

# **The Home-School Partnership: Features That Support Its Productivity and Tips to Foster It**

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Optimal school performance includes: consistent academic progress, attentiveness and class participation, competent study skills, taking responsibility for school work, participation in the least restrictive environment, a sense of affiliation with peers and personnel, positive classroom behaviors, self-control, and a cooperative attitude with teachers and peers. For the gifted student with learning differences (the twice exceptional [2e] student), attaining these goals is especially challenging. We have documented a successful case study at the Roslyn Middle School (RMS). A custom-designed educational program that developed from a successful home-school partnership enabled this student to thrive.\* A careful analysis of this partnership has yielded ten features that contributed to its productivity and ten tips to foster its development. This article describes these features and tips which, although partially explained by illustrations from the case study, are applicable to all students.

## **Ten Features Supporting a Productive Home-School Partnership**

- 1. Team Structure:** At RMS, major subject area teachers meet one period daily to discuss student progress. Teaming is especially beneficial for 2e students because teachers in these students' areas of strength report their observations of the students' high levels of motivation, task commitment, and achievement with the teachers who instruct them in their areas of weakness. Further, the school recognizes that the home-school connection is valuable regarding student academic performance and encourages parents' contributions to team meetings. Finally, the principal permits team members to use the resources needed to meet student needs.
- 2. Effective Communication:** Both parents and teachers respect each other's expertise. The parents respect the teachers' experience, knowledge of their subject, and choice of pedagogical and classroom management techniques; the teachers respect the parents' knowledge of their child and suggestions for how to optimize his classroom functioning. Both sides are reasonable, calm, and non-defensive, and use common sense when problem solving. They are open-minded, listen to each other's ideas, and exchange ideas.
- 3. Home-School Agreement on View of the Student:** Both school personnel and the student's parents see him as 2e. Both sides see his strengths (creative thinking, excellent memory, wide range of knowledge, extensive vocabulary, sense of humor, and abilities to think abstractly, to make unusual connections, to grasp main points) and weaknesses (executive functioning, impulse control, social-emotional functioning, and repetitive/rigid actions when emotionally aroused). Because both his parents and teachers recognize his wide range of needs, they were able to develop an educational program addressing both exceptionalities.

4. **Home-School Agreement on Educational Philosophy:** Both parents and educators believe that the school environment should be stimulating, nurturing, and flexible, and should value individual differences. It should support the development of trusting relationships where students participate in their community. Parents and school personnel also view students holistically with respect to intellectual strengths and weaknesses, and academic and social-emotional needs. This perspective enables the educator to view behaviors positively (ex. distractibility might be creative thinking rather than a symptom of attention deficit disorder), and the student to develop positive self-esteem and self-efficacy.
5. **Home-School Agreement on Behavior Management Approach:** Both parents and educators also believe that cognitive and positive disciplinary approaches should be used. Perspective taking, reasons for and consequences of behaviors, and feelings should be discussed. They see the goals of discipline to be deeper understanding and increased student management of behavior.
6. **School Philosophy Consistent with 2e Educational Approach:** "High expectations with high levels of support," the motto of RMS, advocates teaching students to reach their potential while providing them with the needed scaffolds. An example of "high expectations" is assigning the 2e student a challenging essay question like "During the American Revolution, were the Patriots freedom fighters or opportunists?" and using a demanding grading rubric that requires proficiency in organization, content, and mechanics. An example of "high levels of support" is the special ed teacher's guiding the student in completing a graphic organizer for each paragraph. That process enables him to identify details from which he deduces the main idea, put those sentences in order, write each paragraph, and complete the essay. This approach is consistent with the *dually differentiated curriculum* designed for 2e students by Baum, S., Cooper, C., & Neu, T. (2001, *Dual differentiation: An approach for meeting the curricular needs of gifted students with learning disabilities*. *Psychology in the Schools*, 38 (5), pp. 477-490). This curriculum teaches through students' strengths and simultaneously supports them through accommodations, remediation, and/or compensation strategies.
7. **Preventative Intervention.** Regarding this case study, at the onset of each academic year, a consultant trains the student's teachers regarding his areas of weakness, and they receive articles on twice exceptionality. Because this student has Tourette's Syndrome, school personnel gave him a truncated schedule to reduce his need to suppress tics, and permit him to leave the classroom to express tics privately, and to draw when bored to avoid expressing tics.

