



# Would Every Family Choose You?

## CUSTOMERS MAKE PAYDAYS POSSIBLE

I began my career as a band director and enjoyed every minute of my time teaching and making music with students. As a teacher of music, I taught elective classes. Students were not required to take my class and, if it didn't meet their needs or if their interests took them in different directions, they would drop my class. I learned very quickly that recruitment and retention were my keys to success. As a former superintendent once said to me, "Remember, Mr. Constantino, customers make paydays possible."

A free, public education, for the most part, has always been the only plausible option for most families for a long, long time and is a cornerstone of our democratic society. Every child has a right to an education, and the vast majority of us have taken advantage of this right. Alternatives have always existed, but the percentage of families who would or could take advantage of these options was a small minority.

## Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles

That is all changing.

There is some debate as to whether or not public education is a right of citizens, good for society, or has simply become a broken idea. Of late, others promote that education is now a commodity. While there is no direct payment for public school services, there is still payment, both in dollars and in societal good, by everyone. With a slight stretch of the definition of *commodity*, it could fit quite well, given the direct competition between public education and the growing number of options open to families with regard to educating their children.

Public education is but one of a number of options open to families who no longer make assumptions or automatically enroll their students in public schools merely because they live in a particular neighborhood. The concept of educational options to families is not a new one, but the availability of these options to a wider range of families is. With the advent of online learning options, the landscape of educational choices is changing, and it is changing quite rapidly.

In my second book, *Engaging All Families: Creating a Positive School Culture by Putting Research into Practice* (2003), I borrowed an idea from a wonderful book titled *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, by authors Glenn and Nelsen (1988). In their book, they argue that every parent wants their children to exceed them in their quality of life. Given the complex world in which we live and the financial realities of a postrecession economic society, most families instinctively fear that this will not occur. As a result, they are driven to help their children prosper in any way they can, and for many, the path is the best education available to them.

## ACTIVITY

### Reflecting on Why

There is a difficult albeit important question that every educator must ask themselves: If families truly have a choice as to where their children will receive an education, will they choose our school district? Our school? My classroom? If your answer to this question is unequivocally yes, then you must ask yourself the logical follow-up question: Why? Why would families choose your school? Why would families choose your classroom or you as a teacher? What is it that is so compelling about your product that a customer will choose it over the growing list of options?

It might be difficult to think of providing an education as a product or service, and it might be more difficult to consider it as an option in an ever-crowded marketplace. Some educators scoff at the idea that education is a business and that we serve customers. There is not enough space here to continue the debate as to whether students are customers or products; both or neither. I've heard it argued just about every way.

If families truly have a choice as to where their children will receive an education, will they choose our school district?

When I suggest that we need to learn better customer service in education, I sometimes am plastered with sentiments that suggest that my audience does not agree. More often than not, thank goodness, we inherently understand that customer service is a cornerstone of our continued successful existence. Family engagement and customer service go hand in hand.

I often challenge schools and districts to consider the questions about choice. Then I challenge them to consider taking an action that could very well send a powerful message to families: Not only do we care about their children but we also understand that there are choices and we are grateful that they choose our product.

## An Idea: We Appreciate You—A Way to Set the Stage to Engage Every Family

If you are looking for a quick way to build trusting relationships, consider this one.

Anybody who flies a great deal listens to endless announcements on the aircraft before they take off, as they fly, and as they land and taxi to the gate. In the myriad of announcements, there is always one that goes something like this: "We know you have a choice in airlines, and we appreciate your choosing us. We hope you will continue to choose our airline in the future."

I have listened to an iteration of this statement more times than I can count. Interestingly, even though I have had more than my fair share of delayed and canceled flights, postponements, and cancellations due to mechanical maladies and other types of issues that cause mayhem in my travel, I stay loyal to one particular airline. Why? Why, when I have so many choices, do I continue to support the airline with which I have been affiliated? Is it convenience? Do I want the air miles that much? Am I on a quest to finally get upgraded to first class? Or do I believe at some level that this particular airline truly *values* me as a customer?

