



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Less Jargon, More Grace: Using Language That Parents Understand

Messages to parents and guardians that are full of acronyms and buzzwords can lead them to miss what teachers are trying to say.

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I work at a blended learning school in Southern Nevada. Our school community was heavily online prior to the pandemic, which gives me insight around what works and what may be needed as we reopen schools.

One factor that we must keep in mind is the need to keep families in the loop as decisions are made about this year. The language we use when communicating with families is more crucial than ever. As educators, we are doing ourselves and our families a huge disservice by alienating them with unfamiliar words, acronyms, and educational jargon. Since family involvement [impacts school achievement](#), examining our communications is even more critical, as many reopening plans include [some form of online learning](#).

For example, our district’s reopening plan calls for dividing students into three cohorts: One cohort would attend school virtually, while another would be in class on Mondays and Tuesdays with distance learning the other three days, and a third group would have in-person instruction on Thursdays and Fridays with the other days spent learning remotely.

What’s the problem here? Many families, especially those where English is not spoken in the home, did not understand the word *cohort*, which is used frequently when describing hybrid plans here in Nevada and in other areas. Why don’t we say what we mean? Is it really that difficult to just say “groups”?

AIMING FOR CLARITY IN COMMUNICATIONS

I thought about the endless supply of acronyms that educators use throughout the school year and how we might be alienating families by not being clear, explicit, and transparent in our language choices

when communicating with them. Here are a few acronyms, words, and phrases I hear being used often, with examples of what we could say to improve communication with families as we dive into virtual learning:

- Instead of “cohort,” use “groups.”
- Instead of “e-learning,” use “learning that happens on a computer, tablet, or phone.”
- Instead of “asynchronous,” use “learning that happens on your own without the teacher.”
- Instead of “synchronous,” use “teachers and students are in the class at the same time.”
- Instead of “hybrid,” use “a mix of online and in-person learning.”
- Instead of “Tier 1,” use “whole class lessons or instructions.”
- Instead of “Tier 2” and “Tier 3,” use “lessons for small groups (Tier 2) or individuals (Tier 3).”
- Instead of “IEP,” use “individualized education program for students with disabilities.”
- Instead of “accommodations” use “help provided to meet a student’s particular needs.”

This list is not exhaustive of the many terms used by educators. It’s meant to be a starting point to foster strong communications between schools and communities. Language is a critical part of building strong relationships and will be even more important as online learning continues across the country. As we consider the importance of relationship building in our remote learning plans, I urge everyone to think about the ways in which our language choices serve to empower or disempower groups, especially those already struggling to overcome the opportunity gap.

MORE TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

1. Drop the acronyms and educational jargon. While terms such as *scaffolding* and *PBL* are common to us, families will need you to explain clearly what these concepts mean.
2. Examine your communications for cultural relevance. Families appreciate seeing themselves reflected in school communications as well as curriculum. This can lead to stronger relationships and can help mitigate the effects of the opportunity gap.
3. Consider recording your email blasts, newsletters, and directions. We cannot and should not assume that everyone in our communities possesses the same literacy level or speaks English as a first language.
4. Account for students and families who are English language learners. Are you creating and disseminating information in more than one language? Will your lessons and communications need to be translated?

Community building is a process, one that we must think deliberately and intentionally about as we move forward. The language we use to communicate with our families is more important than ever, as we seek to create positive school-home relationships in a largely online-learning environment. Persistent equity issues are likely to be exacerbated as more schools begin the year online. Let’s not let language be one of them.

Source: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/less-jargon-more-grace-using-language-parents-understand>