to-date about upcoming events is important, but it's not enough to fully engage parents as partners. When schools and families really work together, that sets the stage for all kinds of benefits.

The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education reports that family-school partnerships lead to gains for just about everyone involved in education. According to the coalition, "Students do better in school and in life. Parents become empowered. Teacher morale improves. Schools get better. Communities grow stronger." In short, everybody wins.

What's more, students with involved parents tend to do better regardless of family background. From better social skills to more regular attendance to increased graduation rates, kids of all socioeconomic levels show gains across a variety of indicators when their families connect with school, according to research by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

How can we create more opportunities for busy families and teachers to connect? This practical guide shares tips, tools, and strategies to strengthen the bonds between schools, families, and communities. Many suggestions have come from *Edutopia* community members who have contributed a host of good ideas in blogs and online discussion groups ([edutopia.org/groups](https://edutopia.org/groups)). We've included a wide range of suggestions that should appeal to parents, teachers, administrators, and other community members who care about improving education.

Technology tools offer great potential for connecting home and school. Several tips focus on ways to use these tools to bring parents closer to the classroom. We've included suggestions for using popular social-media tools such as Facebook (Tip #1: Go Where Your Parents Are) as well as technology platforms designed specifically for school settings (Tip #3: Being There, Virtually).

Most suggestions are appropriate across grade levels. Families and teachers of young learners might be especially interested in Tip #6: Make Reading a Family Affair. Parents and educators of teens and tweens might want to consider including students in parent conferences when they read Tip #8: Student-led Parent Conferences. And schools with a high percentage of English language learner students will find suggestions for reaching out to their families in Tip #2: Welcome Everyone.

Whether you are a teacher, administrator, parent, counselor, or interested community member, we hope you find some useful ideas in our latest guide. As always, we welcome your feedback. If you haven't already joined the conversation at *Edutopia*, please add your voice to the discussions. Share your passion and ideas for improving education.

—**Suzie Boss**

Edutopia.org blogger and author of  
*Reinventing Project-Based Learning*

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# Go Where Your Parents Are

**WHEN IT COMES TO** keeping families up-to-date on school activities, it's not enough to stuff newsletters into kids' backpacks. Increasingly, social-media tools such as Facebook and Twitter are helping to keep parents and other community members in the loop.

The new motto is "Go where our parents are," reports Brad Flickinger, a technology-integration specialist from Colorado. The same parents who might browse a school website a few times a year are apt to be on Facebook every day. He explains how to get started in a post called "Creating a Facebook Page for Your School" on Digital Learning Environments ([guide2digitallearning.com/blog\\_brad\\_flickinger/creating\\_facebook\\_page\\_your\\_school](http://guide2digitallearning.com/blog_brad_flickinger/creating_facebook_page_your_school)).

What kind of information are schools posting on their social-networking sites? Content ranges from the predictable, such as school lunch menus and daily announcements, to the creative. Kelso Public Schools, in Washington, publishes its own podcasts on Facebook and on the district website. Recent episodes feature a student interviewing the superintendent and teacher tips to help parents improve their kids' understanding of math ([facebook.com/KelsoSchools](https://www.facebook.com/KelsoSchools)).

Some teachers use Facebook to update parents about what happens during the school day. Having students post daily updates prompts them to reflect on learning and synthesize information, according to teachers from Nebraska who share their Facebook experiences in a CNN video ([cnn.com/video/#/video/tech/2010/09/08/dnt.facebook.in.class.ketv](http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/tech/2010/09/08/dnt.facebook.in.class.ketv)).

Instead of delivering a top-down message, social-media tools allow for back-and-forth dialogue between home and school. This can facilitate discussions in both large and small learning communities. Parents and other community members can weigh in with a thumbs-up, ask a question, or voice an opinion about school issues. Fairfax County Public Schools, in Virginia, is one of the nation's largest districts. It has more than 14,000 local residents in its Facebook network, many of whom weigh in regularly online ([facebook.com/fcpsva](https://www.facebook.com/fcpsva)). Danville New Tech High School, in Illinois, is brand-new this school year and uses both Facebook and Twitter to grow its network ([twitter.com/DNTHS](https://twitter.com/DNTHS)).

