

# Education Matters

May 2012

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation



## Have you noticed the increased attacks on the teaching profession?

The media and many politicians seem to think that many teachers are lazy and incompetent. It's not just an article here or there; it seems to be everywhere! While we are aware that some teachers may be ineffective, isn't that true of any field or occupation? The reality is that the majority of our teachers do a great job. However, it has become such a thankless job that one wonders why any of us ever taught in the first place.

However, I also realize that the teacher blame game has risen out of what I call "The Politics of Education." Interestingly, our politicians and powers that be are quick to proffer their plans to fix education and

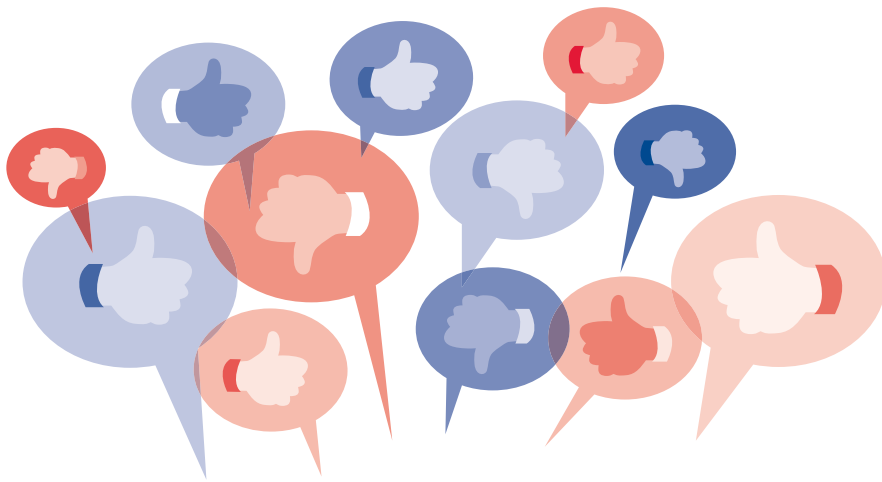
get teachers in line with a bombardment of new initiatives (NCLB, Race to the Top, etc.), more accountability, and the latest in educational programs that will fix education. They dare not place the accountability on flawed initiatives, lack of parental support, or the decay of respect and morals in our culture. Why? Because it's hard to rally support when it requires self-reflection of the general population. However, simply find a scapegoat on which to focus and they will get endless support for funding with very little scrutiny of their actions.

We are all aware of the emphasis placed upon standardized testing. While instru-

ments to check the progress of students are needed, it seems education is more about test taking than actually educating students. One reason for the pervasive use of these tests is that they are relatively easy to administer on a wide scale, which is no small matter when dealing with a large population. However, the problem with placing so much emphasis on testing alone is that too much authority is vested in these tests. The results of testing can determine the way programs and initiatives are developed, what is being taught, and the climate of teaching and learning. They shape legislation and the funding policies of public agencies. Basically, they drive the government's control of the purse strings to education. Those strings are used to make teachers dance like puppets rather than being treated like professionals.

Presently, a major focus in education is on teacher training. While teacher training for specific areas of need may be helpful, the reality is that most of the training is simply preparing teachers for new programs that will be implemented. These aren't workshops that focus on teaching or leadership training but rather on how to implement the latest reading or math initiatives. In fact, workshops are rarely developed that are of real interest or actual need to the teachers.

Another problem is the inconsistencies within school districts as well. Millions of dollars are spent every year trying the latest reading or math programs, which replace the ones implemented within the last year or two, which also costs millions of dollars. Some school systems change literacy or math programs more often than they change their lunch menu. How effective can a reading program be when a program such as SRA is used one year and the next year a school changes to a



program like Soar with Reading? Here again, any teacher training is used to prepare them for the new program.

Yet the powers that be are seriously going to blame the teachers? It's no wonder teachers don't typically speak up for themselves; they are too busy trying to incorporate all the different programs, initiatives, methods, philosophies, and curriculum into a school day without losing their minds!

