

Quality Education News

A quarterly publication issued by the South African Quality Institute in the interest of promoting educational excellence.

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A word or three from the Editor

Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Every school tries to ensure good communication. No school, however, gets it perfectly right. Not everyone who needs to know gets the needed message every time on time. Even when they get the message, it's sometimes misunderstood. Poor communication such as between a teacher and a learner can result in anger and rudeness. In dire cases it can lead to physical violence.

This issue of QEN will briefly look at Communication, the fourth pillar of the quality school. A small community school often finds it easier to ensure good communication. There's a strong likelihood that families and staff interact well and build friendships. When a school has an enrolment going into the high hundreds and more, this type of communication becomes a real challenge. It's more difficult to know one another.

Yet many schools—irrespective of size—create superb communication. They create a 'sense of family'. Everyone knows that they belong and are 'in the loop' about what's happening. Ten ways in which these schools achieve five-star communication levels are outlined in this newsletter.

Effective communication is far more than giving factual information. It's also a relationship. A circular about a fund-raising event can, for example, provide all the necessary information. Yet the circular can also create an emotional response. A well-worded circular can be an excellent motivator. It could encourage and persuade many families to attend and put their hands deep into their pockets to support the fund-raising.

Conflict occurs in every school. When there's effective communication between home and school, conflict is dealt with directly. The conflict is resolved. Everyone knows the route to follow when there's a complaint. Everyone's self-respect is maintained throughout the process. People are listening to each other. Good communication skills resolve conflict.

Many of our South African schools in 2008 are dysfunctional. Learners, parents and teachers are only hearing (often abusively and loudly) each other. There's little or no listening happening. They don't understand the reasons for the anger, aggression, un-cooperativeness and unhappiness of others.

Inter-personal conflict has one thing in common...poor communication between the 'fighting' factions. There's a lack of communication skills. When communication skills are sound, conflict is resolved. The school is an attentive listening-to-each-other place. Then the school is on the quality journey.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

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"We're trying hard to understand each other!"



This newsletter is edited by SAQI and distributed by Woolworths to schools nominated to benefit from their unique MY SCHOOL project. The project aims at improving the quality of learning in South Africa through a network of partners and supporters.



Turning a problem into a challenge

First, there's the good news. The QEN online newsletter grows with every issue. The start-up issue in 2006 had a distribution of under a thousand. This newsletter has an online distribution of almost three thousand. We're truly grateful to Woolworths and the My School programme for their big-hearted sponsorship. They walk the Quality talk.

The challenging news is that there are over 28,000 schools in the country. Only 10% of the schools receive QEN which is published only in electronic format. How do we get QEN to the other 90%... and especially those schools that don't have computer facilities? The South African Quality Institute (SAQI) doesn't have the staff or financial resources to send the newsletter to all these schools.

Every QEN reader can be of great help. If every reader were to inform only five schools of this newsletter, the message would reach 15,000 schools. That's more than half of South African schools! Let your five selected schools know of the free online subscription. They can contact Client Services of MySchool on 0860-100-445 or cs@vmp.co.za to be on the list. If a school doesn't have email facilities, you might like to photocopy QEN and post it to them. Thank you for helping to spread the Quality message.

Ten out of ten for communication

By the very nature of a school, it's impossible to have flawless communication. Learners and staff are absent on any given day. People forget to pass messages on; or the passed on information is inaccurate. Yet some schools achieve almost perfect scores in this area of quality management. They create excellent communication. Ten of their tips are:

1. Calendar of activities

At the start of the year, issue a calendar which gives the dates and times of major activities. This helps families plan their own activities. When learners know the dates of important events well in advance, there's little excuse for non-attendance.

When drawing up the calendar, invite input. Any staff member is welcome to attend the year planning meeting. The Parent Association, PTA and SGB should be encouraged to make input too.

Practical considerations when deciding on dates are: block off major religious holidays, school and public holidays as well as major sporting fixtures. Remember the Beijing Olympics in August 2008! Avoid having events on a Saturday when the prior Thursday or subsequent Monday is a holiday. Some families create long weekend for themselves in such situations.

2. Communication folders

Often a great deal of paperwork gets lost between the home and the school. Di Rademan, the principal of Edenglen Primary School (Tel: 011-609-5206/7), ensures that every learner is given a plastic Communication Folder. It contains home and school contact details. The folder also has copies of both the Learners and the Parents' Conduct Codes. Inside the folder is a 'Reasons for absence' form which is completed by parents when their children are absent. There's a Comment Form for parents who wish to communicate with the teacher. Newsletter and other notices are included in this "catch-all" folder.

3. Diaries

Printing companies make standardized school diaries. These diaries include the school calendar dates for the different provinces. Most schools require learners to record their daily homework. Parents sign off the done homework.

Diaries can also be printed solely for a particular school. This type of diary would contain items such as: Code of Conduct, homework time schedule per Grade, School Prayer as well as uniform and kit requirements for class and extramural activities.

4. Meetings

Meetings are crucial for the imparting of information. They also provide opportunities for the different groupings to interact with the school leadership. It's important to have meetings with all stakeholders, not only the traditional ones such as the teaching staff and the SGB. Remember the learners, administrative and

maintenance staff. Meetings provide a professionally acceptable forum to raise concerns and make recommendations. By having regular open and honest meetings, car park gossip or “car park assassins” can be much reduced. Regrettably, they’re never entirely eliminated!