For districts that have been slow to adopt these tools, setting up a Facebook page or Twitter account can be one way to wade into social media. Portland Public Schools in Oregon, for instance, had to overcome its own ban on social networking to set up its Facebook page a year ago.



## Related Resources:

- Join the *Edutopia* community on Facebook to stay up-to-date with new content and connect with others who care about improving education: [facebook.com/edutopia](https://www.facebook.com/edutopia)  
Or follow *Edutopia* on Twitter: [twitter.com/edutopia](https://twitter.com/edutopia)
- MakeUseOf.com offers a step-by-step tutorial on how to set up a school Facebook page: [makeuseof.com/tag/a-simple-guide-to-set-up-your-school-on-facebook](http://makeuseof.com/tag/a-simple-guide-to-set-up-your-school-on-facebook)
- PTA Great Idea Bank is a social-networking site where parents can exchange ideas: [ptagreatideabank.org](http://ptagreatideabank.org)

# Welcome Everyone

**WELCOMING WORDS** can make a world of difference to families whose home language is not English. A variety of technology tools can help to overcome language differences and engage families.

Lisa Nielsen, technology-innovation manager for the New York City Department of Education, demonstrates how teachers can offer simple greetings in multiple languages with Voki avatars ([theinnovativeeducator.wikispaces.com/Global+Welcome+from+The+Innovative+Educator](http://theinnovativeeducator.wikispaces.com/Global+Welcome+from+The+Innovative+Educator)). Voki ([voki.com](http://voki.com)) is a free tool that lets you create personalized, speaking avatars. You can post your multilingual Vokis on a class website or blog.

Tools like Google SMS-Translate will help you reach out to non-English-speaking families who use mobile devices. Here's how it works: Text 466453 with "translate" plus the word or phrase you want to translate plus "to" plus the destination language. (For example, you could text, "Translate upcoming parent meeting to Spanish.") You'll receive an automated reply, which you can then text to recipients. To see a simple demonstration, visit the Google Mobile help page: [google.com/mobile/products/sms.html](http://google.com/mobile/products/sms.html).

Tweetdeck ([tweetdeck.com](http://tweetdeck.com)) offers a similar tool for translating Twitter posts, which you can automatically post on your website or Facebook page to provide regular updates from the classroom. (Download free widgets for setting up Twitter feeds at [twitter.com/goodies/widgets](http://twitter.com/goodies/widgets).) ImTranslator ([imtranslator.com/](http://imtranslator.com/)) provides real-time translation for a wide range of languages and enables you to email translated text.

To encourage family literacy activities, share resources like Los Bloguitos ([losbloguitos.com](http://losbloguitos.com)), a Spanish-language blog by children's authors and illustrators. Families can explore the site from home computers or at local libraries.

A family technology night offers the perfect opportunity to introduce these new-media resources to your parent community. Encourage adults to bring mobile devices if they have them. Have school computers available for parents to use too. Give adults time to test-drive tools while you're together. Be sure to invite someone who can translate, and have your tech-savvy students standing by to help.



## Related Resources:

- [Parent involvement emerges as a key strategy in a new report, "Next Generation Charter Schools: Meeting the Needs of Latinos and English Language Learners." Download a copy from the Center for American Progress: \[americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/pdf/charter\\\_schools.pdf\]\(http://americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/pdf/charter\_schools.pdf\)](#)
- [Watch an Edutopia interview with a determined student from YES Prep in Houston, a school that encourages every student to attend college with a "whatever it takes" philosophy: \[edutopia.org/yes-prep-students-parents-slide-show\]\(http://edutopia.org/yes-prep-students-parents-slide-show\)](#)



# Being There, Virtually

**A VARIETY OF WEB-BASED** solutions can create virtual windows into the classroom, giving families a better understanding of what's happening during the school day.