(Continued)

(Continued)

My preferred airline stays in constant communication with me before, during, and after a trip. They want to know my experiences and every time—every *time*—I have responded with a concern, I have received a response. That's impressive. Even more impressive is their communication when they know a problem has occurred and they want feedback as to how they have handled the situation. They even monitor social media for customer dissatisfaction and respond accordingly.

What if we apply this idea to *our* business? At some point, ask every employee of a school district, from the superintendent through the teachers to the support staff, to choose one family at random and call them on the phone. When they answer, simply say:

*Hi, my name is [ . . . ] and I am calling from [school/district]. I just wanted to take a minute to thank you for choosing our [district/school] to educate your children. We know you have a choice in how to educate your children, and we appreciate your choosing us. We consider working with your children and your family a privilege.*

Don't say another word. Just listen. Think about the responses you get.

That's it. That's the whole purpose of the message. You simply want your customer to know that you value their decision to use your product/service. Consider for a moment what would occur if every family in your school or district received this call. There would be an exponential increase in relationships and trust.

Every person who makes a phone call like this from your school district should report his or her experience. Was the message received positively? Negatively? As a result of the phone call, did we learn anything about the student or their family that will help us? How can we modify our service to meet the needs of our families in a better manner?

These are all important questions that lead to the ideal of engaging every family. What do you think would happen? What kind of responses do you think you would get? What message will families take away from this simple effort? You won't know unless you try it.

## EVERY OPPORTUNITY IS A MARKETING OPPORTUNITY

Consider for a moment a world-famous soda pop company. If I shared the name with you, it would be instantly recognizable. The

name of this company and their brand are listed as one of the most recognizable products on the *planet*. That is saying something!

My dear friend and family engagement researcher and expert, Dr. Karen Mapp, often shares a story about this company and how they would pay handsomely to have audiences similar to the ones we get at school events. It would be their marketing dream to work with a captive audience to sell their product or elicit feedback about their product. Yet, we do little to market or elicit feedback for our product when we have these gatherings of families.

When we have families together and listening to us, we should take that opportunity to sell our product to them and explain the meaning and relevance of their child's education to them. We also need to create a culture that helps families share their feedback in a manner they perceive to be both safe and constructive. Maybe we should begin to think of these gatherings as sales opportunities.

If public education is indeed a commodity, then the concept of attracting and retaining customers is not that far-fetched. If you do not believe in the commodity idea, then there is still no harm in helping every family understand why you are the best.

## SOME IDEAS TO GET STARTED

The most difficult part of any experience is actually making the decision to begin. All of us have made commitments to making changes that often fall short. On New Year's Eve, many of us resolve to bring a renewed energy and focus to goals in the coming year that have previously eluded us. Sometimes we follow through, sometimes we don't.

The fact that you have this book and you are still reading is an indication that you are ready to start or enhance your efforts to engage every family. It seems appropriate to give you a few things to keep in mind as you get into *Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles*. Over the years and with mountains of feedback from educators everywhere, a few common themes have emerged. They appear below as a way to draw a starting line and can act as guidelines for you as you begin your venture toward engaging every family.

### Keep It Simple

We as educators tend to overthink issues, sometimes to the point of paralysis—we think that change is not worth the time or will not produce the desired result. We take challenges that we face and make the avenues toward potential solutions so complex that resolving the

## Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles

issue seems impossible. We overwhelm ourselves with problems and ultimately become frustrated.

Simply put, we lose hope. We lose hope that we have the energy or power to change anything. We lose hope that things will change regardless of what we do. Let's commit to breaking that cycle. While I would agree with the idea that hope is not a concrete strategy, I would also argue that it is essential to improving organizations. Be sure, however, that hope is not your only strategy.

So, let's keep it simple. Simple translates into more effective action. Breaking down complex ideas into simple ones allows educators with finite amounts of time and resources to actually think and implement the ideas that are presented. Family engagement is not a race. Implementing strategies without the necessary processes and learning will result in little change to your school—or at best, temporary or sporadic change.

You do not have to read this book in a week. As a matter of fact, the longer it takes you to get through the book (assuming you are fully participating in the questions and ideas presented), the more likely your perceptions and actions are changing. As they change, so changes the culture of your school.

*Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles* is designed to be simple—simple to discuss, simple to plan, and simple to execute. There are no herculean efforts or large budget expenditures needed to engage every family. As a matter of fact, engaging families is nearly budget neutral. Imagine that—a way to increase student achievement that is almost free. Worth considering, don't you think?

Simple ideas presented by groups of educators supporting each other almost always result in success sooner or later. If it takes a week, a month, or five years, so what? Measurable progress toward a goal is key. Breaking down the progress into simple, logical steps will keep the notion of family engagement very doable in the minds of just about everybody.

Remember the classic question: How do you eat an elephant?

The answer is one piece at a time. Do not expect that by implementing the ideas learned in this book, suddenly or magically every family will be engaged. Consider that we want to engage families, especially those that are disengaged from us, one family at a time.

## Time and Patience

---

We are conditioned to fix everything now, today, this minute. There is no time to think, to explore, to investigate, to research, to pilot, and to assess. Because of the performance pressures placed on schools

and educators, we have become a group of people wandering around, educational zombies looking for a quick fix to what ails us. Professional athletes spend 90 percent of their time training and 10 percent of their time performing. For educators, it is exactly the opposite. That's a problem.

There are no quick fixes to the significant challenges we face in education. If there were, we wouldn't have the challenges. The necessary investment to engage every family is one of time and patience. There is no magic wand to wave that will suddenly engage the disengaged or miraculously engage every family by the beginning of the next school year. The process is often a slow one.

The best way to engage every family might very well be one family at a time. In one case, a preschool teacher worked with a family for over a year before the comfort level rose to the point where a relationship could be established.

The best way to engage every family might very well be one family at a time.

Having patience with families, especially those that have been traditionally disengaged or disenfranchised from our schools, will unquestionably support any effort to reaffirm a commitment to their engagement. Families that are disadvantaged, families for whom English is not a first language, and families whose own school experiences were less than positive all play a role in engagement decisions. These challenges can be overcome. It just takes time and patience.

It is equally important to have patience with educational colleagues who may not see the value in engaging every family. Educators have been made a lot of promises over the years, and many of those promises never materialized. Teachers have become skeptical of educational initiatives, maybe rightfully so. Think of it this way: Family engagement is not an initiative nor is it a new task set in front of you. Consider it the same as doing what we already do but doing it differently, through the lens of engaged families—no new time commitment, no new resources, no new energies, simply doing what we already do . . . differently. Don't think outside the box—blow the box up! Rebuild and reassemble the pieces in a different way.

## **Not More, Just Different**

As a teacher, I remember attending the new school year opening meetings and listening to the leadership share the initiatives for the upcoming year. Over time, the word *initiative* struck fear in my heart. It usually meant that I was going to have to do something else, something new, something for which I may not appreciate the value. I learned to shudder at the word *initiative*.

Family engagement is not an initiative nor is it a race. Family engagement is a commitment to change school culture and, as such,

## POINTS TO PONDER

1. Discuss with your colleagues the time you devoted to implementing a new idea and the amount of time you engaged with the idea before you decided to abandon it.
2. Discuss with your colleagues those ideas and strategies that have proven effective. How long did it take to implement and perfect the ideas/strategies before you saw the success you wanted?
3. What role did the amount of time devoted to the new concept play in its ultimate success or failure?

is ongoing and never ending. It is important to keep in mind that not everyone on a school staff or in a school district will suddenly think that engaging families is a great idea. In some cases, there will likely be strong opposition to the idea—even flat-out refusal.

Consider that the implementation of family engagement philosophies, strategies, and practices is not adding new responsibilities to your already full plate. Family engagement takes into consideration what we already do. It merely requires us to act *differently*—no new time, no new energy, no new resources—simply a remolding of what we already have. To engage families means to look at our practices and procedures through a different lens—the lens of families.

During my years as a teacher and building administrator, I marveled at the sharing of ideas and resources among teachers. When one would get a good idea, others would watch to see the results. If the results were good, they would ask the originator of the idea for the information so they could replicate the success. Great methodology is passed among teachers every day. (We'll delve into this idea a bit deeper in the next chapter.)

Educators, similar to the students we teach, are discoverers of knowledge. When presented with good, solid ideas that they see have positive effects on their jobs, the likelihood of their involvement and support of new ideas grows. Engaging every family and promoting the appropriate culture in a school to engage every family takes time and patience. Be encouraging, nurturing, patient, and steadfast. The results will come.

