

How to Engage Parents

Parents know personally the importance of graduating all students with the knowledge, experience and skills necessary to prepare them for college and careers. It is their kids we're talking about and all parents want their children to have bright futures no matter which path they choose. The world, and what's required to succeed in it, has changed since parents were in school, so you may need to educate them in order to enlist their support. If you do, parents can become the most powerful advocates for college- and career-ready (CCR) reforms in your state.

About the Audience

Parents have the greatest influence over the choices that students make about their future and will rightly have strong opinions about curriculum and graduation requirements. They will be the ones helping students finish homework and prepare for college, so winning their understanding and support is critical.

The Message

Preparing students to take their place in the world is challenging – no one knows that better than a parent! The knowledge and skills that are needed to enter college and careers today are different than those required 10 or 20 years ago. Parents have their children's best interests at heart, and it is to those interests that your message must appeal. For parents, the key messages are:

- *Expect more:* The world your child will enter is different than the world you entered after high school. They need different skills and knowledge to succeed. The more you expect from your child, the more he or she will learn and succeed.
- *Partner with educators:* Be a partner with the school. Teachers and school administrators need your support – and you need theirs. Together, you can help your child achieve.
- *Get involved, stay involved:* When parents are actively involved, kids do better in school, so you should get involved and stay involved.
- *Be supportive:* Create an environment at home that enables your child to succeed. Listen to them and support them.
- *College- and career-ready reforms leave all opportunities open for your kids:* The new reforms, such as the Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards, college- and career-ready graduation requirements, are about providing a solid foundation for all kids so all doors remain open after they leave high school.

The Strategies

Talking to parents about what's best for their children can be a sensitive subject. You should stick to the facts and relate the CCR requirements to real world expectations and situations.

Strategy 1: Talk to Them

Parents have a lot on their plates. They have jobs that demand a lot of their attention, they have family and social commitments, and, frequently, they have other children with their own needs. Their time can be very limited so, they need help and they need the facts in a straightforward, simple format. Here's some of the information you can provide to help them help you and their children:

- *Why a college- and career-ready education is important:* Create fact sheets that explain the importance of college- and career-ready knowledge and skills – and how they will help their children succeed.

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- *What your state requirements mean:* You might already have high expectations in place. You should clearly explain, requirement-by-requirement, what the expectations mean – and how they are relevant to building college- and career-ready skills.
- *How do others feel about CCR policies:* Give parents information on how school and elected officials feel about the CCR agenda. You can create a legislative scorecard to explain policymakers’ positions or a report card to show them where your school officials stand on the issue.
- *Latest news and updates:* Ask parents for their email addresses and send them a regular newsletter with updates on the CCR initiative or relevant CCR policies and programs, such as the Common Core State Standards. Or create an online forum that allows them to communicate in real-time with you for the latest news and answers to questions.
- *Stay in touch:* Whether through a newsletter, new fact sheets, social media or events, stay in touch with parents, making sure that they have the information they need to support their children and the CCR initiative.

Strategy 2: Help Them Talk to Their Children

Contrary to what you may believe, high school students seek advice from their parents more than friends, teachers or anyone else. So, make it easy for them to talk to their kids about college and career readiness. Tools for helping parents talk to their kids about the importance of college and career readiness include:

- *Basic informational materials:* Create pamphlets, brochures, Q&A’s and other basic informational pieces that parents can give to their children to explain the college- and career-ready agenda from their points of view. Put it in terms they can understand, for example, how the mathematics requirements will help them go to the college of their choice or help them get the job they want.
- *Checklists for Success:* Create checklists that parents and students can work through together to help them map out their college and career coursework as well as set their college and career goals and plan for both.
- *Workshops and other events:* Sponsor “how to” workshops at which parents and students are invited to come learn more from you and from their peers. Walk them through the checklists and invite in speakers from local colleges and businesses who can tell them how college- and career-ready knowledge and skills work in the real world. Part of these events can be formal or informal training around how they can be advocates or ambassadors of the agenda themselves.

How To TALK TO PARENTS

Several state initiatives nationwide are employing effective strategies to talk to parents:

- **MinnCAN (Minnesota)** maintains a blog on Minnesota’s education reform movement and publishes a monthly e-newsletter recapping related news, events, reports and advocacy accomplishments.
- **Foundation for Florida’s Future** informs parents of lawmakers’ positions on education issues by publishing an annual report card on each state congressional representative.
- **Expect More Achieve More Tennessee** has a section of their website dedicated to parents with links parent-focused resources.
- **The National Parent Teachers Association** created guides on the Common Core written for parents, which have been adapted by many state and local PTA chapters and shared at meetings.
- **Education Trust** provides fact sheets informing parents of important education standards and assessments. The initiative also publishes a newsletter exploring the positive and negative trends throughout districts nationwide.
- **Thomas B. Fordham Institute** publishes a regular newsletter to keep parents afloat of education news, trends and research.

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Strategy 3: Engage Them

An important part of gaining traction for a CCR agenda is to engage parents and give them opportunities to engage with each other. Some strategies for parent engagement include:

- **Create a core group:** Ask some of the more energetic and willing parents to be your core CCR committee. These parents can serve as your steering committee and core focus group on issues that you want to explore further. You should make sure you have specific things for this group to do, for example meet with them once a month; ask them to review or write an article for your newsletter or materials; or ask them to help you recruit other parents.
- **Let them connect with each other:** Get together with parents, and let parents get together with each other. Invite local leaders and/or elected officials to come speak to parent groups. Coordinate your efforts with the local PTA. Meeting face-to-face on a regular basis will help create energy for the initiative and keep them engaged. You can also do this online through a blog or discussion forums that allow them to share questions and concerns with each other.
- **Ask them to help you make the case:** Solicit their feedback often and ask them to get involved in advocacy and education efforts. No one, except perhaps a student, makes a better “face” for your efforts than a parent talking about the importance of CCR policies to the future success of their children.

You need to talk to parents. They are highly influential in their kids' lives, and they will be highly influential in your initiative. Help them understand why CCR policies are so important, and help them explain this to their children. With the right materials and strategies, you will gain their support.

How To ENGAGE AND ACTIVATE PARENTS

Several state initiatives nationwide are employing effective strategies to engage and activate parents:

- **Learn More Indiana** provides parents with detailed K-12th grade checklists to help them properly guide and prepare their children for college.
- **Expect More Arizona** developed a 12-page college and career planning guide outlining important measures students should take to succeed while also providing useful college admissions resources for parents to assist their children's efforts.
- **College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC)** offers students individual profiles, so they and their parents may track and file high school, college and career plans. In addition, CFNC has brochures, videos and a quarterly newsletter via GEAR UP to keep parents informed.
- **Chalkboard Project Oregon** runs two blogs on education issues and trends from the perspectives of parents, teachers, thought-leaders and activists. The “Project” also posts videos of various education initiatives across the U.S. to keep parents educated on what are succeeding.