Edmodo ([edmodo.com](http://edmodo.com)) offers secure social-networking spaces specifically for the classroom. Social studies teacher Dayna Laur, from Pennsylvania, says she uses Edmodo for class discussions, student polls, document uploading, class calendars, and more. She also gives parents the class code to access the space. As Laur explains, “Parents now have access to all of the materials, due dates, and important links and can join in on the online discussions. They also now have insight into class forums so they can discuss them with their child—a great dinnertime conversation starter!”

Decisions about content-management and communication systems are often made at the district or school level. For teachers, the key is knowing how to leverage available tools to connect with parents—and making sure parents understand how to use these tools too. Here are just a few examples.

Forest Lake Elementary School in South Carolina (featured in an *Edutopia* Schools That Work series on differentiated instruction) uses the Blackboard Learn ([blackboard.com](http://blackboard.com)) platform for managing content. Parents can access their students' Blackboard accounts from home. That means they can read their kids' online journals and other work and stay current on pending assignments. A portal for parents lets them check grades throughout the term, avoiding surprises at report card time. This video offers a parent's perspective on the value of such tools for staying informed: [edutopia.org/stw-differentiated-instruction-home-school-parent-connection-video](http://edutopia.org/stw-differentiated-instruction-home-school-parent-connection-video).

Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, in Massachusetts, is moving toward a paperless environment with the use of Edline ([edline.com](http://edline.com)), an integrated learning-management system. Parents can set up their own Edline accounts, which pull information for any of their children currently enrolled in the high school. The electronic information gives families access to everything from classroom calendars to progress reports.

Some schools are finding that such tools can be helpful for communicating and achieving school-improvement goals. For example, Marshall Elementary, in Boston, used Edline to create a public data wall to share information such as daily student attendance rates. Attendance improved by an average of 19 percent across grades. Principal Teresa Harvey-Jackson credits public access to data for generating excitement and creating a “focus on making sure all students succeed.” The effort is part of a broader Boston Public Schools initiative to increase the number of students on track to graduate from high school. (To read more about Marshall's experience, visit [bpe.org/node/527](http://bpe.org/node/527).)



## Related Resources:

- [eChalk](http://echalk.com) is another tool that allows districts and schools to customize web content and keep parents informed about everything from schedules to student work: [echalk.com](http://echalk.com)
- Class websites and blogs can offer parents a regular look inside the classroom. Maria Knee is an award-winning kindergarten teacher who uses her *Kinder Kids* blog to connect with families and enhance student literacy: [classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger\\_id=51141](http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=51141)
- [Google Apps for Education](http://google.com/apps/education) offers free tools for collaboration and communication. Learn more in this *Edutopia* story, and check out the comments for more ideas: [edutopia.org/google-educators-school-communication](http://edutopia.org/google-educators-school-communication)
- Individual schools can use [Tapped In](http://tappedin.org), a free communications hub for educators, to set up forums for teacher-parent discussions: [tappedin.org](http://tappedin.org)

# Smart Phones, Smart Schools

**CELL PHONES, SMART PHONES,** and other mobile devices can help busy educators connect with on-the-go families.

On the Innovative Educator blog, Lisa Nielsen shares several tips for using cell phones to strengthen the home-school connection: [theinnovativeeducator.blogspot.com/2010/08/6-ways-to-use-cell-phones-to-strengthen.html](http://theinnovativeeducator.blogspot.com/2010/08/6-ways-to-use-cell-phones-to-strengthen.html). Survey tools like Poll Everywhere ([polleverywhere.com](http://polleverywhere.com)) allow teachers to solicit responses and opinions from parents and help them feel more connected to the classroom. For example, you might ask parents about areas of expertise they would be willing to share with students. The polling interface will look familiar to anyone who has watched shows like *American Idol*. Parents can respond via a smart phone, the web, or text messaging.