## We Already Tried That

It is the rare workshop where I offer more than a handful of new ideas to help engage every family. Quite honestly, schools across the country have captured a plethora of ideas and tailored them to their schools and specific situations. I remember one workshop participant a few years ago who said to me, “Yeah, we did the letter and the phone call and the visit and the food and the childcare and the transportation and three people showed up.”

I readily acknowledge that while we continue to find new ways to engage families, especially with technology and social media, most of the great ideas are already out there and have had varying levels of success. So, what is the answer?



It might be time to consider why your efforts, if they were marginally successful, paid so little dividend. Maybe it was the structure or timing of what you did. Perhaps the content didn't resonate with families. Maybe it was the school location that kept families away. Most likely though, the answer lies in the culture that permeates your school. Does everyone value the engagement of every family? How is that value communicated? How do we respond to situations where families do not act as we had hoped with regard to school engagement? What is our response to disengagement? Was the message of your meeting or event meaningful or relevant to families?

Make sure you understand this important fact: No one event or first attempt at engaging every family will bring a thundering herd of families to your doorway. More often than not in communities where family engagement is traditionally low, the successes are small—one family, followed by a few more families, and so forth. If you repeat an event and you increase attendance from three to five people, celebrate that! Don't be discouraged that there were not twenty or thirty people at the event. For many years, I have used this adage: We engage families one family at a time. With time, we hit a tipping point; sometimes it takes a while. Hang in there.

There is another idea about engagement that needs to be discussed. Most of the engagement that impacts student learning happens in homes away from school. I often refer to this as "invisible engagement," engagement you may not see but with which you will see results. This is not to say that workshops and efforts to engage families are fruitless and should be discontinued—quite the contrary. The work we do outside of the home will help promote the efficacy of families when they are with their children and we are not.

In workshops, I usually give the following example of practices that I have witnessed in many schools (including my own!): School staff work tirelessly to create an opportunity for family engagement. They follow all of the appropriate procedures to be an open, welcoming environment and have practiced significant outreach to families. A central idea in the preparation of these events is the notion of its importance. We tend to drive the point home to families about how important it is that they do whatever it is we want them to do (come to a meeting, participate in a workshop, etc.).

When the event occurs and the family attendance is disappointing, it's not what we do next but rather more about what we don't do. We usually are exhausted from our efforts and frustrated with the results. We sulk away and vow never to expend that amount of energy again. We convince ourselves that families are simply apathetic and that our efforts are a waste of time and energy. What we almost never do is follow up with our customer and find out why they didn't attend.

## Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles

Consider this: If we repeatedly hammer into a family's head that taking a particular action is important and, upon their not taking the desired action, we never say another word, what message have we sent? Exactly! Reinforced in the mind of the parent or family member is the idea that whatever it was, it simply was not that important. That very notion erodes trust in relationships between schools and families.

### REALITY, PERCEPTIONS, AND BELIEFS

Understanding that perception is reality for most people underscores the need to carefully examine the belief systems of people and organizations.

Our personal belief systems play a powerful role with regard to our desired family engagement outcomes. Families apply the very same thinking. Their personal belief systems and customs also play a large role in determining their level of engagement with their child's education. Understanding that perception is reality for most people underscores the need to carefully examine the belief systems of people and organizations.

When a decision is made to undertake a course to engage every family or to increase family engagement, a critical first step is to gauge where everyone is on the subject. Later in the book, ideas and activities will be presented to create a culture for engaging every family. (Hopefully, you took the first step before you ever started reading this chapter.)

Can every family truly be engaged? This question has been debated over the years, and as one can imagine, the answers fall along a continuum between absolutely and absolutely not. It might be interesting to know that many urban and Title I schools have proven that 100 percent engagement is possible. It seems that the answer begins within one's own personal belief system.

Facts, reality, and evidence are clear: There is a strong correlation between family engagement and student learning. Not every family is engaged with their child's education. Every educator does not place the same value on building relationships with every family. Families' experiences with their children's schools shape their engagement practices over time.