On top of all of this, now there is a renewed buzz over the education systems from top-performing countries. I have recently received several links from people about articles on the greatness of the Finnish education system. Finnish educators are speaking throughout the U.S. about their effective education system. Now, I am not putting down any other country, and I think teachers in any country should be appreciated for the wonderful work they do everyday. However, before we shut down our schools and send all of our children to Finland, let's see how the two really measure up. First of all, Finland has a grand sum of 540,000 students. In comparison, the U.S. has more students (573,000) identified as Intellectually Challenged than the total number of students in Finland. In fact, the U.S. has more students in special education programs (6.1 million) than the total population of Finland (5.4 million). By the way, the U.S. has over 81 million students!

The students in Finland are also a more homogenous group. Ninety percent of the Finnish population actually speaks Finnish. In the U.S., only 70 percent of the popula-

tion speaks English. If these percentages are used to break down student population, then approximately 486,000 of the 540,000 students in Finland speak the native language. In the U.S., 57 million of the 81.5 million speak the native language. Even a conservative estimate would mean that over 20 million students don't speak English.

Remember the buzz about Singapore math? Here again the powers that be look to another country because they must do things better than our teachers. Singapore has about the same student population as Finland (532,000). Singapore does have a more diverse population than Finland. However, in Singapore, students with disabilities are not required to attend school, and there are no public schools for students with disabilities. This means that students with disabilities are not included in their educational statistics.

So, trying to compare our education system with any other is not like trying to compare oranges and apples but is more like trying to compare a diverse overcrowded classroom with a private one-on-one tutoring session. No other industrialized country can compare to the size, ethnic diversity, or social-economic diversity of our student population. The U.S. is a melting pot with over 337 languages spoken or signed. This includes over 20 different languages spoken by at least 250,000 people for each language.

Now if all of that wasn't enough, let's examine what I believe to be the underlying reason that teachers have become the scapegoat of education. The federal government has made education a centerpiece of poli-

tics because it is a topic that is important to everyone, so it benefits them to keep it an issue for increased funding. Why do you think that all political parties (Democrats, Republicans, and Independents) use education as a staple in their campaigns? You probably can't even remember the last politician who wasn't going to fix education and, more specifically, hold teachers accountable.

As politicians call for more money to fix education and specifically to improve teacher quality, let's look at their track record. The March 2011 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report identified overlap and fragmentation among 82 distinct teacher quality programs and 47 separate job training initiatives, representing a taxpayer investment of roughly \$22 billion. Education committee chairman Kline, U.S. House of Representatives, has explained that there are more than forty duplicative and unnecessary K-12 education programs.

Seriously, how can there be 129 teacher and training initiatives and 40 (K-12) programs that are now considered unnecessary or duplicative? And at a cost of nearly 22 billion dollars? This does not even take into account the fact that the Department of Education has actually failed its annual audits on multiple occasions. Hundreds of millions of dollars have never been accounted for in the past decade.

The politics of education can be dangerous if you are not informed. However, the evidence is clear. Teachers have little or no voice in the overall functioning of education. Billions of dollars are wasted each year on programs and initiatives that don't have any real impact on teaching and learning.

All the while, teachers continue to endure the attacks while often spending money out of their own pockets to make sure the students have a creative, relevant, and engaging learning environment. Imagine, billions of dollars wasted and yet teachers spend hundreds of dollars each to make learning come alive for their students. The irony is that while teachers are considered the problem with education, they actually make the most impact.

When we peel away “The Politics of Education,” we are left only with the teacher. My dear friend comedienne Mary Dimino has said it best. “Teaching is where a connection was made; a spark was lit. A gap was bridged between traditional learning and the realities of the world. It is here that the student will realize the relevance of education and will take ownership of his learning. Teaching means leaving a piece of yourself in the development of another. And the student is where we deposit our most precious treasures.”