Nielsen also suggests using group texts to notify parents about classroom news such as assignment due dates, celebrations, or student accomplishments. Free services such as WeText ([wetxt.com](http://wetxt.com)) make it easy to create a group and invite parents to join. Then you're ready to send group messages from your mobile device or the web.

One *Edutopia* community member has several suggestions for when to text parents: "I use it to communicate little things quickly, and I use my messages as a follow-up after an actual face-to-face or phone conversation. If I have a student with a homework or behavior issue, it's hard to connect with parents to relay daily information, and sometimes written notes mysteriously 'disappear' on the bus. Text is a great alternative. I can send a 'great day' or 'check for action plan' message at the end of the day to keep parents updated."

Teacher Michelle Grove notes that email continues to be useful for connecting with parents "but can be too quick, too easy, and incomplete—and the tone is really hard to read. I've found nothing beats picking up the phone and having a real conversation. I try to call home at least once a semester to each parent to say something good too. It sets us up for better communication if there ever is a problem."

Free Web-based applications like Google Voice ([google.com/voice](http://google.com/voice)) are gaining popularity as a way for teachers to connect with families. Phil Wagner, high school teacher and Broken Airplane blogger ([brokenairplane.blogspot.com](http://brokenairplane.blogspot.com)), points out that Google Voice does not require giving out your personal phone number, which enables teachers to preserve their privacy. You can use it from any Internet-connected computer.

Of course, being available to parents 'round the clock can have drawbacks. Teachers who share personal contact information with parents agree that it's important to draw some boundaries. By setting up virtual office hours, you can let families know when you'll be available to connect online.



## Related Resources:

- In this *Education Week* story, busy administrators talk about the pros and cons of using smart phones to stay connected: [edweek.org/dd/articles/2010/06/16/03mobile.h03.html?cmp=clp-edweek](http://edweek.org/dd/articles/2010/06/16/03mobile.h03.html?cmp=clp-edweek)
- In the *Edutopia* Administrators community, school leaders discuss the use of cell phones at school: [edutopia.org/groups/administrators/26013](http://edutopia.org/groups/administrators/26013)
- Should you share your personal contact information with students and parents? Take the *Edutopia* poll on this topic and find out what others are thinking: [edutopia.org/poll-teacher-contact-information-students](http://edutopia.org/poll-teacher-contact-information-students)



# Seize the Media Moment

**CONVERSATIONS ABOUT** education reform have heated up in recent months, with high-profile documentaries, new books, and public forums focusing the nation's attention on teaching and learning. Here are a few ways to seize the moment and encourage productive dialogue about education reform in your community.

Host a school film night with a facilitated discussion or an invited panel of speakers to talk about the film. Three new releases offer opportunities for thoughtful community discussions.

*Waiting for Superman* ([waitingforsuperman.com](http://waitingforsuperman.com)), a documentary about the state of American education by Davis Guggenheim, was stirring controversy even before its fall release. Whether you are pro charter, pro union, or not wedded to either position, you're bound to have questions and responses that you'll want to discuss. Participant Media is sponsoring a citizens' action campaign to coincide with the film's release, including local activities across the country ([waitingforsuperman.com/action/get-local](http://waitingforsuperman.com/action/get-local)). If you pledge to see the film, you will receive a \$5 gift to donate to the classroom project of your choice on Donors Choose ([donorschoose.org](http://donorschoose.org)).

*The Lottery* ([thelotteryfilm.com](http://thelotteryfilm.com)), a new documentary by Madeleine Sackler, focuses on four families from Harlem and the Bronx who have entered their children in a charter school lottery. *Race to Nowhere* ([racetonowhere.com](http://racetonowhere.com)), directed by Vicki Abeles, takes a hard look at the achievement pressures felt by students, teachers, and parents.

