



## The Parent Teacher Partnership

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ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

# The Parent Teacher Partnership

**There is a powerful way to enhance student performance across the board; it's family engagement.**

Study after study confirms that regardless of the student's age, type of school, curriculum, or culture, family engagement, when done well, improves the likelihood of student performance. Henderson and Mapp found a statistically significant relationship holds across "families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and all ages" (*Henderson & Mapp, 2002*).





Family engagement exhibits itself in a variety of ways such as showing up to a sporting event, volunteering at school, or attending a parent teacher conference. And while these are all beneficial, only the last one deals directly with student performance. Research has found that these other types of involvement, such as volunteering and attending school events, had little effect on performance (*Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996*).

And since improving student performance is the goal, family engagement should focus on how to productively extend the conversations and thought processes of a parent teacher conference in an ongoing way. Family engagement has the most impact when it is directly linked to learning (*Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez, & Weiss, 2009*). Research shows a strong relationship between parent engagement and educational outcomes, including school attendance. (*Epstein & Sheldon, 2002*)

Despite this research, many schools and districts do not have a planned family engagement strategy. Beyond notifying parents of their students' progress, there may be little constructive dialogue focused on personalized learning. There may be a division between classroom learning and home support. Yet learning is enhanced when parents stimulate their children's intellectual achievement (*Walberg & Paik, 2004*). A system can be put in place that can successfully construct a learning environment that extends from the school into the home and beyond.

Fundamentally, at its core, that system serves to foster a partnership between the parent and the teacher. In this partnership, parent and teacher share information and work together on employing sound strategies which they monitor, analyze, and adapt to support the student without being overly invasive. We call this, obviously, the **Parent Teacher Partnership**.

Developing this system of strong Parent Teacher Partnerships rests on four core principles:

-  **Understanding the Parent Engagement Curve™**
-  **Elevating the Role of Parents as True Partners**
-  **Building Trust in Communications**
-  **Measuring and Correlating Engagement to Achievement**

## Who initiates the Parent Teacher Partnership?

The responsibility lays with the school to initiate a family engagement strategy; this results in better student performance than ad hoc efforts by parents. As the research indicates:



Students made “greater and more consistent gains when teachers were ‘especially active’ in outreach to parents” (*Henderson and Mapp, 2002*).

When teachers “involved low-achieving students’ parents early on, students were able to resolve their learning difficulties before they multiplied” (*Westat & Policy Studies Association, 2001*).

Involvement can be achieved by maintaining “a consistent message of what is expected of parents, and reaching parents directly, personally, and with a trusting approach” (*Kerins, Perlman & Redding, 2009*).

## Understanding the Parent Engagement Curve™

### **Parents and families in the school community are at varying levels of engagement.**

Some families are fully engaged in their child’s performance, while others are not. Teacher effectiveness can be strengthened by improving the level of engagement with each family. We need to identify these levels, and develop a strategy to help parents “move up the curve.”

Parents and teachers are not required to communicate with each other. Often, they don’t talk to each other at all. In many instances, they don’t know what to say to each other. They don’t understand the other’s point of view. They don’t have each other’s “data.” Unfortunately, parents and teachers can think of each other as an adversary or at least as sitting on opposite sides of the student.

