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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine teacher-to-parent communication preferences among parents of students, grades 9-12, attending a rural Iowa alternative education program. Thirty-seven parents were chosen to participate in the study. Twenty volunteered to complete the Parent Communication Survey (PCS). Data analysis of the PCS indicated most parents preferred regular progress updates to be sent bi-weekly via U.S. mail. Parents preferred that teachers contact them about more specific issues via phone call home. Over half of parents surveyed said they would read a classroom newsletter and website. An analysis of parent comments yielded four themes: honesty, timeliness, sensitivity, and partnership. Knowledge of these trends will be used to improve communication with parents, develop parental involvement programs, and guide future research.

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Teacher-to-Parent Communication:
What Parents Want from Alternative Educators

by

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B.A. Dordt College, 1998

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
March 2007

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What Parents Want from Alternative Educators

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine teacher-to-parent communication preferences among parents of students, grades 9-12, attending a rural Iowa alternative education program. Thirty-seven parents were chosen to participate in the study. Twenty volunteered to complete the Parent Communication Survey (PCS). Data analysis of the PCS indicated most parents preferred regular progress updates to be sent bi-weekly via U.S. mail. Parents preferred that teachers contact them about more specific issues via phone call home. Over half of parents surveyed said they would read a classroom newsletter and website. An analysis of parent comments yielded four themes: honesty, timeliness, sensitivity, and partnership. Knowledge of these trends will be used to improve communication with parents, develop parental involvement programs, and guide future research.

Teacher-to-Parent Communication:

What Parents Want from Alternative Educators

In order to provide each individual student with an exceptional learning environment, it is imperative that alternative educators seek to establish effective communication patterns with parents. In a recent study, Griffith (1996) reinforces various previous findings that parental involvement has an impact on student achievement. Although communication between school and home is only one facet of parental involvement, it is not one that can be overlooked. Creating effective communication between teachers and parents is vital to student performance.

There is some debate about whether parents' ethnicity and socio-economic status play a role in their communication preferences (Lindle, 1989; Kettler, Valentine, Lucas, & Miles, 2000). This debate becomes even more pronounced when dealing with an alternative high school setting where potential drop-outs are more likely to be of low socio-economic class and minority status. Therefore, it is important for alternative educators to determine what parents want in received communication from teachers.

The purpose of this study was to determine teacher-to-parent communication preferences among parents of students attending Northwest Iowa Alternative High School, a rural alternative education program serving grades nine through twelve. The study determined the following: How often do parents want to receive progress updates, what modes of communication do parents prefer, what information do parents want, and what manner and style of communication do parents wish teachers would use? Answers to these questions provided useful information for improving teacher-to-parent

communication practices, therefore encouraging parental involvement in order to promote student success.

Literature Review

Although there are many studies to support the claim that parental involvement positively influences elementary and middle school student achievement, significantly fewer studies have been done among high schools. Even more limited are studies at the high school level which focus exclusively on the facet of parental involvement known as Type 2, parent-school communications (Epstein, 1995). Furthermore, little is known about teacher-to-parent communication preferences among parents of secondary students in traditional high schools, and virtually no information is available specifically for alternative high schools and programs.

McNeal (as cited in Kettler et al., 2000) suggests that school-home communication and parent involvement may vary according to race and income level. Therefore, it is important for educators to develop strategies that will be most beneficial to the community they serve. Other research suggests that “all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications” (Lindle, 1989, p. 13). More specifically, Catsambis (1998) found that high school seniors benefit from parental involvement regardless of socioeconomic or race/ethnic background. These studies suggest it is important to determine the communication preferences of high school parents as a whole as well as the more specific preferences of the community in question.

Jeynes’ (2005) meta-analysis tried to determine a more holistic view of parental involvement, synthesizing over 77 studies, including all grade levels, ethnic groups, and

socioeconomic classes. Jeynes' analysis found that, on all levels, parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcome. This is true for minority students as well. Although, it is not known whether any alternative high schools were included in the study, the results indicate an overall trend for all K-12 institutions. In addition to Jeynes' meta-analysis, a closer look at studies focused specifically on parental involvement during high school also show an overall positive influence on student achievement (Catsambis, 1998; Patrikakou, 2004).