Another way to get the discussion going is to launch a book club for parents. To kick it off, share the recent *Edutopia* webinar featuring Milton Chen, senior fellow of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, in which he discusses his new book, *Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in Our Schools*. Middle school teacher Anthony Armstrong joins him to talk about what innovation looks like in the classroom. It's the ideal setup to talk about innovation and best practices in your own school community. Find the archived webinar and related resources at *Edutopia*: [edutopia.org/education-nation-webinar-archive](http://edutopia.org/education-nation-webinar-archive).

Which books interest local families? Set up a social network for your school book group, and members can post reviews or recommendations, see what others are reading, make a reading wish list, or join an online book discussion. Popular sites include Shelfari ([shelfari.com](http://shelfari.com)), LibraryThing ([librarything.com](http://librarything.com)), and Goodreads ([goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com)).

Stay informed. REDU is a new website from Microsoft that aims to grow the national discussion about education reform. It includes information, resources for teachers and parents, a forum, and suggestions for citizen action, such as opportunities to volunteer or donate to school causes: [letsredu.com](http://letsredu.com).



## Related Resources:

- The *Edutopia* article “Parents Power School Reform” discusses how YES Prep schools involve families in student learning: [edutopia.org/yes-prep-parents-school-reform-hogg](http://edutopia.org/yes-prep-parents-school-reform-hogg)
- Reform Starts Here is an *Edutopia* community that discusses school-reform strategies: [edutopia.org/groups/reform-starts-here](http://edutopia.org/groups/reform-starts-here)
- Does your school address the needs of the whole child? Find out by encouraging parents to take part in a survey from The Whole Child, an initiative of ASCD: [wholechildeducation.org/take-action/grade](http://wholechildeducation.org/take-action/grade)
- A free webinar series running until September 2011 and sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education focuses on family, school, and community engagement: [hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/achieving-excellence-and-innovation-in-family-school-and-community-engagement-webinar-series](http://hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/achieving-excellence-and-innovation-in-family-school-and-community-engagement-webinar-series)



# Make Reading a Family Affair

**A WIDE RANGE OF EARLY-LITERACY PROGRAMS** can help prepare students for school success. There are many ways for parents, grandparents, and other community members to get involved in building a strong foundation of literacy. They all share a simple but powerful strategy: read together.

NEA's Read Across America is a year-round initiative to build a nation of readers. The annual highlight—Read Across America Day—celebrates the birthday of Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, on March 2. For ideas about organizing special events, visit the Read Across America site ([nea.org/readacross](http://nea.org/readacross)). Find out how schools are promoting reading by visiting the Read Across America channel on SchoolTube. To sign up and share your school's videos, go to [schooltube.com/user/NEAreadacrossamerica](http://schooltube.com/user/NEAreadacrossamerica).

Getting books into the hands of young children from low-income families is the goal of First Book ([firstbook.org](http://firstbook.org)). This award-winning nonprofit aims to close the literacy gap by making sure all kids have books of their own to spark their interest in reading. Community members can get involved as volunteers or by encouraging organizations that serve low-income children to register with First Books.

Programs that connect adult volunteers with young readers are gaining traction across the country. Learn how your community can engage with programs like Experience Corps ([experiencecorps.org](http://experiencecorps.org)), which currently operates in 20 cities. This national program recruits and trains older adults to be reading tutors for students developing basic literacy skills. Some communities have developed similar programs locally, such as Start Making a Reader today in Portland, Oregon ([getsmartoregon.org/](http://getsmartoregon.org/)).

## Related Resources:

- [In2Books](http://in2books.epals.com) supports young readers by facilitating conversations about thought-provoking books among students, educators, families, community organizations, corporations, and mentors: [in2books.epals.com](http://in2books.epals.com)
- [Mixbook](http://mixbook.com) is a tool for making your own digital book: [mixbook.com](http://mixbook.com)
- [Edutopia](http://edutopia.org/blog/literacy-instruction-across-curriculum-importance) blogger Rebecca Alber explains how to build literacy across content areas in this post, "How Important Is Teaching Literacy in All Content Areas?": [edutopia.org/blog/literacy-instruction-across-curriculum-importance](http://edutopia.org/blog/literacy-instruction-across-curriculum-importance)





TIP #7

## Bring the Conversation Home

**MEETING WITH A CHILD'S TEACHER** can be an intimidating experience for parents, especially if their own school memories are less than idyllic. One strategy for changing the dynamics is to have teachers visit their students' families at home.