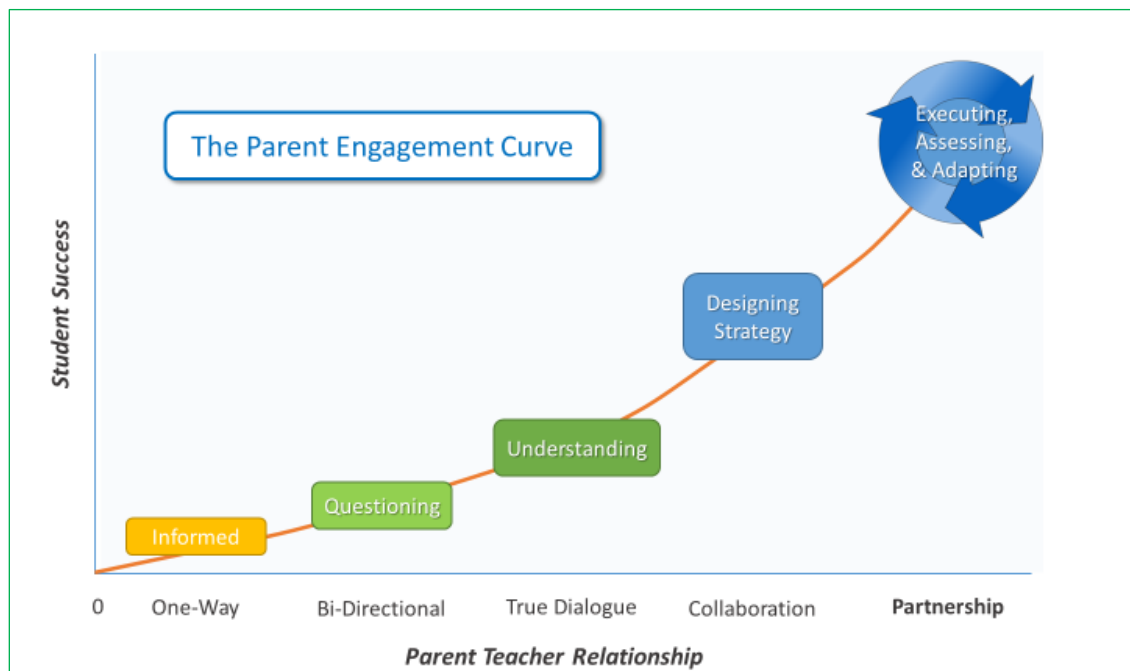
Research has studied other obstacles to family engagement as well. Some parents have low levels of school-related skills or they can’t communicate in English (*US DOE & US Dept of HHS, 2000*). They may be overwhelmed by other realities of their families’ lives or lack transportation (*Sanders & Sheldon, 2009*), or they may feel that school culture is foreign to them (*Boethal, 2003*). Parents may have bad memories of their own school experiences (*Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997*), which influence their relationship with teachers.

Similarly, there are obstacles from a teacher’s perspective. They may have limited time, and although wanting to be more communicative, the sheer number of parents and families overwhelm their ability to respond in a timely fashion. They may also be apprehensive of the “helicopter parent”, who advocates solely for their child.

**The goal is to build both a strategy and a feedback loop focused on student performance that is strengthened with respectful parent/teacher communication.**

Ideally, a parent and a teacher will agree on a strategy to help the student improve. Parents and teachers can check with each other to see how well the strategy is implemented and how well it is working. They can then decide to make any appropriate adjustments and start the process again. This does not need to be a formal process. It could be as simple as telling a teacher your child had difficulty with last night's homework.

This strategy is outlined in what we call **The Parent Engagement Curve™**. At the lowest point of the curve, there is no contact between the parent and the teacher. Moving forward, the parent receives easily understood information specifically about what and how the student is doing, not just what's happening at the school.



The parent may have a question or two...which leads to an answer from the teacher.

Which may lead to insight from a parent and the beginning of a dialogue...

Which turns into a strategy...

Which creates points of feedback...

Which allows for joint analysis...

Which can lead to some reshaping...

Which creates new data points, more analysis, and fine-tuning...

**And at this point, a strategic feedback loop is in place and we're at the top of the curve!**

### **Moving anywhere up the curve can have a substantial effect on student success.**

And we can do all of this with a light touch. But such an outcome is not easily reached. It certainly takes time; it doesn't always happen; nor does it have to. Any steps forward where a parent and teacher work more closely together to improve student performance can be thought of as a step up The Parent Engagement Curve.

From non-existent communication, to a parent asking a teacher a question, to a dialogue ensuing where both share their thoughts and observations, to a strategy being considered and implemented, to employing a structured feedback loop, movement up this ladder has been shown to aid student success.

## **Elevating the Role of Parents as True Partners**

### **Parents are not just observers and overseers.**

Most parents feel they are responsible for their child's performance in school. Too often, they have no or little voice in the matter. This is often because schools have no system or strategy in place to hear parents so that they can take advantage of the family environment. With such a system, the parent could provide a more holistic picture of their child. Teachers could learn from what has and hasn't worked for them.

Together they could co-create ways for gathering evidence of success, an approach for evaluating the data, and determining what adjustments to make for the student. Indeed, they would be working to move up The Parent Engagement Curve.



Studies show that schools need to focus on “valuing, not changing parents” (*McCollum, 1996*). Our research has found that parents have a great deal to contribute to the teacher's efforts. They have tremendous expertise that, if utilized well, can elevate a parent into being a respected "colleague" in the efforts to help the students achieve greater success.

