

LEARNING FIRST ALLIANCE

Practical Guide to Promoting America's Public Schools

This Practical Guide to Promoting America's Public Schools has been prepared by the Learning First Alliance, a permanent partnership of 11 leading national education associations, to help educators and others interested in education promote public education in their communities.

Using this Guide

Educators are accustomed to talking about academics, student achievement, test scores, and other crucial issues that are the core of their work and the basis on which their schools are judged. But research suggests that educators should broaden their message by linking those issues to the vision and values the public holds for public schools. The following messages and ideas for action can be used to complement a focus on academic programs and results. Use them when communicating with your community, parents, and the media. Include them in talks, newsletters, Web site features, press releases, articles, etc. Modify them to suit your individual circumstances by:

- ❖ Linking commonly held values to the mission and activities of your schools;
- ❖ Using specific examples, figures, and stories from your state, district, or school to illustrate points;
- ❖ Stressing the concrete benefits of public schools to individual students, to the community, and to the nation.

Enlist other supporters of public education in communicating these messages. Many members of the public get their information about public education from other people – parents, students, teachers, neighbors, and employers – as well as from the media. These people can be credible and effective messengers about what is working well in your schools.

A Shared Message of Values, Vision, and Performance

Research and poll data suggest that Americans share deeply held values about, and a common vision for, their public schools. Reflecting a strong belief in America as "the land of opportunity" for those who work hard, Americans see public schools as almost a "right," an engine of opportunity for individuals. Public schools ensure that every child has equal access to a good education and thereby give every child a chance to succeed.

Americans also believe that public schools provide concrete benefits for our nation good public schools help develop productive citizens who contribute to a strong economy. They say that strong public schools are an essential component of healthy communities. And, because all kinds of students attend public schools, young people can learn to respect others and "get along in the real world."

Yet Americans also want reassurance about their public schools. They want to ensure that schools champion certain important shared values. They want schools to set clear expectations for parents and for responsible student behavior. They want to see greater financial accountability and transparency. And they want to know that employers find students well prepared for work.

America's schools do, in fact, reflect shared values in both their mission and their activities. Public schools are accountable for the wise use of taxpayer dollars; they work hard to direct funds to effective programs for student success. Educators can serve the public better if they more clearly and publicly discuss what schools do in these areas and if they find additional ways to demonstrate how the values, vision, and performance of their schools respect and reflect the aspirations of the public.

Building Relationships: 7 Steps

1. **VALUES.** Connect the shared values most important to Americans – hard work, persistence, personal responsibility, and mutual respect – to your public schools.

What to Say

- ❖ Americans share many common values. Among them are hard work, persistence, individual responsibility, and respect for others. Our schools reflect these values and embrace their teaching as a core part of our mission.
- ❖ For children to become productive members of society, we must teach them the value of hard work and persistence and the need for respectful and responsible behavior.
- ❖ Our goal is to give students the skills and knowledge they need for their individual success and well-being. This includes teaching them to work hard and behave responsibly and respectfully toward others.

What to Do

- ❖ Talk about your school's successes in terms of values. For example, when talking about specific programs, emphasize that, in addition to teaching students specific academic skills, your programs instill the values of hard work, persistence, and responsible and respectful behavior.
- ❖ Test scores are important. Parents and the public consider them one indicator of quality, but they also seek information about "the intangibles" of schooling. Americans care about many aspects of schools that cannot be measured precisely: the dedication of teachers; students who are happy in school and eager to learn; a school environment that is welcoming to students and parents and conducive to serious learning. Be sure to include "softer" indicators of good schools in your discussions of policies, practices, and results.

2. **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE.** Reassure the public that schools take the issue of student discipline seriously. Do not underestimate the importance of Americans' demand for discipline and respectful behavior in schools. Many are concerned about the day-to-day misbehavior that disrupts learning for everyone.

