

Home-school connection

Teacher guide

Families and caregivers expect students to learn to speak clearly, to listen carefully, to read with purpose, and to write powerfully. They are delighted when they see progress. Both teachers and parents know that closing the loop in their communication can have a positive effect on a student's performance. Both know that a team effort is needed, and each appreciates having the other as a partner.

This section contains tools to support efficient and effective communication with families and caregivers: 1) around student achievement, 2) around independent reading, and 3) around the publishing of student work. Included at the end are sample templates for emails or letters to send home to families.

Enlisting support for student achievement

A simple phone call is the perfect way to open a line of communication between parent or guardian and teacher. An email or letter can serve just as well. The purpose of this opening communication is:

- A.** To establish communication early, in a way that is positive and substantive.
- B.** To solicit useful information about students.
- C.** To obtain or confirm the mode of communication you will use throughout the year.

A quick comment about a student's positive traits is the perfect way to set the tone for the rest of the conversation. Make notes of any specific concerns that a parent might have during this initial, brief conversation.

Another good way of establishing communication is to send out a bulk electronic message to the parents, asking for a simple acknowledgment to verify their messaging address. For the ELA teacher, an online space can keep parents abreast of what's happening in their child's classroom. Many teachers establish a class website where they post this type of information.

Whether via a class website or through personalized communication, make sure to explain to parents and guardians how the class operates and how they can support their children's learning at home. Explain that students will be expected to read regularly, write often, share their ideas, and receive encouraging, instructive feedback. The following are specific suggestions you can share with families.

Class activity: Reading

- Support: Explain to parents that reading is the most common homework assignment and that the first, most essential thing they can do to help students is to carve out a time and a place every day for sustained focus and concentration.
- Support: Explain that, although the multiple choice questions that accompany Solos (independent work or homework) generally come with a “check answer” option, you are more interested in a student’s thought process than whether he or she got the answer right. Families can engage in ongoing conversations about reading to help students develop their comprehension skills. Families can start these conversations by asking students what they think about the characters, what they find engaging or confusing, and what they think the writer is saying about society.

Class activity: Writing

- Support: Send parents a screenshot of how you comment on student writing. Point out the principle of focusing on what is working, not what isn’t, and building skills from there. Remind parents that the key to improvement is fostering their child’s confidence to experiment and take risks with their writing.
- Support: Give parents three or four phrases that they can use when they review a piece of writing to focus attention on the skills students are developing.
 - You created a clear picture in my mind when you wrote _____.
 - I liked when you used the word _____ because _____.
 - I see what you mean about _____ when you write _____.

Another important thing to communicate to parents is an explanation of your grading process. The Amplify ELA curriculum involves a constant stream of performance assessments. Teachers are encouraged to examine the results of students’ efforts by tracking student progress in specific habits and skills in their daily work. At regular intervals teachers will grade an essay, which will require writers to use the skills that they have been explicitly taught through the Amplify ELA curriculum. You decide to emphasize performance, production, or both, and you select which components of the rubrics to use for grading purposes. Establish and communicate this grading policy early, so expectations are clear.

Your district and school will also want to communicate changes in the curriculum and provide information about California Common Core State Standards (CA CCSS) and the California ELA/ELD Framework. You should share links to websites that describe the CA CCSS for the grade level you are teaching so that families can become familiar with them. Your district should provide resources for communicating to English Learner (EL) parents in their native language.

Enlisting support for independent reading

You want your students to see reading as a daily, fun activity. However, independent reading is also a serious, lifelong pursuit. A love for learning can begin if parents or guardians help nurture it at home.

Communicate the goals and structure of the program. Explain the guidelines for choosing books in terms of challenge-level and reading widely across genres and cultural perspectives. Share the student Reading Tracker as a way to promote diverse selection, but let parents or guardians know their children are free to make choices—and they can help. Parents can browse the Amplify Library with students and use the printed lists that break down the collection by areas of interest. When reading begins, encourage family members to ask their children: “What are you reading?” “What did you notice in the part you just read?” “What questions do you have?”

