Designing Parent/Family Notifications

In order to meet parent/family notification requirements under state and federal accountability, districts must communicate important and often complex information to families. As with any communication to and with stakeholders, when developing required parent/family notifications, it is important to integrate the essential elements of strong stakeholder partnerships as outlined in the Colorado P-12 FSCP Framework.

When we construct outreach to families, how can we intentionally integrate the evidence-based elements of strong partnerships to meet the needs and preferences of families, foster engagement and two-way communication, and build stakeholders' collective capacity in FSCP?

Using the P-12 FSCP Framework lens, we can intentionally design parent notifications that meet requirements, increase engagement, and ensure families are able to understand, remember, and use the important information provided.

P-12 FSCP Framework Lens: Family/Parent Notifications

Create an Inclusive Culture	Build Trusting Relationships
Guiding Question: How are your notification practices inclusive of all families and their lived experiences?	**Guiding Question: How are you ensuring effective use of two-way communication with families to sustain positive relationships?**
To create an inclusive culture, carefully consider content, access, language/translation, and context. Pay attention to the multiple perspectives and individual identities of stakeholders and personalize communication whenever possible.	To build and maintain trusting relationships, remember to use various and preferred methods, and be intentional about tone, word choice, and opportunities for two-way communication that are ongoing and interactive.
Design Capacity Building Opportunities	**Dedicate Necessary Resources**
Guiding Question: How are you utilizing (and increasing) the assets of families and using FSCP as a school/district improvement strategy?	**Guiding Questions: How do you implement evidence-based practices to cultivate and sustain FSCP? Where are you now and where will you go?**
To build capacity and maximize the impact of stakeholder communication, carefully consider what information families already have and what they might need. Well-designed two-way communication can build deeper understandings, increase collective capacity, and improve engagement for families.	To improve systems of stakeholder engagement, it is necessary to dedicate time, effort, and attention to our communication practices. Consider 2 or 3 notification examples currently in use in your schools/district and apply these evidence-based principles.

Designing Parent/Family Notifications: A Checklist

☑ **Organization, Format and Presentation**

Limit communication length to one side of one page, single spaced, using no smaller than an 11 font.

Ensure multiple formats are available (paper, electronic), include translation options in multiple languages, and use preferred communication methods.

☑ **Content, Purpose and Depth**

Start with an introductory paragraph that briefly states the purpose of the notification and **summarizes/forecasts** the content to come. The introductory paragraph may sometimes be as far as stakeholders will read in the moment. The first paragraph should **introduce novel vocabulary** and **reference the important elements** we want stakeholders to remember, use and understand. Consider:

- What is the purpose of the notification?
- What three things do we need families to understand, remember, or do?

When developing the body of the communication, consider:

- What information is necessary and what information is supplemental?
- How can this communication build trust and convey partnership?
- What else might be needed to create readiness for increased engagement and ongoing involvement?

To enhance and invite engagement, include:

- Who and how to contact staff for more information.
- Links to more detailed information for stakeholders who choose to dig deeper.
- Office hours or other opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions and learn more.
- Opportunities to share their input and feedback.

☑ **Simplify, Demystify and Personalize**

Simplify the complex to increase understanding, and to foster a sense of competence and confidence in stakeholders.

- Be concise and direct, without judgment or emotion.
- Use simple tables, graphs, and icons to visually convey complex content when possible.

Demystify vocabulary:

- Use social rather than academic language.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Use commonly recognized words whenever possible. For example:
  - Assessment = test; Data = information; Curriculum = learning materials; Academic Standards = What the state expects your child to know and be able to do this year

Personalize word choice and tone:

- Use an informal, friendly voice.
- Include student and/or family names whenever possible.
- Use "you, your child, or your student" when referring to students.
- Use "we, us, and ours" (the language of partnership) when referring to stakeholders' partnerships with schools.
- Make connections to their student(s) their schools, their experiences, and shared goals.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

What is important to remember about vocabulary and word choice when messaging diverse stakeholders? How can we increase the clarity, comprehension, and effectiveness of notifications that require multi-language translation? Consider how language in English will translate to other languages for multilingual students and families by reviewing the tips below.

- **Be concise.** English often translates into longer text in other languages.

- **Use simple sentences**. Avoid compound or run-on sentences.

- **Use an active (vs. passive) voice** and use standard word order: subject--verb--object
    - Active: Your student posted a video on Facebook.
    - Passive: A video was posted on Facebook by your student.

- **Avoid long noun strings:** When noun strings become longer than three words, they can make readers labor. This is particularly true when the reader is not already familiar with the subject or technical domain.
    - Noun String: Garfield School has a school family relations improvement program.
    - No Noun String: Garfield School has a program to improve relations with families.

- **Avoid humor in most cases**, as it almost always depends on intonation, body language, and socio-cultural background knowledge, and will not always be clear in text or email.

- **Avoid jargon, slang, acronyms, and idioms.** Use only literal terms.
    - Idiom: Using "under the weather" instead of "sick" can create confusion, especially if you translate that phrase using an online translation tool.
    - Jargon: Avoid professional jargon and complex academic language.
    - Acronym: Avoid saying IEP rather than Individual Education Plan.

- **Avoid multiple meaning words.**
    - Example: Use "learning online" vs. "remote learning," because remote can mean two very different things. *(That city is remote. I used the remote to change channels.)*

- **Use the simplest and most commonly used words and expressions** for any concept.
    - Example: Learning from a distance is a simpler way to say remote learning because "remote" is a word that's not commonly used in this way.

- **Social language is preferable to academic language.**
    - Example: "Your son/daughter did a **great** job on the math test" instead of "Your son/daughter met the *success criteria* on the math assessment."

Always Double Check: If you are not multilingual, it is important to double check the accuracy of critical or complex messages translated by technology. Consider double checking your translation with a multilingual colleague, or use another platform, such as DeepL Translator: https://www.deepl.com/translator or WordReference.com: https://www.wordreference.com/