What to Say

- ❖ Respectful and responsible behavior by all students is the first prerequisite to successful learning. It is also the key to success in all aspects of life. Our students need to know the difference between right and wrong, and parents must be partners with us in helping teach these important lessons.
- ❖ Students can't learn and teachers can't teach when a small number of students persistently disrupts classrooms. Classroom disruptions cheat everyone, which is why we address them promptly and firmly.
- ❖ Respectful and responsible behavior should start at home, but our schools have a clear obligation to do all they can to reinforce and insist upon this behavior among students.

What to Do

- ❖ If you have a code of conduct, talk about it throughout the year. Publicize it widely in and outside the school building. Post it on the school Web site. Have teachers discuss it with students in class. Send it home for parents to read, sign, and return. Condense the main points into a one-page document that can easily be duplicated and distributed at meetings. Publish "rules reminders" in your newsletter occasionally.
 - ❖ If you don't have a code of conduct, develop one with the involvement of parents, students, teachers, and other school staff. If your code needs revision, involve the community in the process.
 - ❖ Explain your school's specific approaches for promoting positive behavior, good study skills, self-discipline, school safety, and respectful and supportive relationships among students and staff.
 - ❖ If you have policies and programs to combat bullying, violent or disruptive behavior, or illegal drug use, talk about these with parents in terms of teaching students the importance of personal responsibility and respectful behavior.
3. **ACADEMICS.** Talk about teaching "the basics plus," connecting this with students' preparation for a successful future. Americans strongly emphasize the need for public schools to teach "the basics," but for them, this includes problem-solving skills and preparation for life-long learning and a productive future (jobs, vocational training, and/or college).

What to Say

- ❖ We teach the basics. It is our core mission. But in the 21st century, the basics encompass more than just the three Rs. Students must be prepared for success in a job, training program, or college when they graduate high school; develop the skills for life-long learning; and learn to get along in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.
- ❖ We insist on the basics because they are essential to all other learning. Students must be able to read, write, and do math so that they can then go on to learn literature, science, social studies, and technology. They need the basics to pursue their dreams and interests, wherever they lie.
- ❖ Our schools are preparing students to read, write, and do math because those skills are the bedrock of their education. But they are also preparing students to succeed at their chosen vocation and to thrive as responsible citizens in their communities.

What to Do

- ❖ Be specific in talking about your reading, writing, and math programs, whether for young children or adolescents. Don't describe the details of the program; instead focus on what students will gain from the particular approach you're using.
- ❖ If you have adopted specific reading, writing, or math programs, post a brief description of each on your Web site and include it in your newsletter.
- ❖ If you have recently adopted new instructional programs, consider holding parent forums to introduce these to parents and the community.
- ❖ Discuss how your schools are preparing all students for future success, including your vocational programs, college prep, and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs.

4. BENEFITS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION: Describe public schools in terms of the concrete benefits they provide for individual children and for society.

What to Say

- ❖ **Benefits to Children:**
 - ❖ High-quality public schools give every child from every family the chance to learn the skills they need to be successful in life. Public schools are open to all and enable our children to go as far as their talent and hard work can take them.
 - ❖ Free public schools give every child the opportunity to succeed.
 - ❖ Most Americans who have worked their way out of poverty have been educated in public schools.

- ❖ **Benefits to the Community and the Nation:**
 - ❖ If kids get a good education, they are more likely to become productive members of society.
 - ❖ Healthy communities need strong public schools.
 - ❖ A strong national economy requires good public schools to develop new generations of productive employees, good citizens, creative entrepreneurs and innovators, and effective leaders in all fields.
 - ❖ America needs the best efforts and accomplishments of all our people. That's why we need to come together to support every public school.
 - ❖ Without free public schools, problems like crime and welfare dependency would get worse.

What to Do

- ❖ **Demonstrate success with individuals.** Schools at all levels give awards to recognize student achievement and outstanding efforts in a variety of areas. Tell stories about students who have won awards or scholarships; who have excelled in music, the arts or sports; and who have made a contribution to the community. Consider including brief feature articles on these students in the newsletter, on your Web site, or in other communications.

- ❖ **Encourage business leaders who support your schools and are familiar with your students to speak up.** For example, employers can describe how the students they hire for summer jobs and after graduation are well prepared, hard working, respectful, and responsible.