Not every school welcomes families. Not every family feels welcome in their child's school. Not every family believes that their voice is heard or that their opinions or ideas matter. It will be imperative that whatever your goals in family engagement, you start with a thorough discussion and reflection on your reality, your perceptions, and your present beliefs on the topic. Not spending this time now will most likely result in very little change, if any.

The ideas below are items that should be completed before you venture into the Five Simple Principles.

## WHERE WE ARE

**Directions:** Have each individual member of your team or school answer the following questions independently and anonymously. Compile the answers to see where your starting point is with regard to engaging every family.

1. What do you believe about family engagement?
2. Do you believe that every family in your (classroom, team, school, etc.) is engaged with their child's learning?
3. If the answer to Question 2 is no, then why do you think there are families who are not engaged?
4. If every family in your (classroom, team, school, etc.) is not engaged, would you welcome their engagement?
5. What would engaging every family look like to you?

### FINALLY, THE SECRET TO SUCCESS!

Here is a story that underscores the secret to successfully engaging every family. Read through the story. The point of the story and the secret to success should be clear by the time you finish reading it.

Having numerous issues and stressors in his life, a gentleman made the difficult decision to seek professional counseling. This was a decision that did not come lightly and one that the man debated and rejected many, many times. In the final analysis, though, the man realized that without some assistance, the issues in his life would continue to affect his health and his relationships with the ones he loved. Because of this, he took the large, difficult, and scary step to seek help.

Upon arrival to the counselor's office, the gentleman was immediately put at ease. He was under no obligation to say anything he didn't want to say or take any action he didn't want to take. He was in complete control of the conversation. Almost without knowing it, an hour went by, and the gentleman was asked if he would return the following week. He agreed.

The following week (and several weeks after that) seemed to be a repeat of the first. He talked about all kinds of things, and the individual

### Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles

hours of conversation flew by. After several weeks, he realized he felt a bit better but really couldn't put his finger on why. At his next appointment with the counselor, he decided to ask.

He walked into the meeting, sat down, and asked the counselor the question he had been pondering.

"You feel better because you have discovered the secret," the counselor said.

"The secret? The secret to what?" The gentleman was a bit irritated at the answer given to him.

"The secret to success," answered the counselor. He walked over to his desk and picked up a picture frame and handed it to the gentlemen.

"Please read this out loud, if you will," said the counselor. The gentleman looked at the frame. Inside the frame there was no picture and really no sentence or recognizable word to read. He simply saw the following:

YAGOTTAWANNA

When the gentlemen read it out loud, at that instant, he realized what the word was and what it meant.

"One's personal desire to make a difficult change starts with the very simple idea that we *want* to make the change. Without the intrinsic desire, whatever our goal, it most likely will remain elusive. You have decided to make the change. Therefore, you are." The counselor sat back waiting for a response.

"Yagottawanna, eh?" said the gentleman. "That simple?"

"That simple." The counselor smiled and said not another word. Neither did the gentleman.

The secret to successful family engagement starts with the simple notion that we desire to engage families because we believe that doing so will have a positive impact on the children we serve.

*Yagottawanna*. It really is that simple.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CARING

There is no question that we have many mountains to climb with regard to reforming and improving our public schools. It seems to be a reasonable conclusion, though, that the mountain that is the easiest to climb is the one that convinces families that we care about

their children. Why? Because we do care! I do not recall ever meeting educators who said they simply didn't care about the children they were teaching. Further, convincing families that we care about their children is budget neutral.

The importance of caring is best summarized by another short story. This time, two neighbors, one of whom is a teacher at the local school, are discussing a decision by one of them to move his child from the local public school to a newly organized charter school.

Tom was a staunch supporter of public schools and would be the last one to abandon them. But Tom did just that. Tom removed his children from the local public school and enrolled them in a newly opened charter school. Bill, his friend who was a teacher in the local public school, knew the risks of engaging in a conversation with Tom about his decision but ultimately could not ignore the situation.

"I must admit, you caught me by surprise with your decision about the charter school," Bill said.

"There was a big part of me that was afraid to tell you, given your career and commitment to public schools," Tom responded rather sheepishly. "I want you to know that this was not a decision that we came to lightly."