For more than a decade, teachers in Sacramento, California, have visited local families through the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project ([pthvp.org](http://pthvp.org)). As Executive Director Carrie Rose explains, the model brings together teachers and parents as equal partners. The partnership continues across a child's developmental years, reinforced by twice-yearly home visits. Read more about this replicable program in an interview with Rose in the Harvard Family Research Project: [pthvp.org/media\\_HarvardFRP.html](http://pthvp.org/media_HarvardFRP.html).

*Engaging the Family in Their Children's Learning*, an *Edutopia* video, offers a close-up look at home-school visits: [Edutopia.org/home-visits](http://Edutopia.org/home-visits).

YES Prep schools, profiled in the *Edutopia* Schools That Work series, emphasize parent-involvement strategies such as home visits and family contracts. Learn more about these components to school success in this video about YES Prep Houston: [edutopia.org/yes-prep-parent-involvement-video](http://edutopia.org/yes-prep-parent-involvement-video).

How do parents get involved at your school? Joyce Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has developed a model describing six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Visit the National Network of Partnership Schools for more information about how to develop the whole spectrum of family engagement: [csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps\\_model/school/sixtypes.htm](http://csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps_model/school/sixtypes.htm).

### Related Resources:

- "Parents Are a Secret Weapon Just Waiting to Be Discovered," an *Edutopia* article, includes an accompanying how-to section with more suggestions: [edutopia.org/secret-weapon-discovered](http://edutopia.org/secret-weapon-discovered)
- For more ideas, see the *Edutopia* resource page on strengthening family involvement: [edutopia.org/how-to-strengthen-parent-involvement](http://edutopia.org/how-to-strengthen-parent-involvement)

# Student-led Parent Conferences

**WHEN STUDENTS ARE PART** of parent-teacher conferences, good things can happen. Parent attendance often improves when kids participate. Students have an opportunity to put their presentation skills to work and to reflect on current and future learning goals.

What happens during a conference? Students typically select a few work samples to explain to their parents and teacher. An agenda helps participants make the best use of their brief time together and keeps the conversation focused.

High school students talk about the value of this experience in a video produced for a Washington State project called Navigation 101: [k12.wa.us/navigation101/Multimedia.aspx](https://k12.wa.us/navigation101/Multimedia.aspx). As students explain, the conference offers “a time to shine” and can help parents gain new insights about their student’s strengths, challenges, and goals. In selecting work samples to share, students are prompted to reflect on their own growth and accomplishments. Kids say that conferences can also lead to more productive conversations with parents outside of school.

A website called The K5 offers video tips for parents on how to make the most of parent-teacher conferences: [theK5.com/blog/2009/04/17/the-most-important-ten-minutes-of-the-year-tips-on-how-to-prepare-for-a-parentteacher-conference/](https://theK5.com/blog/2009/04/17/the-most-important-ten-minutes-of-the-year-tips-on-how-to-prepare-for-a-parentteacher-conference/).

*Edutopia* blogger Bob Lenz offers more insights in his post on student-led conferences at Envision Schools, which he founded ([edutopia.org/student-led-parent-teacher-conference](https://edutopia.org/student-led-parent-teacher-conference)). As Lenz explains in describing conferences, “This is an active event in which the learner and those responsible for supporting her education identify her strengths and areas of growth and make plans to address these areas. Unfortunately, parents often do not know how to support their children in school, particularly if they were unsuccessful in their own schooling. The conference is one tool to help parents support their child’s success.” Lenz estimates that 95 percent of his parents take part in these events.