Indeed, research on whether parental involvement increases student achievement has produced a wealth of information. However, many earlier studies were often limited in scope and operational definition of parent involvement. Epstein's (1995) typology of parent involvement has given researchers, educators, and parents a framework for understanding the various facets of parent involvement. Epstein's framework includes six types of parental involvement: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community. "School practices of Type 2 - communicating [between home and school] are essential for improving the other types of involvement" (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999, p. 14).

In a 1998 study, Catsambis analyzed data from the *National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988*. The study used fifteen indicators in the twelfth grade of family practices falling under Epstein's general typology of parental involvement. Outcomes investigated included achievement test scores in math, science, and reading; number of credits completed in math, science, and English; and curricular enrollment. The results found specifically for Type 2 communicating revealed that educational

contacts with school have a moderate negative effect on test scores. “This pattern suggests that parents whose children have academic or behavioral problems tend to seek the help of school personnel and increase their contacts with school” (Catsambis, 1998, p. 11). Educational contacts with the school also have a negative effect on course credits completed as well as enrollment in an academic high school curriculum. Once again, the speculation is that these communication practices do not lower students’ levels of achievement, but rather that they are a symptom of parents’ attempts to deal with problematic behavior. These results suggest that it is important to establish early, ongoing communication practices that focus on positive behaviors of students.

Although we can not be certain whether effective teacher-to-parent communication practices directly enhance students’ achievement test scores, research does show that they positively influence parental attitudes toward school. A 1999 study of six high schools in Maryland – two rural, two urban, and two suburban – revealed that parental involvement programs practicing Epstein’s six types of involvement were likely to improve parental attitudes toward school. More specifically, the results showed that Type 2 involvement – communicating about parent involvement at home, appeared to be linked to Type 4 involvement-learning at home and Type 1 involvement – parenting. “These high correlations underscore the significance of good communication to the successful implementation of the other types of partnership practices” (Sanders et al., 1999, p.13).

Although understanding the role of communication in parental involvement is key, it is even more important to determine what parents want from teachers, especially in regards to the mode, content, and manner of their communication practices. In light of

recent advancements in online technology, it appears parents find value in and a desire for teacher-created web pages (Nelms, 2002). At one traditional suburban middle school in central Florida, an investigation revealed that parents preferred to receive communication via telephone calls home, electronic mail, and notes in students' planners. Parents indicated interest in four major areas: academic progress and concerns, behavioral concerns, social-emotional development, and curricular issues (Freytag, 2001). Parents prefer communication that is less formal because formal communication, such as the parent-teacher conference, is often considered "too businesslike" or "patronizing" (Lindle, 1989). Parents appreciate teachers who take a personal interest in their child as a unique individual and want communication from teachers to reflect this idea. Yet another recurring comment from parents is that they want to be considered partners in their child's education (Freytag, 2001; Lindle, 1989).

Studies also suggest that parents and teachers often have very different perceptions and preferences of teacher-to-parent communication. For example, teachers most often communicate through notes; however, parents feel distanced from teachers using this method and prefer phone calls (Upham, Cheney, & Manning, 1998). Another example is that both teachers and parents often believe that the other does not prefer to discuss emotional or behavioral issues (Upham et al., 1998).

Halsey's (2005) study further reveals that parents and teachers may perceive communication differently. The study found that teachers tend to use rather institutional communicative methods: parent-teacher organizations, open houses, newsletters, and inviting all families to a public event such as a play or athletic competition. While teachers perceived these methods to be invitations for parents to become involved,

parents perceived them as simply announcements of upcoming events and not necessarily invitations to participate. Teachers really didn't question whether parents were informed about how they could become involved. Teachers assumed their "open door" policies would make parents feel comfortable visiting their classrooms. However, parents said that they had not been asked to be involved nor aware of how to be involved in their child's classroom. Parents felt more compelled to become involved in various school activities when they received more personal, individual contacts rather than institutional ones. A final misconception found in this study was that most teachers believed parents were not interested in being involved. However, parents thought that teachers didn't want them to be involved due to a lack of individual communication.

