



**Indicator:** The School Community Council ensures that all parents understand the purpose of a standards-aligned curriculum, their own children's progress, and their role in supporting learning at home. (C1)

**Explanation:** The evidence suggests that increased communications between schools and families are critical for increased parent engagement and student academic success. Individual teachers, as well as groups such as the School Community Council (SCC) can have a significant impact on how families understand their students' progress, the standards they are learning, and how they can help at home. Stronger home-school relationships not only benefited the parents and teachers through increased information about the child, but they were also shown to improve student achievement and parent-child relationships.

**Questions:** How frequently are teachers communicating with families? In what ways are teachers, other staff, and the SCC sharing information about expectations, standards, and student progress to families? How can the principal support teachers in building stronger home-school relationships? How can the school provide a supportive environment for families to feel comfortable reaching out to teachers about their child's progress and curricular requirements?

*What is the Cognitive Competency?*

The Cognitive Competency refers to what teachers and families "need to know" to best help their students learn; this can include the standards, curricula, and the basics of both child and brain development that will help them encourage student mastery of the content that they are learning (Educator Competencies, 2015). This competency aims to connect what students are learning to their prior knowledge and previously mastered material to foster and assist in new learning. Vocabulary and writing tasks play a key role in the cognitive competency, as tools for connecting pieces of knowledge across content areas and domains (Redding, 2016).

In the era of the Common Core State Standards and comparable sets of state-level standards, expectations for what and how students will learn have risen. Focusing more on conceptual understanding than on rote learning and memorization, these sets of standards represent a different way of learning than many parents were exposed to during their own school experiences. This era of learning standards emphasizes interdisciplinary learning and demonstrating proficiency in context, across multiple content areas, such as teaching and assessing writing in a social studies course (Ryerse, Schneider, & Vander Ark, 2014). This shift in standards nicely fits into the cognitive competency, which emphasizes making connections between content, skills, and knowledge (Redding, 2016).

*Why is it so critical to keep families informed about their children's learning?*

Redding (2006) writes that, "Helping parents fully engage in the learning lives of their children is a necessary function of the school, and one that requires considerable, consistent, and competent attention" (p. 145). Research has shown that parents are hungry for information that will help them understand and be involved in their children's

education. Sixty-five percent of respondents to the 2011 Parent Involvement Survey indicated that they wanted to do more to help their children academically (Public Agenda, 2012). On another parent survey, 95 percent of families who did not receive adequate information about their children's progress and preparation for the future said that they would like that information; 96 percent of those who did receive it wanted to continue receiving this critical information (Data Quality Campaign, 2016). Approximately 89 percent of families wanted their child's data – including grades and test scores – to help them understand and improve their children's progress in school (Data Quality Campaign, 2016).

These two surveys show that parents want to be involved and informed, but unfortunately, many are not, often for reasons of insecurity or a lack of knowledge. Only 22 percent of respondents to the Parent Involvement Survey could identify a learning milestone appropriate to their child's grade level (Public Agenda, 2012; Kraft & Rogers, 2014). Cogan, Schmidt, and Houang (2013) suggest that parents may be interested in helping their students but may not have the tools or knowledge to do so. Ryerse, Schneider, and Vander Ark (2014) put it this way, "Ironically, in this information age, there is also an information gap," stating that the information that parents and students need is often not shared coherently or in meaningful and usable ways (p. 33).

In addition to the changes in standards and learning strategies, there are also shifts in the scoring of standardized tests that parents need to understand. Prior sets of state standards were known to have low cut scores, meaning that students did not have to achieve at high levels in order to be deemed proficient. On the new standards, it is expected that students will not perform as well because the cut scores for proficiency have been normalized. It is even more important for schools to share with parents that their children's progress on the new standards and corresponding assessments may look different than on previous tests because the standards are higher and geared towards preparing their students for the future (Polikoff, 2014).

#### *Strategies Schools Can Use to Increase Parental Understanding of Standards*

The simplest solution for parents' lack of information and preparation to support their students at home is to increase the communications between school staff and

families. According to Redding (2006):

Communication between the school and the home includes five essential topics: 1) what parents can expect from the school—its programs, curriculum, activities, procedures, and policies; 2) what the school can expect from parents—the curriculum of the home; 3) how the parents' child is progressing; 4) how the school can help the parents; and 5) how the parents can help the school. (p. 159)

Building stronger relationships between teachers and parents helps the teacher better understand students' needs and can motivate the parents to have a greater impact on their child's academic endeavors (Kraft & Rogers, 2014; Redding, 2016).

Helpful strategies include:

... providing educational activities and other programs for parents to learn about the curriculum used to teach their children and developing systems that parents can use to work with their children at home on the academic skills being stressed in the school program. (Murphy, 2007, p. 82)

It is also critical for teachers and school staff to share how students are doing in school and in what areas they may be struggling, as children may not always share this information with their parents. Additional knowledge on the parents' part can also help improve parent-child communications in addition to the home-school relationships (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Kraft & Rogers, 2014). However, information alone is not sufficient; schools must also provide guidance and strategies for parents to use in helping their children in these areas of growth at home (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

Another mechanism for this increased communication and support is the School Community Council (SCC). Redding (2006) writes that, "Helping parents understand learning standards and see their role in supporting their children's mastery of standards is a job the SCC assumes effectively within its scope of work" (p. 157-158). Having the SCC as a conveyor of information – both to families and from families—is a way to encourage deeper and more trusting home-school relationships. Through increased communication and outreach, as well as workshops for families who may need additional support, the SCC is an effective means for engaging parents in their children's academic lives (Redding, 2006).

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