Teachers aren’t the problem with education. Teachers are the very reason that education succeeds at all. ■



Dr. Brad Johnson has over fifteen years of experience in public schools and at the collegiate level. Dr. Johnson’s educational certifications include science, educational leadership, instructional supervision, and teacher support specialist. Because of the diversity and extensive nature of his education background, Dr. Johnson has a unique perspective as it relates to education. His roles have included classroom teacher, administrator, curriculum developer, and scholarly researcher. Besides his experiences as a teacher, curriculum director, and administrator, Dr. Johnson has served as an accreditation committee chair. He developed and supervised a formal mentoring program. He has chaired committees for curriculum development at the middle and high school levels. Click here for more information about Dr. Johnson.



Tammy Maxson McElroy has over twenty years of experience in the educational field. Tammy’s certifications include language arts, science, and mathematics. Her roles have included teacher, department chairperson, grade-level coordinator, and mentor, and she has served on committees that addressed the development of curriculum, textbook adoption, and admission test design, as well as schoolwide behavior and discipline policies. During her time in public schools, Tammy served on a county-level committee to develop testing policies for one of the largest school systems in Georgia.

# Public School Class Size

## One Member’s Thoughts By Joani Enfield

As a current public school teacher, I have strong opinions about class size and why its policy takes on different meanings in traditional public schools as opposed to public charter schools. While I am not opposed to charter schools, I think that both sides of the coin should be addressed.

In my experience, one of the main differences is the fact that in a charter school, the students experience more parent involvement and, in turn, become more disciplined. This is a factor because the charter schools have a right to refuse students who experience constant behavior issues. In public schools a lot of times we have less parent involvement in a situation in which many pupils simply attend their “zip-code” school. Schools in my district are unable to say No to students seeking to enroll, and as a result, we must take on students with extremely varied backgrounds and circumstances.

Furthermore, the government continues to raise the bar, yet does not address the needs involved with engaging students on a high level. They keep putting more and more students in a classroom. With only one teacher, it is nearly impossible to take the time needed to sit with the students who really need help.

Additionally, parenting trends have degraded the value of education, in my opinion. Instead of discipline, parents are often too busy being their child’s friend. They are giving them what they want, when they want, no matter the cost. This

degrades student learning, the perceived value of a dollar, and the ability to respect what they have. Instead of classes full of respectful pupils in kindergarten, educators are tasked with teaching baseline skills, like sharing and manners.

Take, for instance, my classroom. I currently have twenty-six kindergartners who are primarily learning English as a second language. I am expected to teach these students to behave, make friends, get along in society, read and write all twenty-six letters and their sounds, read 50-100 sight words, rhyme words, write a story, count, add, subtract, and much more. Many of these students are not only experiencing a classroom setting for the first time, but also many are a mere four years old.

Whatever happened to finger painting, playing with play-dough, socializing, and nap times? In my opinion, we are raising a society of people who do not know how to socialize with their peers without the use of the computer and social network sites. We are putting way too much emphasis on academics at too early of an age.

My concluding thoughts are that we need to go back to the basics. Starting at home, the parents need to teach their children how to have self control long before they step inside a classroom. Lastly, districts should not advance students who aren’t performing well. All parties should be held accountable: students, parents, and teachers. ■

Joani Enfield is an educator and AAE member. She lives in Nevada.



## The University of Southern California Rossier School of Education Launches Teacher Resources

By Sarah Fudin

The USC Rossier School of Education's online Master of Arts in Teaching program, the MAT@USC, has entered into partnerships to produce two websites as resources for teachers across the country and around the world with questions about certification. The websites seek to engage teachers in new and interactive ways while providing them with the requisite information on how to become a teacher and better serve our children.

### Certification Map

Certification Map is a one-stop-shop for all your teacher certification questions and needs. With an easy-to-navigate landing page that sports a map of the United States, both current and aspiring educators can easily cull all the details relevant to securing and maintaining teacher certifications in all fifty states. The site even includes information for those interested in teaching abroad in countries such as China, Japan, Germany, South Korea, and the United Kingdom.

In addition to the technical details about applications and testing, Certification Map also features germane information about teacher salaries and answers to frequently asked questions about becoming an educator. The site's blog is filled with content that future teachers can use on their paths to becoming instructors (such as "Top Michigan Schools for Teachers") and content from which current teachers can learn a great deal (such as "How to Increase Your Teacher Salary").