Overall, the research gives evidence of the necessity for educators to promote better communication strategies with parents. Better strategies can only be accomplished by understanding and responding to parents' preferences. Although previous research has given educators broad perceptions of what parents want and need, it is important to determine the local and immediate needs of the community educators serve. It is particularly important for alternative educators to evaluate their current situations, as little research has been done specifically in alternative education settings.

Method

Participants

Participants included parents from thirty-seven families whose children attend a rural alternative high school program in northwest Iowa. The alternative high school program serves students in grades nine through twelve, functioning as an extension of thirteen local school districts. Students earn credits toward their local high school

diplomas by means of independent study. Parents were selected based on the date of their child's enrollment during the 2006-2007 academic year. Parents whose child was enrolled by the end of first quarter, October 20, 2006, were asked to participate in the study.

Design

Research was conducted using a questionnaire survey. Approximately 15% of the Parent Communication Survey (refer to Appendix) contains questions from Freytag's Family Communication Survey (2001) which are both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The remainder of the survey was self-designed, containing questions of a quantitative nature.

Procedure

Parents of new students were asked to fill out the Parent Communication Survey at orientation. Parents of returning students were sent a survey via U.S. mail. Parents of returning students also received a phone call to remind them to send in the completed survey.

The researcher designed the Parent Communication Survey particularly for use in the present study. Respondents were asked to indicate preferred frequencies, modes, and content of communication. They were also asked an open-ended question on the effectiveness of teacher-to-parent communication.

The Parent Communication Survey was piloted with a group of fifteen professional colleagues. Colleagues were asked to take the survey as if they were alternative high school parents. Colleagues reviewed the survey for reliability and validity. They also provided feedback on the ease and understandability of the survey.

Changes were made in accordance with suggestions for survey improvement.

Results

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected from quantitative questions generated descriptive statistics. Data collected from qualitative questions were reported using thematic analysis. Indicated trends in communication preferences were used to determine how teachers can increase parental involvement by way of improved teacher-to-parent communication.

Results

How often do parents want to receive progress updates?

Of the frequencies for receiving regular updates listed on the Parent Communication Survey, every two weeks (40%) and monthly (35%) were parents' two most preferred frequencies. Significantly fewer parents preferred weekly updates (15%), quarterly updates (5%), and other write-in frequencies (5%). (See Figure 1)

What modes of communication do parents prefer for progress updates?

Of the modes of communication listed on the survey, U.S. mail (55%) was the most preferred method for receiving regular updates. Email (35%) was the second-most preferred mode of communication. Reports sent home with the student (10%) and phone calls, as indicated by the other write-in selection (10%), were equally less preferred. No parents indicated the conference at school (0%) was their preferred mode of communication for progress updates about their child. (See Figure 2) It should be noted that some respondents chose more than one answer to this survey question even though the directions clearly stated to check one answer.

What modes of communication do parents prefer for specific issues beyond regular progress updates?

Parents were asked to indicate which mode of communication they most preferred teachers to use when contacting them about specific concerns related to their child's emotional, social, behavioral, and physical well-being. These are issues that would not typically be addressed on a regular progress update. Overwhelmingly, the most preferred mode of communication was calling the parent at home (75%). Contact via e-mail (25%) and contact via U.S. mail (25%) were the second most preferred modes of communication for dealing with issues beyond the regular progress update. Calling the parent at work (20%) followed as the third most preferred mode. Unpopular modes were the conference at school (5%), sending a letter home with the student as indicated by the other write-in selection (5%), and do not contact me (5%). No parents preferred the home visit (0%) as a mode of communication for issues beyond regular progress updates. (See Figure 3) It should be noted that some respondents chose more than one answer to this survey question even though the directions clearly stated to check one answer.