Another important principle to communicate is that you want students to “see themselves,” (to see their background or their interests, for example) in what they read in school, and independent reading offers that opportunity. Make sure parents understand that the primary language or home dialect of English is understood as an important resource for academic success. Independent reading can be a bridge between the home and school environments by allowing students to choose books that both build important literacy skills and reflect their home culture and language. After the independent reading routines are established, encourage parents to help their children select books from the home, school, the Amplify Library or local library.

Independent reading, by nature, is highly personalized, which is why it is important to open an individual line of communication to each student. Students will use the Reading Tracker document (in the Appendix) to record book choices, next book possibilities, weekly page targets, various written reflections, and the territory covered to date in terms of the genres and cultural perspectives of books read so far. This line of communication is easiest if each student is able to use the Reading Tracker digitally, and share this document with you and the parent or guardian—as a Google Doc, for instance. The Reading Tracker can then become an instantaneous point of reference if you need to follow up with students who are not reading regularly.

Enlisting support for students to publish

Since you want to reinforce that a writer’s job is to communicate with an audience, look for ways to publish student work to a broader audience. Posting a “spotlighted” piece of student work on a school website or within a principal’s digital newsletter will involve more readers. Parents and caregivers can be a source of ideas. Solicit ideas from families so you can distribute student work to people outside of the school.

Model letters

The templates below are provided as guidance for communicating with parents via email or online postings. The first offers ideas on how to support student achievement. The second informs parents and caregivers about the classroom independent reading program and asks for their support. The third letter asks for help in finding opportunities to publish student work about specific topics of study.

Template: enlisting support for student achievement

This particular template is divided into three aspects of enlisting support for student achievement: information and support for extending student learning at home, information about the CA CCSS, and information about assessment and grading. Teachers should add, delete, or change details depending on class, school, or district requirements.

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

I am confident that your child will progress and show growth as a reader and writer during this school year. During class time, students read regularly, write frequently, share their ideas, and receive feedback that is encouraging and instructive. I look for growth over time in daily assignments in order to determine where I can offer intervention and enrichment activities to best support the next steps in your child's learning. You and I are partners in this effort so I am writing to encourage you to extend your student's learning at home and to let you know the ways through which your student is assessed.

Information and support for extending student learning at home

You can definitely extend your student's learning at home by supporting a love of reading. Helping your child select books that interest him or her and discussing what he or she is discovering will help your child develop into a mature and engaged reader.

Most of your child's writing will be done in school. However, ask your child to tell you about a particular reading or writing activity that he or she found challenging or thought-provoking. If your child has a device at home, ask him or her to share that particular activity. When you examine a piece of writing together, and your child is using a quote in his or her writing, say, "Tell me why you chose this quote and what it shows" or "What idea are you trying to convey about this quote?" To support reading comprehension, begin a conversation about the reading they are doing in class. Ask questions such as "What do you make of the characters and their decisions?" "What is most engaging and most confusing?" or "What ideas does the writer raise about society?" Even more than checking multiple choice responses from their Solo (homework) assignments, this ongoing conversation will support students in developing reading comprehension skills.

Information and support for informing families about standards

The work that your child is doing is designed to be both challenging and engaging. It is aligned to the CA Common Core State Standards, the CA ELD Standards, and to the CA ELA/ELD Framework. These standards are extensive, but focus largely on 1) the student's ability to use evidence from texts, and 2) challenging students to work with complex texts and using rich, non-fiction reading to build content knowledge. The CA Standards emphasize using evidence from texts in writing, and answering text-dependent questions in reading.