Teachers, education professionals, and career services professionals alike should use Certification Map as a tool to guide, advise, and support today's teachers and the teachers of tomorrow.

### Teach.com

Like Certification Map, Teach.com hopes to be an invaluable resource for instructors and any other professionals who work alongside or support our country's education system. Teach.com covers the Why, Who, What, Where and How of teaching, making

it the consummate informational site for any current or soon-to-be teacher.

The Why section of the website offers inspirational materials and other information on the national demand for better educators, and it covers the tangible benefits and salary incentives that give teachers further reason to teach. In the Who section, the site delivers anecdotal and empirical data about what types of people choose to teach. The website stresses that great teachers have knowledge, goals and personality; these attributes are highlighted on the "Meet Great Teachers" page where Teach.com focuses in on some truly amazing educators, and the traits and experiences that have brought them to where they are today. Under What, Teach.com provides a comprehensive outline of the responsibilities that are expected of teachers. The Where and How sections offer information akin to that which can be found on Certification Map; any logistical questions regarding certification and testing, and the differing standards between states are listed in order to help teachers find their way.

The Teach.com blog delivers content that revolves around the world of teaching at large. Whether it's an education news roundup or a spotlight on how a teacher is using educational technologies in the classroom, the blog offers great pieces that allow instructors to connect and learn from one another.

Whether you're interested in becoming a teacher, are already a veteran teacher, or are working as an education professional, Teach.com is a resource and a guide for you. ■



Sarah Fudin currently works in community relations for the University of Southern California's Master of Arts in Teaching program, which provides aspiring teachers the opportunity to earn a master's degree and teacher certification online.

**M**aintaining classroom order depends upon the teacher's ability to maintain his own state of inner order, which can be described as a state of authentic peace and poise.

Some students are quite skilled at "psyching" teachers out of their peace and poise and into a state of insecurity.

These bossy or defiant students effectively trigger the teacher's insecurity by creating classroom disorder with impunity.

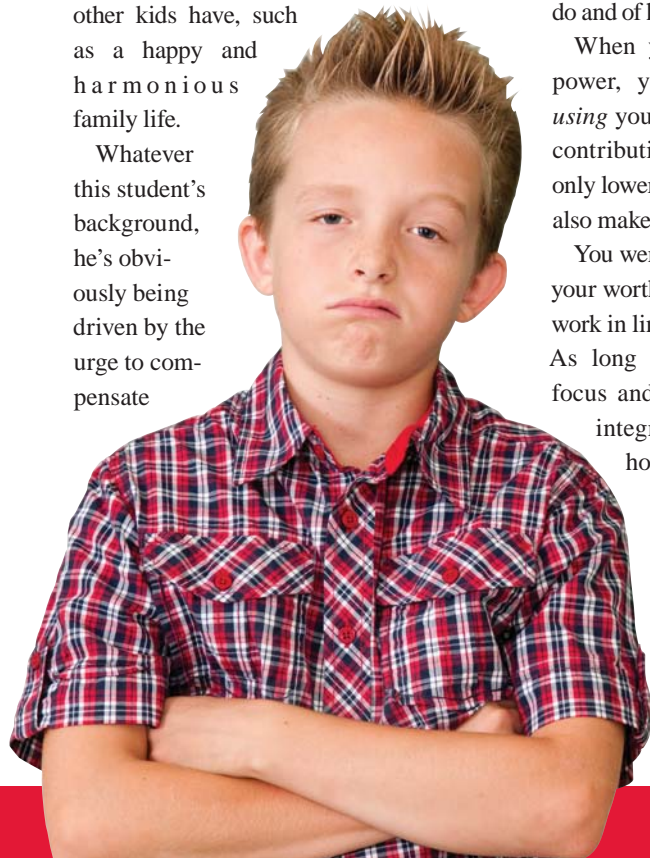
An extreme example of this is the seventh grader who recently tried to disempower and intimidate his teacher by taking over the class.