What modes of communication do parents prefer for mass communication tools?

Parents were asked whether they would read a classroom newsletter and website. A majority of parents said they would read a classroom newsletter (85%). Over half said they would read a classroom website (65%).

Beyond academic progress, what additional information do parents want?

Parents consistently reported that they desire teachers to communicate with them if a teacher has a concern about their child's behavioral, social, emotional, or physical

well-being. Depending on the issue, 80%-95% of parents felt it was appropriate for teachers to contact them regarding these types of concerns. (See Table 1)

Parents were asked what information they desired included in a classroom newsletter or website. Several options were listed, and participants were asked to check all that applied. Student achievements (75%) was chosen most often. School calendar (70%) and upcoming events (70%) were chosen second most often. Both school policies (50%) and community resources (50%) were chosen by half of all participants. Slightly less than half of all participants chose parenting tips (45%) and teacher contact information (45%). Least popular choices were student birthdays (35%), other write-in suggestions (0%), and wouldn't use (0%). (See Table 2)

What manner and style of communication do parents wish teachers would use?

An analysis of parent concerns as to what parents desired when teachers communicate with them about their child yielded four dominant themes: honesty, timeliness, sensitivity, and partnership. First, parents want teachers to be straightforward, direct, and truthful about their child's achievements and struggles. Parents want teachers to help parents see their child in a realistic light, giving them a true sense of their child's capabilities. Second, parents want teachers to keep them continually updated on their child's progress, informing them of problems immediately. Parents reported that they desired to deal with small problems immediately, rather than larger problems later. Third, parents want teachers to communicate with them using sensitivity and understanding. This includes teachers understanding disabilities and disorders of diagnosed students. Finally, parents want to work as partners in their child's education.

They want teachers to suggest strategies for helping their child at home. Parents also want to be consistently made aware of their child's progress, including areas of concern.

Discussion

Summary

The present study suggests several trends in parents' preferred teacher-to-parent communication practices. Parents preferred to be contacted in writing via U.S. mail and e-mail for regular progress updates. Most parents responded that they would prefer to receive regular progress updates bi-weekly and monthly. Parents felt it was appropriate for teachers to contact them regarding concerns about their child's emotional, social, behavioral, and physical well-being. Parents preferred teachers to communicate via phone call home for these specific types of concerns. The majority of parents said they would make use of a classroom newsletter and/or website. More than half of parents felt classroom newsletters/website should include student achievements, the school calendar, and information on upcoming events. Finally, analysis of write-in comments suggested four dominant themes concerning the manner of communication parents wish to receive from teachers. Parents desire teachers to use honesty, timeliness, sensitivity in recognizing their child as an individual, and a mindset of partnership with the parent.

Conclusions

Implications

The present study also suggests implications for improved teacher-to-parent communication. Parents preferred bi-weekly and monthly progress updates. This implies that the use of traditional, less frequent quarterly progress updates needs to be reconsidered.

The majority of parents said they would read a parent newsletter while only slightly more than half said they would use a class website. The reason for less interest in a website is unknown. A limitation of the study was no knowledge of how many parents had internet access. We know that traditionally, alternative education students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, possibly indicating limited computer and internet access.

Many trends which surfaced in the present study paralleled trends found in the 2001 Freytag study. The present study's results are similar to Freytag's in that parents wanted communication regarding their child's behavioral concerns and social-emotional development. Also similar to Freytag's study was the indication of e-mail being ranked fairly high as a preferred mode of communication. While Freytag's study indicated telephone calls home as the most preferred mode of communication, Freytag did not specify the purposes of communication. The present study separated purposes of communication into two categories: regular progress updates and addressing more specific emotional, social, behavioral, and health-related issues. Parents in the present study preferred written forms of communication sent via U.S. mail and e-mail for regular progress updates. However, parents overwhelmingly preferred oral communication via phone calls home to address more sensitive issues. Parents did not prefer face-to-face communication in either purpose category. This implies that teachers need to consider scheduling time to call parents in the evenings when parents are home to address specific concerns. It also implies that use of the traditional conference at school needs to be re-evaluated.