When given such respect, the parent tends to return the favor and sees the teacher as more professional. This results in a growing atmosphere of trust and respect that becomes more quantifiable and focused and, in so doing, it creates a more scientific and systematic approach to parents and teachers supporting students.

Parent coordinators can fill a valuable role in in parent-teacher relationships. Being in the unique position to “see” both sides, parent coordinators can provide support, direction, and professional development to help teachers in this paradigm. A modest re-alignment of responsibilities can make the district more responsive to this changing dynamic.

## Building Trust in Communications

### **The Parent Teacher Partnership requires a shared desire: student success.**

Parents and teachers, though, may come at this success slightly differently. A teacher's focus is on the whole class, while the parent's is on the child. These different perspectives need not prevent a parent and a teacher from finding common ground. Each party can easily respect where the other is coming from and any dissonance that may result is typically minor. Recognizing the difference, though, does help build trust.

### **Respect for each other's commitments is critical.**

Building trust also means that parents and teachers must respect each other's time and privacy, so although a few conversations will be lengthy and intense, most can be very short. These shorter conversations often feel much like text messaging – a quick question followed by an answer; a simple exchange of ideas, a check-in to see what happened.

And like messaging, often the replies will not be immediate and will take place over time. Teachers and parents tend to be busy. When each side respects the other's schedule and both make commitments to answering within a reasonable amount of time, the foundation for trust is laid.



### **Trust in each other's motivations is needed for transparency and civility.**

Honesty is critical but professionalism rules the day. Indeed, if we think of the parent teacher exchange not just as conversation but as documentation of the work involved to support a student, then it makes sense to capture and store the communication. In this way, the integrity of the work can be checked and lessons can be learned. Conversation can be turned into data that can be used to help better determine what works.

## Measuring and Correlating Engagement to Achievement

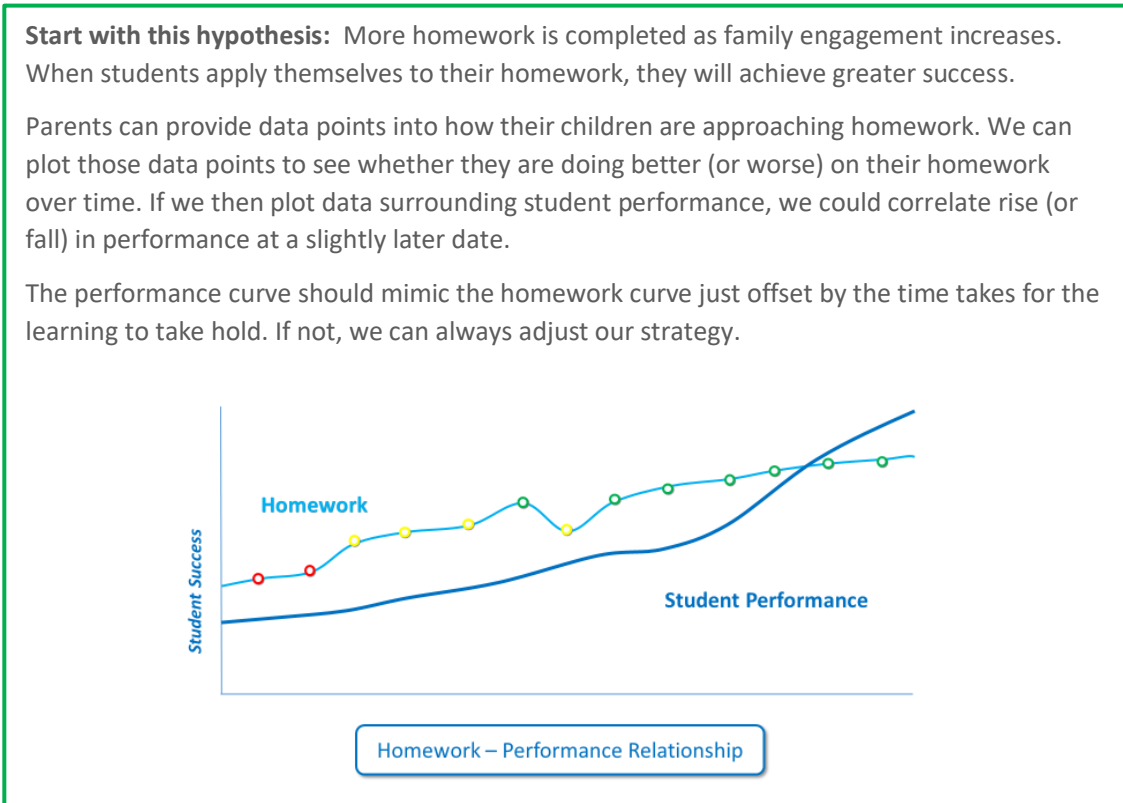
### **Proper measurement is key to successful Parent Teacher Partnerships (and school/district-wide strategy).**

On an individual level, the feedback loop in the Parent Teacher Partnership provides the ability to assess and adapt strategies in personalized learning. As importantly, macro trends can be verified; this information can provide insight for further district initiatives and help develop new models for student success.