Bill asked a series of questions to determine the rationale for the decision. "What is it about the education that your kids are getting at their present school that concerns you?" Bill asked. "Or is it a safety issue? I know how much the safety of children weighs on the minds of all parents." Bill thought that if he continued to share potential reasons for the switch, the conversation would go a bit better and he would be closer to understanding the basis for Tom's decision.

"I can't say that I am unhappy with the education my kids are getting. Then again, I really can't judge whether or not what they are getting is appropriate. As far as safety goes, I am more than convinced that the principal and the staff have a good plan for security. I really don't worry about my kids when they are in school."

Bill decided to prod a bit further. "I hear all the time from parents that the lack of challenging curriculum is a real issue. Is that a problem for you?"

"Absolutely not," Tom said. "Sometimes I feel like they are overly challenged and don't have time just to be kids."

"I realize that your kids are tested to death. You do know that the charter schools may require the same kind of testing, don't you?" Bill thought for sure he would hit upon the rationale his friend used to make this decision.

## Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles

"I am not happy about the testing, but I am smart enough to know that the teachers didn't create this situation. We have our government to thank for that."

Bill paused a moment, a bit confused and wondering how he got this far down the rabbit hole of questions without hitting upon the reasons for the move. "So, let me see if I understand this," Bill started. "You are not unhappy with the education your children are getting and you feel the school is a safe place. You are not trying to escape testing or the laws that govern education. I have to tell you, I am at a loss for why you are moving your children. It sounds like we are doing a pretty good job." As soon as Bill heard his answer, it made perfect sense.

"No, it's none of that. It's just that I feel that the charter school will care more about my children than their present school." Bill asked Tom to elaborate. "I need to know that somebody cares about my kids. I never really hear anything about what goes on in school and outside of typed notes about field trips, money owed, and the need for more tissues and hand sanitizer in the classroom, I don't ever hear anything. I go to the conference every year and it's pretty much the same thing—impersonal, scripted, and irrelevant.

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. Reflect on the conversation between Tom and Bill. How did it make you feel?
2. Do you think that this story, which is fictional, could actually occur?
3. Where do you think your school/district is with regard to the issue of caring?
4. What systems could have altered Tom's decision to remove his children from the public school?
5. How do you show families that you care? What more can you do?
6. What ideas can you take away from this story and implement in your school?

"I get a report card with *Es* and *Ss* and really can't tell you what the heck they mean. I guess my kids are doing okay, but I don't know that they are. I don't really trust the teachers or staff to care enough about my kids to tell me the truth or, worse yet, to know if there is a problem. I always feel like teachers are put out when I do call and ask a question. I never get the feeling they really want to talk with me. I always feel like when they hang up the phone, they label me a problem parent."

"Considering that your children have not yet attended the charter school, what is it about the experiences you have already had that makes you think the charter school will be different?" Bill asked, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

"When we called the school, the lady who answered the phone was pleasant and helpful. She asked me my name and used my name throughout our short conversation. Over and over she said how happy she was that we were considering their school. Within minutes, we had an appointment to visit the school."

Playing the devil's advocate, Bill said, "What if you just ran into one friendly person who has been trained in customer service?"

"That would be one more than exists at our present school," Tom shot back. "But it wasn't just the phone call or the information or the visit. From the first phone call, I felt that we were special, that the school staff really wanted us there. What was really amazing is that within twenty-four hours, all five of the people we met, including two teachers, called us to thank us for visiting their school and once again shared their enthusiasm that we might be coming to their school. I have never had this experience in any school my kids attended."

Bill was stunned. Tom's decision to send his children to a charter school had nothing to do with the quality of education or the perception of a safe school environment but had everything to do with whether or not he perceived that the staff cared about his children. It occurred to Bill at that precise moment that this was the real crisis in our educational system.

The importance of caring about the families we serve cannot be overstated. For the Five Simple Principles to truly assist you in your quest, the whole issue of caring must be discussed at the start.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCESS

Strategies without a process produce sporadic and temporary results.

Schools and districts wishing to improve their quality of experiences for staff, students, families, and communities understand that redesigning internal processes of the organization will ultimately lead to improved performance. Schools and districts will need to create processes that are self-sustaining and capable of delivering the required performance objective.