Both the present study and Freytag's 2001 study indicate that parents want teachers to use timeliness in their communication practices, recognize and understand their child as an individual, and work in partnership with the parent. This implies that parents of both traditional and alternative school students value the same characteristics in teacher-to-parent communication practices. Broader studies need to be done to verify this implication.

Furthermore, recognizing the many similarities between the present study and Freytag's 2001 study questions the notion that parents of alternative education students have less interest in their child's education than traditional students' parents. It is possible that parents of alternative education students appear less interested because of a lack of resources such as time to actively be involved and knowledge of how to be involved. Further studies will need to be done to verify this possible explanation.

The importance of this study is far-reaching. With so much research suggesting that parental involvement directly affects student achievement, educators can not overlook communication practices between teachers and parents. It is essential that parents are satisfied with the frequency, mode, content, and manner of communication. Lack of satisfaction may produce frustration, causing parents to become less involved with their child's school, ultimately compromising student achievement.

Limitations

Although the present study provides very useful information, there are limitations that should be considered. This research was purposely intended to collect information about one specific alternative high school program. Therefore, the results will be unique to the program in question and cannot be generalized to other alternative high schools or

programs. Furthermore, the information collected was limited to parents of first quarter students. Their responses do not necessarily represent the opinions of all parents of Northwest Iowa Alternative High School students. Furthermore, parent responses collected during first quarter may not necessarily reflect feedback that would have been given if surveyed at a later time during the school year.

Despite this study's limitations, the author believes that it was a worthwhile pursuit in that it provided valuable insight for improving the communication and partnership between teachers and parents. Alternative educators in similar circumstances are encouraged to replicate the study to improve communication with parents in their own schools and programs.

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Appendix A

Parent Communication Survey

1. How often would you prefer regular updates on your child's progress? (check one)

- Weekly
- Every two weeks
- Monthly
- Once every 9 weeks (once a quarter)
- Other (please specify) _____

2. Which mode of communication would you most prefer for receiving regular updates on your child's progress? (check one)

- E-mail message
- U.S. mail
- Report sent home with child
- Conference at school
- Other (please specify) _____

3. If a teacher had a concern about your child, would you find it appropriate for the teacher to contact you regarding any of the following areas?

	<u>Yes Contact Me</u>	<u>No, Not Teacher's Concern</u>
Classroom behavior	Y	N
Social/Peer issues	Y	N
Anger	Y	N
Depression	Y	N
Eating disorder	Y	N
Substance abuse	Y	N
Domestic abuse	Y	N
Mental health issues	Y	N
Physical health issues	Y	N
Illegal activity issues	Y	N

4. If you indicated it was appropriate for a teacher to contact you related to any of the above concerns, how would you most like to be contacted? (check one)

- Do not contact me
- Home visit
- Conference at school
- Phone call at home
- Phone call at work
- E-mail
- U.S. Mail
- Other (please specify) _____