The bigger the school, the greater likelihood of more meetings on the school calendar. Staff at these schools could feel that they’re not informed enough of decisions taken at the meetings. To deal with this concern, staff should know that they’re welcome to attend and make input at the various meetings. Also, give every staff member copies of the minutes of meetings such as the PTA and the Children’s Council. There are SGBs which welcome staff to be observers and make comments at their meetings.

5. Newsletters

The weekly newsletter is powerful in creating a sense of family and teamwork. It’s one way for the principal to reach every family. If the school has the facilities, put the newsletter on the website.

Newsletters can be directed at niche audiences. So, for example, each Grade can have its own quarterly newsletter. The teachers of that Grade would focus on matters that are important to that group of learners.

Nicole Verdonck, a teacher at St Peter’s Boys Preparatory School, goes a step further with the newsletter. She has a monthly online newsletter to the families of her homeroom class. Everyone is ‘in the loop’ about what is being taught. The newsletter adds further to the warm rapport between her and the boys’ families.

6. Prospectus

For any prospective or new family to a school, a prospectus is invaluable. An effective prospectus gives the answers to frequently asked questions. A good prospectus reflects the values of the school and is also an effective marketing tool.

7. Reports

State schools are required to issue quarterly written scholastic reports to parents. Reports can be used to nurture an excellent relationship between the home and the school. The remarks written by the teachers and principal give an indication of the level of their understanding and professional care towards a learner. Accordingly, dedicated and empathic teachers reflect before writing comments on the report cards.

To nurture communication, invite parents and their children to attend “Let’s look at my work!” - style meetings. Together with the teachers, they discuss the quarterly progress. They make plans on how to ensure continuous improvement.

8. School magazine

An annual magazine celebrates the achievements of the past year. It’s also an historical record. The magazine communicates what’s deemed important to the school. Whether stated or implied, the core values of the school are reflected in the magazine.

9. SMS messaging

A tiny but growing number of schools are using their computer facilities to send SMS messages. Cheaper and faster than telephone calls, SMS messaging gets information across to many people. One common use is to tell parents of short-notice cancellation of sport events. Another is to remind them of future school fixtures and functions.

10. Website

Virtually every British school has a website. A website is seen as a very important means of communication. Increasingly, South African schools are having their own websites.

A website is an invaluable reference source. The weekly newsletter and the year calendar can be posted on it. A popular feature is a photo gallery of events. The list of items that can be put on the site is endless. When used effectively, it reflects the spirit and unique character of the school.

Dealing with complaints

Part of communication is dealing with complaints. No school is immune. There will be incidents of the hurt or angry person. Yet if dealt with promptly and in an emotionally intelligent way, peace can soon be restored. The longer a complaint lingers, it festers. Research in the business world states that an unhappy customer tells seven other people. The complaint then spreads further and further.

Accept gracefully that there will be complaints...no matter how hard a school tries! Have a process in place to deal with complaints. Here's an item that appeared in a 2006 weekly newsletter of IR Griffith Primary School in Randburg:

"Any Complaints?!"

I hope not. Yet if there are complaints, suggestions or queries, please contact us. Speak to the teacher, Grade Facilitator, Head of Department, Deputy or myself. Every reasonable effort is made to respond to your concern on the same day or evening. As a staff, we are committed to giving your child a caring, quality education.

If a school claims to have an 'open door' policy, make sure that the door is wide open! When a learner wants to talk to a staff member, respond promptly. Should a Grade One child want to speak to the principal, that request should be granted...and quickly, too!

Every teacher knows that it's not necessary to open one's mouth to make sure that everyone gets the message. Body language is a potent form of communication. Sue Cowley writes:

Body language

It would be nice to think your pupils listen to every pearl of wisdom that drops from your mouth, but truth be told, they don't. A huge part of what they "hear" in the classroom is what your body says.

Stand tall, keep your posture open and relaxed. No matter how terrified you feel, don't let it translate into defensive body language. Relax your face as well—a smile helps everyone feel at ease.

Scan the room, making regular eye contact with every pupil. Then, when you remove your gaze, the message is clear: "I'm waiting for you to pay attention. Perfect your deadly stare, so that a simple look tells an individual that you are not impressed, without the rest of the class needing to know.

You can say a great deal with your hands: "five minutes left", "stop", "great stuff", "up you get". A quick tap on the desk of a recalcitrant pupil can indicate that you have spotted a problem.

Then there's the classic glance at the watch. Every pupil in every school across the land knows what that one means—"if you waste my time, I'll waste yours."

All that attention without even opening your mouth.

(Acknowledgement: Times Educational Supplement magazine, page 7, 2 November 2007)

Clothes that speak

The clothes worn by a person are part of body language theory. First impressions count enormously. Clothes make a huge statement about a person. Body language theory states that an opinion of a person is formed within seconds. A teacher needs to look professional. The smartly attired teacher has a head start with classroom management when entering the classroom. A business-like tone for the lesson can be set. Yet teachers also need to feel comfortable in their clothes. A balance is needed between professional dress and comfortable classroom wear. For lively, animated staffroom discussion, raise the issue of a dress code! The communication will be vibrant...that's guaranteed!

Most happy news for SAQI is the return of Vuyi Segooa. She has come back from the business world. A very warm welcome, Vuyi!

SAQI is a not-for-gain institute. The Institute conducts programmes on Quality leadership and management. For more information, kindly contact:

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