

# What Parents Want School Staff to Know

*Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
Madison, Wisconsin*

Welcoming parents as respected partners in their children's education and opening communications between home and school are the goals of "What Parents Want School Staff to Know," a project of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The project is actually a presentation with the same title that is beginning to make the rounds of conferences and teacher education classes in the state to help teachers and other school staff members understand parents better, and vice versa. "Clearly, relationships need to be developed before content can be addressed," said the DPI director, one of two staffers heading up the project.

"We hear so often that teachers aren't prepared to work with parents, that they don't feel comfortable with parents, and they don't know how to involve parents to improve student achievement," she adds. This presentation attempts to overcome these problems, and the initial reaction has been positive.

Though in its second year, the project is still developing. It began when State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster encouraged her Parent Leadership Corps (PLC) to develop a presentation for teachers and education students. The PLC started with a discussion of what its members wanted to share with teachers in a positive manner. Then the PLC invited teachers' union representatives to join the discussion, adding teachers' views. Building on "10 Things Parents Want School Staff to Know," a document compiled earlier by the PLC, the DPI's director and coordinator put together a

PowerPoint presentation. They categorized the 10 topics into the 3 Rs of school-family cooperation: Respect, Relationships, and Rules.

Then they took it on the road, recruiting two members of the PLC, who also happened to be teachers, as presenters. Their first stop was the summer institute of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state's largest teachers' union. The veteran teachers at this two-hour workshop raised tough questions and challenges regarding parent involvement, the director reported. "Most surprising...was the bluntness of the teachers about how they felt about parent involvement."

After that initial outing, the PLC presented at the superintendent's New Wisconsin Promise Conference in January and at the Gear-Up conference in March. In May, the PLC piloted the presentation to education students at Edgewood College in Madison. Their reception at Edgewood was especially warm: The students found it heartening that parents were conducting the presentation, and one college student even volunteered her mother for future appearances. The PLC is already scheduled at Edgewood for summer and fall sessions.

The list of "10 Things Parents Want School Staff to Know" is also used widely by itself as a handout at gatherings of parents and teachers. Here are a few of the parents' top 10 that were used to build the broader presentation:

- Parents want to know that they are important to their children's school success and are their children's first and most influential teachers.

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- Parents want to know why the school or their child’s teacher is asking them to do something.
  - Parents want to know the “chain of command” in schools or the process for expressing concerns and requesting action.
  - Parents want to feel welcome in the school building to talk with teachers or the principal, visit their child’s classroom, or be involved however and whenever they can be.

After each presentation, the PLC reviewed and revised its work. The PLC and presentation developers feel as if they have a great future with their offering, as it has become a hot topic among educators and conference planners. As more parents are trained to conduct the presentation, the PLC will schedule more appearances at conferences and in-service and pre-services classes. Besides being fun for those involved, the project has a big payoff—building trust and respect among children’s families and their schools.

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