5. Would you read a classroom newsletter? Y N Website? Y N

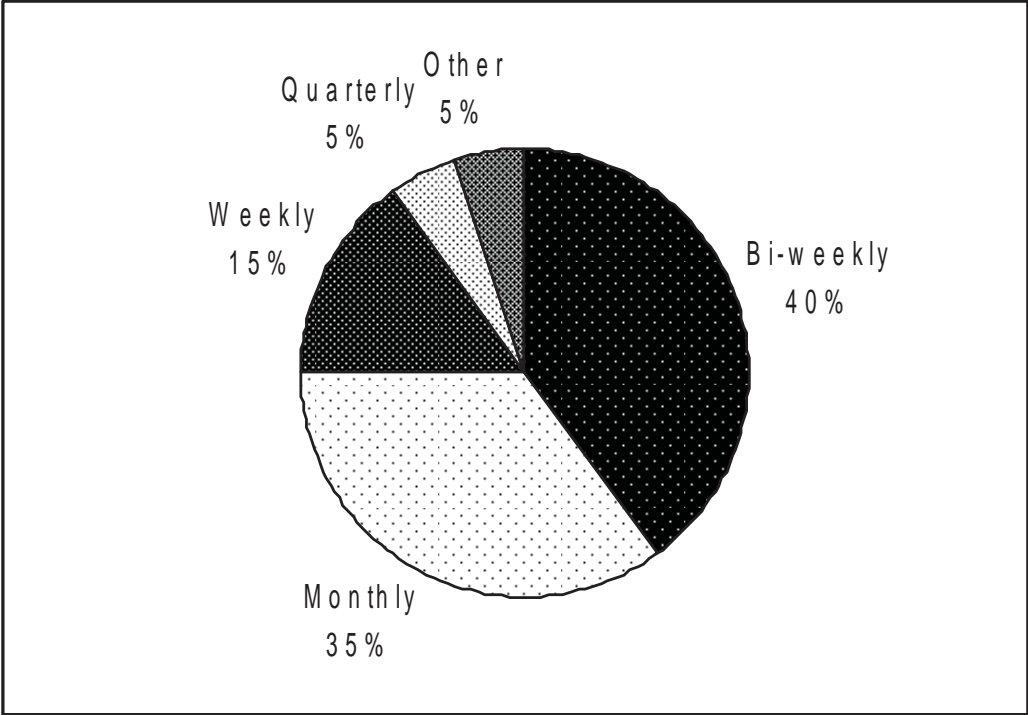
6. If there were a classroom newsletter or website, what information would you want included in this newsletter or website? (Check all that apply)

- School policies
- Classroom rules
- School calendar
- Student birthdays
- Community resources
- Student achievements
- Helpful parenting tips
- Teacher contact information
- Upcoming field trips/events
- Other (please specify) _____
- Wouldn't use newsletter/website

7. When teachers communicate with me about my child, I wish they would...

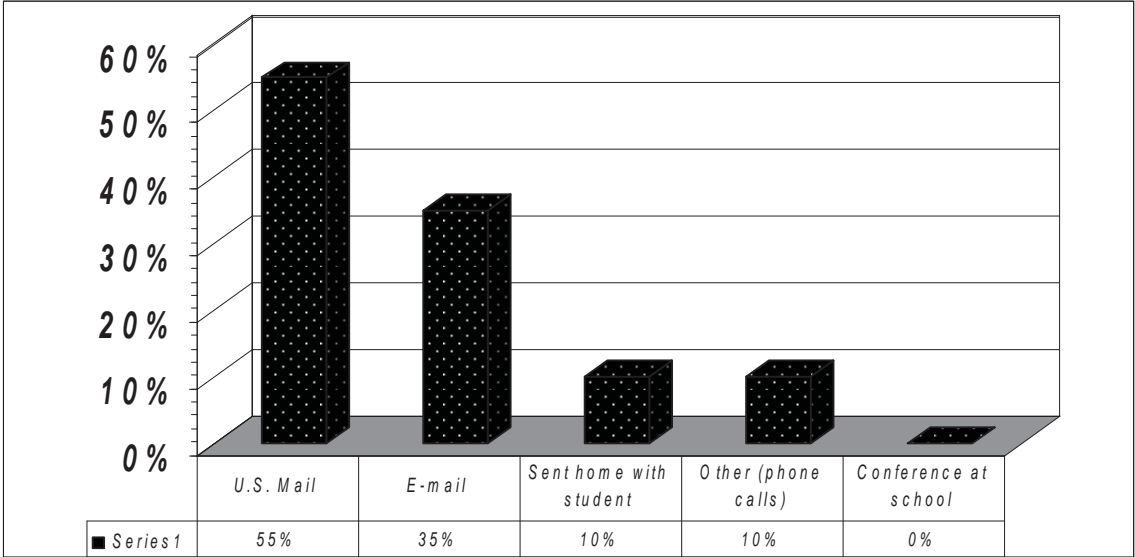
Appendix B

Figure 1. Parents' preferred frequencies for regular progress updates.