- ❖ **Ask students to tell their stories.** Students can give compelling examples of how their schools are giving them an opportunity to succeed. Showcase graduates who have gone on to success. Ask former students to speak at a PTA meeting about how they benefited from their school experiences and then publicize this in your newsletter.

- ❖ **Demonstrate your school's commitment to educate every student who comes through its doors.** For instance, describe academic programs that assist English Language Learners, students with disabilities, students with special talents in specific subjects, and high-achieving students.

- ❖ **Highlight efforts that boost student academic achievement.** If your district has adopted a new reading or math program, provided tutors or extended day programs for students needing extra help, or developed new programs to help boost student achievement, mention these specifically.

- ❖ **Demonstrate student success with numbers.** Improved test scores, lowered dropout rates, higher graduation rates, and more students continuing with higher education all serve as evidence of your school's ability to foster success for students.

- ❖ Highlight how schools contribute to healthy communities. If you have partnerships with community agencies, businesses, or volunteers, talk about these to illustrate that your schools are an integral part of the community. If your students do community service or volunteer work, talk about their efforts and how they contribute to a healthy community.
- ❖ Gather and use quotations from those who benefited from the services.
- ❖ Invite the community to see what your schools are doing. Hold events or activities that bring community members into schools so they can learn about school programs and performances, as well as how they can help support your schools. Issue invitations to community leaders and the media.
- ❖ Don't forget to acknowledge – publicly and frequently – those who support your schools, be they local business leaders, clergy, parents, or representatives of other community organizations.

5. PUBLIC INFORMATION. Give the public information – and be sure it is the right kind of information. The public wants information that lets them judge overall school performance, but parents want information about how their own children are doing.

What to Say

- ❖ We believe it is important for parents and the community to know how our school is doing, about our successes and our shortcomings, and how we continually work toward meeting high standards and sustaining a great school for our students.
- ❖ Our schools are succeeding in [insert appropriate item: raising test scores, reducing dropout rates, increasing the number of our students who go on to further vocational training or college, etc].
- ❖ We are also facing challenges. We need to improve our [insert appropriate item: reading scores, graduation rates, etc.] and we are working hard to do so. We ask parents and the community to support us and work with us on these challenges.

What to Do

- ❖ Start with school staff. Make a point of keeping them well informed about progress and challenges. Be sure they understand the implications of test scores, new programs, and other changes taking place in the school and district. They are often on the front line and should be prepared to answer questions, too.
- ❖ Provide a written progress report on your public schools at least yearly; send it through the mail. Also make copies available in school offices, and post it on the school or district website. If you have an e-newsletter, highlight some items from the report in it and tell readers where they can get more information or a full copy of the report.
- ❖ Keep the report simple and straightforward. Focus on only a few important items, such as test scores, discipline codes and policies, parent involvement, updates on staff qualifications and achievements, and technological and other resources.
- ❖ Explain to individual parents what achievement test scores mean for their children. Use a letter or standardized form that can be modified to explain results for each individual student. Be prepared to meet – or have teachers meet – with parents to explain scores and answer questions.

- ❖ Talk about what school-level test scores mean for your specific school and students. Although parents may have a generalized interest in how the district or state is doing, their real concern is with the schools their own children attend.
- ❖ If you have an e-newsletter, make sure it goes not only to parents, but also to local officials and leaders of groups like the local Chamber of Commerce, clergy council, and other organizations with whom you work in the community.

6. ACCOUNTABILITY. Demonstrate your commitment to fiscal accountability and transparency by showing how school funds are spent.

What to Say

- ❖ As parents and taxpayers, as well as educators, we work to ensure that school funds are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.
- ❖ It is part of our core mission to be responsible stewards of public funds and to be fully accountable for what we spend and how we spend it.
- ❖ We deploy our resources where they count most: in the classroom, with your children.