If student-led conferences are new to your school community, you’ll want to help students prepare and rehearse their presentations. They may want to make use of presentation tools such as interactive whiteboards or document cameras. Using a tool like Glogster ([edu.glogster.com/](https://edu.glogster.com/)), they can make multimedia posters to present their best work. Or using VoiceThread ([voicethread.com](https://voicethread.com/)), students can share selected work samples along with their recorded comments. (Here’s an example of a fifth grader using VoiceThread for a parent conference: [ourschool.ca/5th-grade-digital-portfolios-for-student-led-parent-conferences.html](https://ourschool.ca/5th-grade-digital-portfolios-for-student-led-parent-conferences.html).)

But remember to keep the focus on the conversation, not the presentation. That’s where students, parents, and teachers will find the real value in this experience.



## Related Resources:

- Join the *Edutopia* community discussion about parent conferences: [edutopia.org/groups/parents-parent-teacher-conferences](https://edutopia.org/groups/parents-parent-teacher-conferences)
- For ideas about successful student-led conference in the middle grades, check out this resource page at MiddleWeb: [middleweb.com/mw/resources/ParentConfs.html](https://middleweb.com/mw/resources/ParentConfs.html)
- This article from the National Middle School Association shares survey results of what parents and students say about student-led conferences: [nmsa.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Portfolio/tabid/650/Default.aspx](https://nmsa.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Portfolio/tabid/650/Default.aspx)





## Get Families Moving

**WITH ONE IN THREE AMERICAN KIDS** currently overweight or obese, many communities are focusing on ways to promote healthier habits. Get in the swing of things by organizing school events that get families moving together.

Let's Move ([letsmove.gov](http://letsmove.gov)) is a national campaign launched by First Lady Michelle Obama that aims to solve the childhood-obesity challenge within a generation. The website offers tools and resources for parents, schools, kids, and communities. One strategy is to set up a school health team and focus on doable actions.

For starters, you might want to assess the walkability (or bikeability) of the neighborhood around your school site. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration offers an online survey tool that examines everything from sidewalks to driver behaviors to street lighting ([nhtsa.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/ped/walk1.html](http://nhtsa.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/ped/walk1.html)). By including kids in the data collection, you'll give them a chance to conduct authentic research and be part of the conversation about creating healthier communities.

International Walk to School Day is an annual event to encourage walking and biking to school. Join communities around the world by planning special events and uploading photos to the site: [walktoschool.org](http://walktoschool.org).

Family play dates are also catching on in many communities. A nonprofit called KaBOOM sponsors annual Play Day events nationwide and encourages communities to share photos and ideas on its social-media site: [kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org).

Encourage students to celebrate their favorite parks and play spaces by creating a video in honor of National Public Lands Day. They can share their work by entering a national youth video contest ([publiclandsday.org/videocontest.htm](http://publiclandsday.org/videocontest.htm)).

### Related Resources:

- “Children Create the Playground of their Dreams” is an *Edutopia* story with accompanying resources on the importance of childhood play: [edutopia.org/students-design-school-playgrounds](http://edutopia.org/students-design-school-playgrounds)
- National Center for Safe Routes to School offers tools to survey kids and parents about their neighborhood habits: [saferoutesinfo.org/data](http://saferoutesinfo.org/data)
- Families can chart their fitness progress with a downloadable calendar from Let's Move: [letsmove.gov/pdf/Family\\_Calendar.pdf](http://letsmove.gov/pdf/Family_Calendar.pdf)



TIP #10

## Build Parent Partnerships

**WHEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS BUILD** stronger relationships, everyone wins—especially students. But it doesn't happen without effort. Parents and teachers alike face tight schedules and multiple demands. Here are a few ideas for strengthening partnerships.

Know your goals. Are you aiming for parent involvement or parent engagement? Larry Ferlazzo, author of *Building Parent Engagement in Schools* and a high school English teacher from Sacramento, California, outlines the differences in a recent blog for the Learning First Alliance ([learningfirst.org/LarryFerlazzoParentEngagement](https://learningfirst.org/LarryFerlazzoParentEngagement)). He explains, “When we’re *involving* parents, ideas and energy tend to come from the schools and from government mandates. We tend to *sell* ideas. When we’re *engaging* parents, ideas tend to be elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships.” Both have a place, he says, but real engagement goes far beyond communicating due dates or alerting parents to kids’ behavioral issues.