His teacher felt publically humiliated and was stunned into speechlessness as the precocious 13-year-old brazenly stepped in front of the class, explaining that he was the one in charge now.

Understanding where a behavior like this is coming from can empower a teacher. One probable motivation behind the student who tries to run the room is the student's need to regain the sense of power and self-respect that someone has stolen from him.

He may be getting bullied at home. He may feel intensely deprived of something that he thinks all of the other kids have, such as a happy and harmonious family life.

Whatever this student's background, he's obviously being driven by the urge to compensate



for an inferiority complex

that has been programmed into him.

When we understand the motivation behind a student's behavior, we can come up with a way to satisfy the motivation that effectively defuses the student's drive to use inappropriate behavior to get what he is after.

In the midst of classroom chaos, though, it can be hard to play child analyst. It is easier to let our emotional reaction get the best of us. And yet, that may be the most *important* time to maintain self-control.

You encourage the disruptive student to press *your* insecurity buttons when you become insecure in reaction to the actions he uses to usurp your power. The moment you start trying to *prove* your power you stop really *being* powerful and begin giving your student more power *over you*.

The reality is that the only one who *really* has to believe in your power is YOU. Your results in the classroom depend upon what YOU say, think, feel, and do, not upon what another says, thinks, or does.

This does not mean, of course, that the interests and opinions of your students do not matter. It means that your concept of yourself is a critical cause of how well you do and of how others see and relate with you.

When you worry about *proving* your power, you are being distracted from *using* your power to make a real, positive contribution through your work. This not only lowers the real value of your work, that also makes your work unfulfilling.

You weren't hired to prove your power or your worth. You were hired to do your best work in line with the needs of your students. As long as that remains your primary focus and intention, you will act in real integrity, which ultimately brings honor to oneself.



Bob Lancer presents motivational seminars and inspiring keynotes on team building and leadership development for teachers, school support staff, administrators, and students.

For more information, see his websites at [www.schoolsupportmotivation.com](http://www.schoolsupportmotivation.com) and [www.wisie.com](http://www.wisie.com).

To recognize exactly WHAT is truly needed from you, though, you need to maintain your peace and poise. Just by remaining calm, you discharge the student's incentive for trying to take your power because you are showing him that his efforts are not working.

Beyond that, self-confidence is one of the pillars that uphold competence. You have to feel secure about yourself to do your best work, to make the best decisions, and to access your highest level of creativity and problem-solving ability.

If you maintain your composure, you can be most effective at coming up with ways to help your students feel as powerful and in charge as they need to feel, while preserving the classroom order necessary for successful teaching to take place.

The simplest method for doing this involves giving the student a voice. Take time after class to help the student clearly articulate what he really needs from you to feel secure, satisfied, respected, and supported.

Having calm conversations in which you discuss things clearly and without antagonism creates a positive bond between teacher and student that may defuse any possibility of future conflict. It can also help you to better understand how to satisfy the student's legitimate need for a sense of power, control, and self-respect. ■

## Dealing with Bossy Students

By Bob Lancer



# High School Teacher Creates New Educational App

A Maryland high school math teacher has launched an educational app for the iPad that allows students to add their own notes and markups to teachers, Word, PDF, and PowerPoint files without the need to convert those files to another format.

Kevin Giffhorn had the idea for the eNotebook app, which he says is the first app of its kind, roughly a year ago—around the time he saw iPads starting to make their way into education.

“Everyone was having to adapt their files,” said the Carlisle, PA, grad whose first teaching job was also at Carlisle High School.

Struck by the possibilities of an app that would allow for quick and easy access to a variety of files, as well as note taking, Giffhorn founded WeLearn Educational Software and commissioned the Silicon Valley company IndiaNIC to develop his idea into a working app.

“It’s just really neat working with them and seeing something that I wrote down on paper and had in my head... become a workable, usable app,” Giffhorn said. “It’s kind of amazing still that no one’s done it yet, but it’s nice to be first.”