Here are a few more ideas for how we can work together to support learning aligned to the CA Standards:

- If we look at the Grade 6, 7, 8 ELA Vocabulary Standards, we see that students are to “Consult reference materials (dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses) both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning or part of speech.” At home, you can encourage your child to look up word meanings and to use new words in conversation.
- If we look at the Grade 6, 7, 8 ELA Writing Standards, we see that students are to “Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.” Middle school students have a lot of opinions. Ask them to support their statements and ideas from what they have read or have heard. Ask them for evidence.
- For more extensive information about the CA Common Core State Standards, please go to ____ [insert link to the CA Standards or to district or school resources on how they are being used].

Template: Enlisting support for independent reading

This template informs parents and caregivers about the classroom independent reading program and asks for support. Teachers should add, delete, or change details depending on class, school, or district requirements.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Like you, I want your child to read extensively on his or her own and to see reading as a way to learn about things he or she cares about. During class time, students regularly read in an independent reading book, share ideas about the text, and receive feedback. Each student receives individual attention, encouraging him or her to develop the stamina needed to read and enjoy a challenging text. Dedicating this time to supporting independent reading engages students and motivates them to read more and to read more deeply. Along with reading during class time, I expect students to read outside of class for two hours a week—roughly 20 minutes over six nights. Some nights, reading in their independent reading book is the homework. Other nights, students are expected to read in addition to other language arts homework.

I encourage you to begin an ongoing conversation about this independent reading. Help your child select books that interest him or her. [Provide any online resources from your school or district or information about libraries students can use.] If you have Internet connectivity at home, browse the Amplify Library with your child and help him or her to choose books or try reading books together. Discuss what your child is discovering in these books. When you talk with your child, ask: “What are you reading?” “What did you notice in the part you just read?” “Is the main character someone I would like or not?” “What questions do you have?” Check in with your child about his or her reading goals.

I have set up a system in class so I can encourage and monitor your child's progress with his or her independent reading. [Identify your system with details such as: students give at least one book talk per term, post at least two reviews, leave comments for at least three other students, and so forth.]

These are the two or three dates each month [identify dates] when I will use class time to have a conference about independent reading or when students will give book talks. I will follow up with students who are not reading regularly and/or completing their Reading Tracker and will update you as needed.

If you have any questions about our independent reading program, please feel free to text/email/call me. [If you have a school librarian, include him or her as another resource.]

Sincerely,

Template: Enlisting support for publishing student work

This template provides a model for sharing student work with parents and caregivers and asks for help finding opportunities to publish student work about specific topics of study. Teachers should add, delete, or change details depending on class, school, or district requirements.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I am delighted that so many students are writing clear, focused, convincing pieces about _____ [specific part of the text you are now reading] and I want to share a few samples with you. Currently, we are focusing on the skill of _____ [identify skill] in _____ [identify text]. Here is an example of what this skill looks like from one of the students in the class. Note how this student _____ [provide one or two clear descriptions of what you notice the student doing effectively in the sample]. Choose two or three lines that are interesting, maybe from a Spotlight that you are using for instruction in class. Be sure to correct any spelling, punctuation or grammar errors in the student work.

[An example: I am delighted that so many students are writing clear, focused, convincing pieces about changes in Phineas Gage. Students are focused on selecting relevant evidence while reading the beginning of *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* by science writer John Fleischman. Here is an example of what this skill looks like from one of the students in the class. Note how this student chooses one direct quote from the text to support his idea and then explains how the quote demonstrates that Phineas has changed.

Another thing that showed how much Phineas has changed was, "The new Phineas was unreliable, and at times downright nasty. He insults old workmates and friends. He spouts vulgar language in the presence of women" (20). Before the accident, Phineas was very pleasant to be around. Now, he is not at all pleasant, because he makes fun of his friends.]

When students see the impact of their writing on a real audience, they want to become increasingly more powerful writers so they can impact even more people. I am always looking for authentic ways for students to be published. I wonder if you have ideas for places where your child and his or her classmates' writing could be published. We are studying _____ [identify texts or topics or skills] over the next few weeks. If you can think of places where students' work could be posted, displayed, or seen and appreciated by others, please let me know. Of course, the student's writing would be edited so that the written work is clearly understood by those who read it.

All the best,