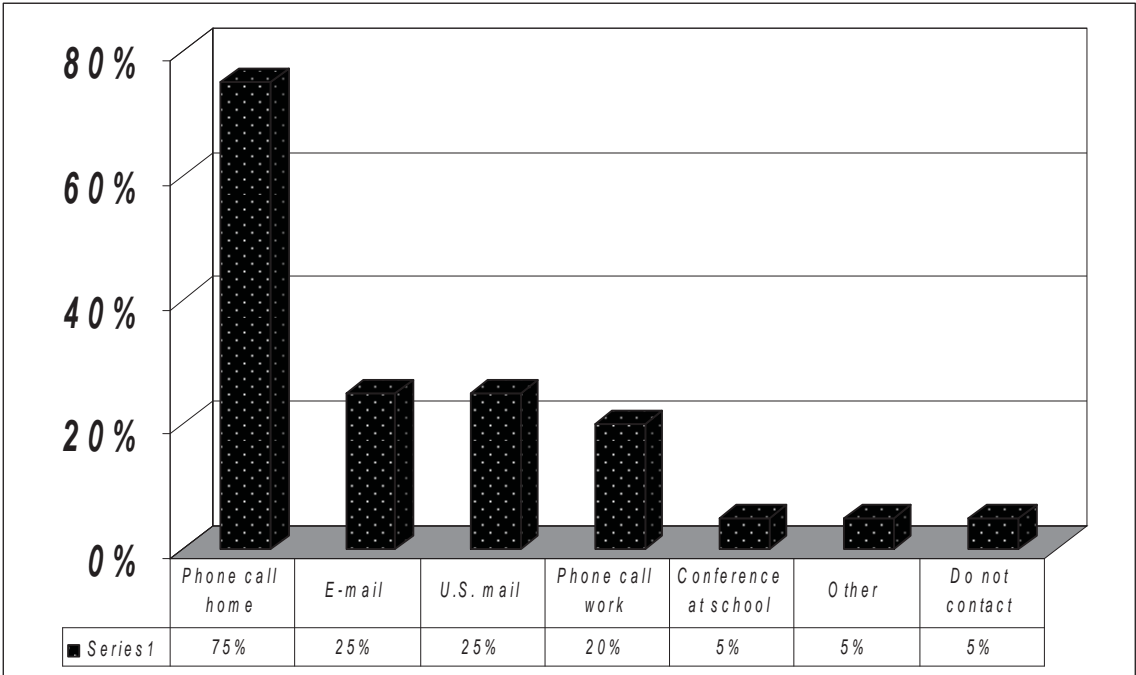
Appendix C

Figure 2. Parents' preferred modes of communication for regular progress updates.



Appendix D

Figure 3. Parents' preferred modes of communication for addressing specific social, emotional, behavioral, and health-related issues.



Appendix E

*Table 1***Parent Responses to Whether Contact from a Teacher is Appropriate**

Area of concern	Yes	No	No response
Classroom behavior	90%	5%	5%
Social/peer issues	80%	15%	5%
Anger	90%	5%	5%
Depression	95%	5%	
Eating disorder	90%	5%	5%
Substance abuse	95%	5%	
Domestic abuse	95%	5%	
Mental health issues	95%	5%	
Physical health issues	90%	5%	5%
Illegal activity issues	90%	5%	5%

Appendix F

Table 2

Information Parents Desire in a Newsletter and/or Website

Type of information	Parents desiring information
Student achievements	75%
School calendar	70%
Upcoming events	70%
School policies	50%
Community resources	50%
Parenting tips	45%
Teacher contact info.	45%
Student birthdays	35%
Other	
Wouldn't use	

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