After three months of beta testing by K-12 and college students, the app went live in Apple’s App Store last month for \$4.99.

The basics of the eNotebook app are simple. Students can take a teacher or professor’s presentations, whether they are created in Word, PowerPoint, or PDF format, and add their own notes or markups to them just as if they were working with a hard copy—whether that means writing a formula or date in the

margins or highlighting an important piece of information.

What the eNotebook app does goes beyond its basic functions, however. There are numerous possible implications of such a software program.

**“It allows the kid to focus more on the actual learning.”**

While other parts of the classroom have changed—such as blackboards being replaced with interactive whiteboards—the notebook has not, Giffhorn explained.

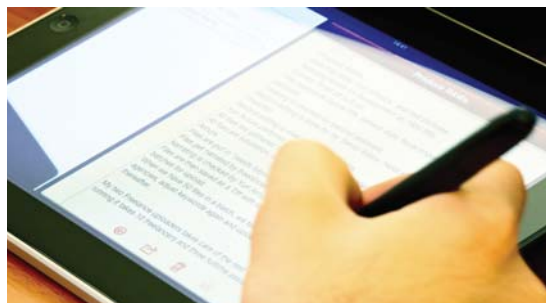
“My students are still using the same three-ring binder their grandparents used,” he said. “I really believe my app will be able to move my students into the twenty-first century classroom.”

Eventually replacing binders and notebooks with tablets and software like the eNotebook educational app could improve student organization and simply reduce the weight of student backpacks.

“It’s going to save kids time from writing down everything on the board because they’re going to be using the teacher’s pre-configured notes and just adding their own notes to it,” Giffhorn said. “It’s one less thing for the kid to have to do. It allows the kid to focus more on the actual learning.”

Such a tool could be especially useful for those students with learning disabilities who have a hard time copying notes from a board, the teacher added.

“I would love to be a part of the movement to change the classroom,” he said. “As the iPad starts getting accepted more into traditional education, I am hoping my app is one of the flagship apps that goes along with it.”



If interest in the app is any indication, Giffhorn might see his hopes become a reality. Schools and universities from as far away as Ireland and California have contacted the high school math teacher about his educational app.

“I knew this wasn’t going to grow overnight, but it’s moving in the right direction,” he said. ■

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# 20 TIPS

By Elena Aguilar

## for Developing Positive Relationships with Parents

In our busy day of juggling papers, lesson planning, and managing sometimes more than a hundred students, we teachers can easily forget the group that could lend significant support in our charge as teachers—parents and families. Consider these tips for improving connections with this valuable group:

### 1. Smile When You See Parents

Greet them. Most parents only occasionally interact with teachers so make sure that at least 90 percent of your encounters with them are positive, warm, and friendly. The impressions left from fleeting encounters in the hallway last a long time.

### 2. Learn Their Names

If you have a self-contained class, learn how the parents like to be addressed and how to pronounce their names correctly.

### 3. Declare Your Intention

Tell them that you want to partner with them, that you appreciate their support, and look forward to working together.

### 4. Communicate Often and in Various Forms

Provide information about what's going on in your class (weekly would be ideal): what students are learning, what they've accomplished, what you're excited about, what they're excited about, and the learning and growth you're seeing. Suggest things they might ask their children such as what they learned last week about meal worms, or to read you the haiku they wrote.

### 5. Make a Positive Phone Call Home

If you have a self-contained class, call all homes within the first couple of weeks and then at regular intervals throughout the year. If you teach many students, identify those students who perhaps need a positive call home.

### 6. Lead with the Good News

Give positive praise first when calling parents or meeting with them to discuss a concern. Every child has something good about him. Find it. Share it. Then share your concern. Adhere strictly to this rule.

### 7. Find a Translator

If you can't speak their language, seek a translator for at least one parent conference and/or phone call. For obscure languages, you can sometimes find a refugee center or other public agency that can help. Reach out to those parents as well; do whatever you can to connect.

### 8. Your Language is Powerful

It communicates an awareness that there are many different kinds of families. Be careful not to assume a mother is or isn't married. Learn to ask open-ended questions and understand that sometimes parents/guardians might not want to share some information.