Proper metrics provide the basis for additional research, and substantiate proper funding for family engagement initiatives. Of the estimated \$14,400 per student per year average expenditure on K-12 education in the United States, less than \$10 is spent on parent involvement.

The extent and quality of the Parent Teacher Partnership can be measured in several ways. We can measure the frequency and quality of dialogue. When we ask questions properly, we can collect the answers and turn them into data points. These can be plotted and correlated against student success.

*As an example:*



We can collect relevant data across school systems to establish a baseline for students so we can start to set observable expectations. Deviations can be isolated and studied and the scientific method duly employed. The resulting research provides validity, and a much stronger case can be made about the efficacy of the Parent Teacher Partnership. This can be achieved within a school, a district, and even at state levels.

Correlating student success with family engagement is perhaps the most important indicator of the value of the Parent Teacher Partnership. Providing these types of metrics, individually and at the classroom level, can be used to develop a “Return on Investment” on the efforts taken to improve family engagement.

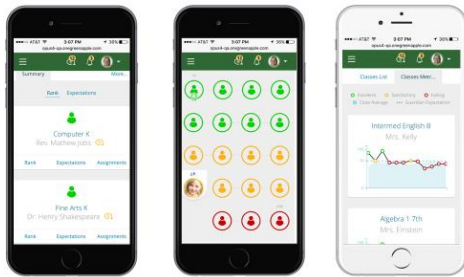
By developing proper measurement, family engagement more easily budgeted and funded and are considered truly an integral part of creating a quality education.

## One Green Apple's Online Parent Understanding System (OPUS)

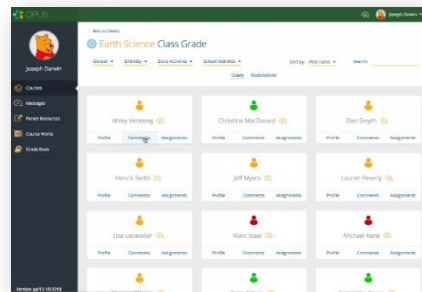
The four principles to developing a strong Parent Teacher Partnership are also the foundation of One Green Apple's *Online Parent Understanding System (OPUS)*. Family engagement technology requires more than a messaging system to be truly successful. OPUS is focused on student performance, providing real time student data in context, and is easy for a parent to understand, evaluate, and be supportive.

Similarly, teachers receive insights from home, providing a basis for true understanding and respectful dialogue. As a system of record for communication, OPUS provides an auditable transcript for professional development and issue resolution. All constituencies receive metrics that are meaningful to them; in this way, OPUS engenders successful Parent Teacher Partnerships.

By improving, monitoring, measuring, and analyzing family engagement, and correlating it to student performance and attendance, OPUS becomes the foundation for a true district-wide family engagement strategy. With the support of local-based organizations, greater impact can be made to the social fabric of the community.



OPUS<sup>SM</sup> Parent View



OPUS<sup>SM</sup> Teacher View

*OPUS<sup>SM</sup> provides parent functionality on any handheld device. By leveraging user-friendly graphics, coupled with in-depth analysis, we increase a parent's capacity to understand their child's performance and development.*

*Visual classroom metaphors enable easy-to-use dynamic analysis of class rank, grading, demographic information, and parent expectations. One-on-One Messaging initiates a continuous virtual parent-teacher conference (The Parent Teacher Partnership) that starts Day 1 of the school year. It is conducted in the family's native language using dynamic translation.*

## About One Green Apple, LLC

The people behind One Green Apple are like you – passionate advocates for effective school-family partnerships that benefit students in helping them realize their potential. We offer schools and families dynamic, effective, visual tools to foster communication while supporting and measuring the engagement strategies that work best in their communities. Visit us at [www.onegreenapple.com](http://www.onegreenapple.com) but most importantly, join our conversation. We'd love to hear from you!



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