What to Do

- ❖ Talk about fiscal responsibility in addition to test scores, academic issues, etc. Make clear that schools' financial information is available to the community.
- ❖ Help parents and the public understand where school dollars go by breaking down costs into concrete items. Show how money is spent to support specific activities, materials, and staff positions that benefit children. Parents want to see money going to support their children's education in the classroom.
- ❖ Post your annual budget and audit on your Web site and let people know they are available there.
- ❖ If you have figures that can document a "return on investment," such as improved reading scores as a result of a new reading or early-childhood program, improved behavior from anti-bullying programs, or other such measurable results, use these to illustrate how school expenditures are contributing directly to student success.
- ❖ List the qualifications of your teaching staff (years of experience, advanced degrees, special training, teaching awards, etc.) in the school directory, on your Web site, or in your newsletter, so that the public can see that money is going to support high-quality teaching in your district.
- ❖ Consider profiling outstanding teachers regularly in your newsletter or on your Web site. If you are required by NCLB to notify parents that students are taught by a teacher who does not meet the law's "highly qualified" teacher requirement, use the opportunity to profile your entire school staff, their accomplishments, and programs in place for ongoing professional development.

7. PARENT INVOLVEMENT. Acknowledge that parent involvement begins home and express appreciation for parents who prepare their children to learn and behave respectfully and responsibly in school. Invite parents to be partners with schools to ensure that children succeed. Offer ideas for how parents can support their children's education.

What to Say

- ❖ When it comes to their children, parents are often more powerful than they believe. Parents can use this power to shape their children's behavior so they can succeed in school – by teaching them respect and responsibility, by encouraging them to work hard to learn, by showing a consistent interest in their schoolwork, and by celebrating their accomplishments.
- ❖ Parent involvement is critical to our students' success. We know this begins at home, with parents teaching their children to behave respectfully and responsibly. We reinforce that in our schools to create an environment that fosters learning.
- ❖ We need parents as our partners to ensure that every child can succeed in our schools. Parents play a vital role in their children's educational success.
- ❖ Schools can't do their jobs without the involvement and support of parents. We encourage parents to help at home and at school. We welcome parents' ideas and suggestions.

What to Do

- ❖ Describe how you support parents' efforts to help their children succeed. Assist parents in understanding the curriculum and homework assignments. See that messages are returned promptly, teachers are available to talk with parents, and school meetings and events are scheduled at times that permit parents to attend. Then publicize these efforts with parents and the community.
- ❖ Download *Tips for Parents: 35 Things You Can Do to Help Your Child Succeed in School* from the No Child Left Behind section of the Learning First Alliance Web site (www.learningfirst.org). Turn this list into a flyer or booklet to distribute to parents at the beginning of the school year and at meetings and events during the year. Publish several tips in each edition of your newsletter.
- ❖ Create "parent-school compacts" that spell out how you expect parents to support their children's education and what parents should expect from the school. Send these home for parents to sign and return.
- ❖ Publish a list of events for parents on your Web site, on hall bulletin boards, and in the newsletter throughout the school year.
- ❖ Work with parents to develop a list of volunteer activities, by school levels. Create a clear "job description" for each activity and give the expected time commitment (i.e., 2 hours per month, on an as-needed basis, etc.). Post this on your Web site and publish it in the newsletter twice a year. Provide the name and phone number of someone for parents to contact.
- ❖ Highlight parent volunteers at meetings, in the newsletter, or on your Web site. Invite parents to share tips with you about how they support their children's education; publish these on your Web site and in your newsletter. Aim to show the many ways in which parents and families serve as teaching partners in children's education.
- ❖ Make it easy for parents to ask questions, broach concerns, and offer ideas. This could include promoting the PTA, setting up a suggestion box, and encouraging parents to submit notes through teachers.

The Learning First Alliance

The Learning First Alliance is a permanent partnership of 12 leading education associations with more than 10 million members dedicated to improving student learning in America's public schools. We share examples of success, encourage collaboration at every level, and work toward the continual and long-term improvement of public education based on solid research. The goals of the Learning First Alliance are to:

- ◆ Ensure that high academic standards are held for all students;
- ◆ Ensure a safe and supportive place of learning for all students; and
- ◆ Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high expectations.

Member organizations:

American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Council of Chief State School Officers

National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Education Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association