### 9. Ask Questions about the Child

“What kinds of things does he enjoy doing outside of school? Who are the special people in her life—family or family friends? What do you think are her best characteristics? What was he like as a little boy?” Demonstrate an interest in knowing your student.

### 10. Listen to Parents

Really listen. They know a whole lot about their children.

### 11. Smile at the Child

When talking to a parent in front of a child, smile and make eye contact with the student to demonstrate that you care about him. Recognize what he has done well in your class in front of the parents. Then share a concern, if you have one.

### 12. Invite Parents to Share

Distribute a survey at the beginning of the year (if parents don't read or write in English, students can interview them and relay their answers). Find out what parents know and what skills they have. Invite them in especially if it connects the curriculum and content. Let them share with you their cultural traditions, interests, passions, skills, and knowledge.

### 13. Let Parents Know How They Can Help

Many want to help but especially as children get older, parents aren't asked for help as often and don't know what to do. There's always some way they can help in the classroom.



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Presorted Standard  
 US Postage Paid  
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 Laguna Niguel, CA

*Education Matters* is a publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF)

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★ *20 Tips for Developing Positive Relationships with Parents continued*

**14. Be Very Specific**

Provide ways parents can support their children at home: Help your children with their math homework by asking them to explain how they got an answer, or ask your children to make predictions. This strengthens reading comprehension.

**15. Be a Broker of Resources**

If they share a concern, be prepared to point them to a direction where they can find help. If you share a concern (“Your daughter spaces out and doesn’t pay attention”), be prepared to suggest what the parents can do.

**16. Explain Your Instructional Decisions**

Take the time to do this and help them learn about the education system if they’re not familiar with it. Help them understand what you’re doing and why.

**17. Invite Parents to Participate in Making Some Decisions**

Invite their input, give them information that will help them form an opinion, and listen to their conclusions.

**18. Thank Parents**

Both individually and publicly for their support, perhaps in your weekly newsletter. Recognize what they do to help your class and how it’s impacting students.

**19. Share Every Success**

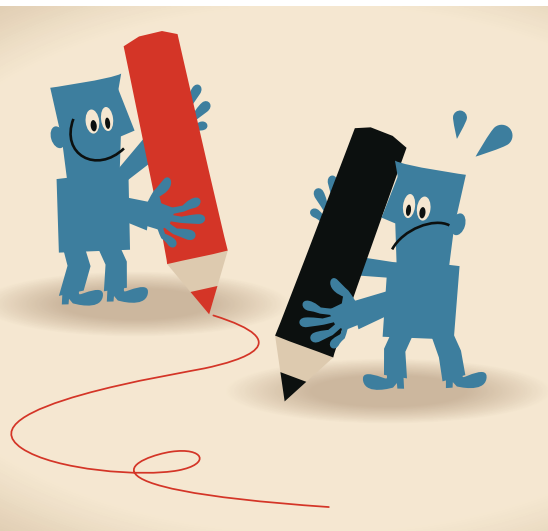
Let parents know what their children are doing well, what academic skills, social skills, or knowledge they have mastered.

**20. Invite Parents to Celebrate and Break Bread Together**

Communities are strengthened when people come together in celebration. Start the year with a potluck. Share food and stories about food. We all bond over food.



A former teacher and instructional coach, Elena Aguilar is now a transformational leadership coach in the Oakland Unified School District.



# You Speak Out: Write for AAE!

Do you have strong opinions about an education policy issue? Are you implementing a new program in your classroom, school, or district that you would like to share with your fellow members? Write an article for the Association of American Educators!

AAE is constantly looking for new material to share in *Education Matters* or on the AAE blog. We would love to hear from real classroom teachers and members interested in sharing their experiences. Whether you are interested in class size, teacher choice, education reform, cutting edge curriculum, or anything in between, don't hesitate to contact AAE's editorial staff. Email AAE today at [Editor@aaeteachers.org](mailto:Editor@aaeteachers.org) with your articles or ideas.