

Home-school connection

Teacher guide

Families and caregivers expect students to learn to speak clearly, to listen carefully, to read with purpose, and to write powerfully. They are delighted when they see progress. Both teachers and parents know that closing the loop in their communication can have a positive effect on a student's performance. Both know that a team effort is needed, and each appreciates having the other as a partner.

This section contains tools to support efficient and effective communication with families and caregivers: 1) around student achievement, 2) around independent reading, and 3) around the publishing of student work. Included at the end are sample templates for emails or letters to send home to families.

Enlisting support for student achievement

A simple phone call is the perfect way to open a line of communication between parent or guardian and teacher. An email or letter can serve just as well. The purpose of this opening communication is:

- A.** To establish communication early, in a way that is positive and substantive.
- B.** To solicit useful information about students.
- C.** To obtain or confirm the mode of communication you will use throughout the year.

A quick comment about a student's positive traits is the perfect way to set the tone for the rest of the conversation. Make notes of any specific concerns that a parent might have during this initial, brief conversation.

Another good way of establishing communication is to send out a bulk electronic message to the parents, asking for a simple acknowledgment to verify their messaging address. For the ELA teacher, an online space can keep parents abreast of what's happening in their child's classroom. Many teachers establish a class website where they post this type of information.

Whether via a class website or through personalized communication, make sure to explain to parents and guardians how the class operates and how they can support their children's learning at home. Explain that students will be expected to read regularly, write often, share their ideas, and receive encouraging, instructive feedback. The following are specific suggestions you can share with families.

Class activity: Reading

- Support: Explain to parents that reading is the most common homework assignment and that the first, most essential thing they can do to help students is to carve out a time and a place every day for sustained focus and concentration.
- Support: Explain that, although the multiple choice questions that accompany Solos (independent work or homework) generally come with a “check answer” option, you are more interested in a student’s thought process than whether he or she got the answer right. Families can engage in ongoing conversations about reading to help students develop their comprehension skills. Families can start these conversations by asking students what they think about the characters, what they find engaging or confusing, and what they think the writer is saying about society.

Class activity: Writing

- Support: Send parents a screenshot of how you comment on student writing. Point out the principle of focusing on what is working, not what isn’t, and building skills from there. Remind parents that the key to improvement is fostering their child’s confidence to experiment and take risks with their writing.
- Support: Give parents three or four phrases that they can use when they review a piece of writing to focus attention on the skills students are developing.
 - You created a clear picture in my mind when you wrote _____.
 - I liked when you used the word _____ because _____.
 - I see what you mean about _____ when you write _____.

Another important thing to communicate to parents is an explanation of your grading process. The Amplify ELA curriculum involves a constant stream of performance assessments. Teachers are encouraged to examine the results of students’ efforts by tracking student progress in specific habits and skills in their daily work. At regular intervals teachers will grade an essay, which will require writers to use the skills that they have been explicitly taught through the Amplify ELA curriculum. You decide to emphasize performance, production, or both, and you select which components of the rubrics to use for grading purposes. Establish and communicate this grading policy early, so expectations are clear.

Your district and school will also want to communicate changes in the curriculum and provide information about California Common Core State Standards (CA CCSS) and the California ELA/ELD Framework. You should share links to websites that describe the CA CCSS for the grade level you are teaching so that families can become familiar with them. Your district should provide resources for communicating to English Learner (EL) parents in their native language.

Enlisting support for independent reading

You want your students to see reading as a daily, fun activity. However, independent reading is also a serious, lifelong pursuit. A love for learning can begin if parents or guardians help nurture it at home.

Communicate the goals and structure of the program. Explain the guidelines for choosing books in terms of challenge-level and reading widely across genres and cultural perspectives. Share the student Reading Tracker as a way to promote diverse selection, but let parents or guardians know their children are free to make choices—and they can help. Parents can browse the Amplify Library with students and use the printed lists that break down the collection by areas of interest. When reading begins, encourage family members to ask their children: “What are you reading?” “What did you notice in the part you just read?” “What questions do you have?”

Another important principle to communicate is that you want students to “see themselves,” (to see their background or their interests, for example) in what they read in school, and independent reading offers that opportunity. Make sure parents understand that the primary language or home dialect of English is understood as an important resource for academic success. Independent reading can be a bridge between the home and school environments by allowing students to choose books that both build important literacy skills and reflect their home culture and language. After the independent reading routines are established, encourage parents to help their children select books from the home, school, the Amplify Library or local library.

Independent reading, by nature, is highly personalized, which is why it is important to open an individual line of communication to each student. Students will use the Reading Tracker document (in the Appendix) to record book choices, next book possibilities, weekly page targets, various written reflections, and the territory covered to date in terms of the genres and cultural perspectives of books read so far. This line of communication is easiest if each student is able to use the Reading Tracker digitally, and share this document with you and the parent or guardian—as a Google Doc, for instance. The Reading Tracker can then become an instantaneous point of reference if you need to follow up with students who are not reading regularly.

Enlisting support for students to publish

Since you want to reinforce that a writer’s job is to communicate with an audience, look for ways to publish student work to a broader audience. Posting a “spotlighted” piece of student work on a school website or within a principal’s digital newsletter will involve more readers. Parents and caregivers can be a source of ideas. Solicit ideas from families so you can distribute student work to people outside of the school.