*Edutopia* blogger Anne O’Brien expands on this idea in her recent post, “Doing More Than Involving Parents” ([edutopia.org/blog/engaging-parents-book-clubs-conferences](https://edutopia.org/blog/engaging-parents-book-clubs-conferences)). She offers strategies for increasing engagement, such as starting a school-based book club for parents, school leaders, counselors, and teachers. *(continued on next page)*

### Related Resources:

- Parents as Partners is a blog that focuses on helping parents and teachers use technology and other tools to support students. The blog includes links to related webcasts: [ourschool.ca](https://ourschool.ca)
- For an overview of research on family-school partnerships, visit this site published by the Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: [pbis.org/family/family\\_partnership.aspx](https://pbis.org/family/family_partnership.aspx)
- This discussion in the *Edutopia* Welcome Lounge focuses on connecting with families: [edutopia.org/groups/edutopia-welcome-lounge/14937](https://edutopia.org/groups/edutopia-welcome-lounge/14937)



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Another strategy for increasing engagement is to involve parents in what their children are learning. To support project-based learning in the classroom, parent and school board member Lisa Cooley suggests recruiting a lead parent for each project. The lead parent could coordinate out-of-school activities that relate to a particular project, such as escorting a student who needs to do research at city hall or taking a student on a photo shoot in the community. Cooley says, “I think it would ease the burden of project-based learning that parents feel.” Join Cooley’s conversation in the *Edutopia* Parents community ([edutopia.org/groups/parents](https://edutopia.org/groups/parents)).

Assignments that include family interviews are another strategy for getting parents, grandparents, and other caregivers more connected with their children’s school activities. A social studies teacher from Brooklyn, New York, for instance, suggests assigning a family history interview “or having students work on a project related to what one of their parents (or another trusted adult) does for a living. If you create a culture in which parent involvement is part of the curriculum, you create an environment in which parents feel welcome, free to ask questions, and make suggestions.”

Project-based learning advocate and veteran teacher Jane Krauss suggests hiding a question for parents in a weekly class newsletter and rewarding students if they come back with an answer from home. For instance, if kids are doing a project on immigration, you might pose a question about family heritage.

**“If you create a culture in which parent involvement is part of the curriculum, you create an environment in which parents feel welcome, free to ask questions, and make suggestions.”**

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, or TIPS ([csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips](https://csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips)), is a parent-engagement program developed by the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. TIPS outlines a process for creating homework assignments that require students to talk to someone at home about something interesting that they are learning in class. The website includes sample activities for elementary through high school, along with a summary of the research behind this approach ([csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/index.htm](https://csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/index.htm)).

In the *Edutopia* community, a principal shares this low-tech but high-impact idea: “I will send a positive postcard to each of my students over the course of the year. I will ask each of my teachers to nominate three students each month, including the positives each child is displaying, be it social or academic. I’ll include those positives in my note to the child.” Find more ideas—and share your own—by joining others in the *Edutopia* community: [Edutopia.org/groups](https://edutopia.org/groups).



# HOME-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS GUIDE

TIPS, TECH TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES FOR  
IMPROVING FAMILY-TO-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

## ABOUT EDUTOPIA

*Edutopia* is where the George Lucas Educational Foundation's vision to highlight what works in education comes to life. We are a nonprofit operating foundation dedicated to improving K-12 learning by documenting, disseminating, and advocating for innovative strategies that prepare students to thrive in their future education, careers, and adult lives.

Through our award-winning website, videos, and growing online community, *Edutopia* is supporting and empowering education reform by shining a spotlight on real-world solutions and providing proven strategies, tools, and resources that are successfully changing how our children learn.

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