- 8. Nipping Problems in the Bud Through Frequent Communication:** In the case at hand, to prevent small problems from developing into larger ones, the student's parents and various school personnel converse on an ongoing basis. His parents exchange notes, and have phone conversations and in-person meetings with individual teachers, administrators, guidance counselor, and school psychologist in response to issues as they arise, mid-semester reports, and quarterly report cards. His parents also speak to his TA at dismissal daily, special ed teacher weekly, and all his teachers at quarterly team meetings.
- 9. Educators' Flexibility and Utilization of Learner-Centered Instruction:** Also in the case at hand, the teachers differentiate instruction with regard to student interest, learning style, and assessment. His English teachers permit him to select high-interest books, such as in theoretical physics, when the assigned ones are too upsetting. Because he learns, thinks, and remembers using pictures (he's a visual-spatial learner [VSL] and has Asperger's Syndrome), he's allowed to illustrate his science lab reports, learn vocabulary words using images, and use graphic organizers to structure his written work. In English, he has submitted a comic strip, book jacket, and newsletter instead of book reports, and in French, he designed a game.
- 10. Student Responsibility:** Both parents and educators believe that the student must be recruited to be a member of the team. All of their work is in vain if he does not work on his own behalf. In the case study, team members from home and school have told him that his family, doctors, and teachers are helping him, and that he, too, must help himself: He should try his best, listen to their perspectives, discuss his feelings honestly, and use his strategies.

### Ten Tips for Parents to Foster the Home-School Partnership

- 1. First Impressions are Important.** At the onset of the school year, the parents should present school personnel with their impressions of their child, strengths first. This introduction can help school personnel see the new student as a multidimensional person rather than as a diagnosis defined by his/her IEP.
- 2. Be flexible.** Parents should present a demand in the context of "How can we work together to solve this problem?" and with the understanding that the school might be able to meet some but not all of their demand. This realistic attitude and willingness to compromise are likely to lead to productive outcomes.
- 3. Listen to and trust each other.** Parents and school personnel should realize that each side has expertise, and should respect and utilize the different types of information each offers.
- 4. Get informed.** Parents should meet with appropriate school personnel to learn about the different types of programs offered. They should see which would be the best fit for their child.

5. **Look and learn.** Before committing to a particular program, parents are entitled to observe that program. They should meet with the guidance counselor/principal to learn more about it and to schedule an observation.
6. **Social Successes.** Being well rounded and experiencing a sense of affiliation help students reduce anxiety. Participating in such non-academic aspects of school as clubs fosters this sense of well being.
7. **Extracurricular exploration.** Parents should help their child develop his/her strengths in after-school and summer programs. They should also investigate if a school program could incorporate their child's interest, ex. could they start a cartooning club? Parents should also help their child develop his/her own "self-control tool box" by learning relaxation and concentration techniques (yoga, mediation).
8. **Network.** We recommend that parents become involved in a group that advocates for their child's special needs. Doing so enables them to learn from others parents' experience and from experts' research.
9. **Keep talking.** It is important that parents do not let the issues they are experiencing build up. Instead, we suggest that they express their feelings to someone else, recognizing that there is no such thing as a silly concern.
10. **Take care of yourself.** It is important that parents find ways to replenish their energy so they are more available to work cooperatively both with their family and school personnel.

\* In addition to a 2e educational program (described in this newsletter, Oct. '05), this home-school partnership yielded a 2e-sensitive individualized education plan (IEP) and school psychological evaluation. If you would like excerpts or additional information, please contact the first author ([eisnerw@ncc.edu](mailto:eisnerw@ncc.edu)).

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