## IDEAS TO PROMOTE CARING TO FAMILIES

1. There is nothing more precious to us than someone using our name correctly. Understand the names of your students and their families, especially if they are different because of blended families. Make every contact a personal contact by using that person's name.
2. When families visit the school, give them two name tags. Allow them to put their name on one and their child's name on the other. You will never have to ask a parent who their child is again. Allowing people to make their own name tags will help you understand how to address them in the future. It also makes life easier for teachers and staff members trying to remember names in blended families.
3. Make your first interaction with a family about them, not about you, your classroom, or the course you teach. Demonstrate your desire to learn about them; their family; their customs, rituals, and challenges; and so forth.
4. Whenever possible, have face-to-face conversations or telephone conversations. In this world of mass communication, much is lost in texts, emails, and 140-character messages.
5. Consider home visits (breathe . . . we'll discuss this in more detail later) to those families who are reluctant to participate.

(Continued)

(Continued)

6. When families are invited to an event, take attendance and pay close attention to those who are not there. Call them and tell them you missed them. Offer to share the information with them in another setting. Do not judge their absence or ask them why they were absent; simply reinforce that the information is important and that you want to share it with them.
7. Smile. Don't allow the few negative experiences you may have had with some families to color your attitude toward others.

I bet you can think of other ideas!  
Write them below:

Available for download at <http://www.drsteveconstantino.com>

We tend to make the time to create the necessary processes for goals and ideas we wish to implement. We often forget the natural dips that occur in organizational effectiveness when we introduce change. Consider Figures 1.1 and 1.2, which help us to understand the implementation of a change.

When we implement a change in an organization, we generally believe that while there may be a few bumps in the road and a few problems to resolve, the change will occur as depicted in Figure 1.1: a slow but steady elevation to our desired state. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case. Change is a messy business. More often than not, it looks more like Figure 1.2.

Change, in any organization, usually plunges some or all of the organization into a chaotic state. More often than not, things get confusing and frustrating before they get better. Then as the change takes hold and the despair turns to acceptance and finally advocacy for the change, the desired state is reached. None of this, however, can be done without explicit processes in place. Strategies without processes do not work.

Figure 1.1

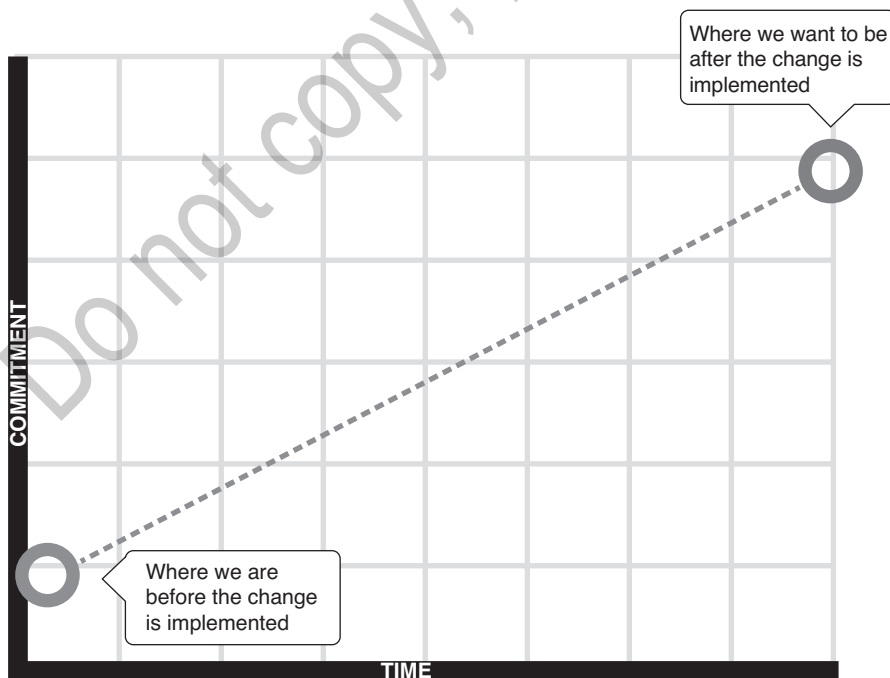
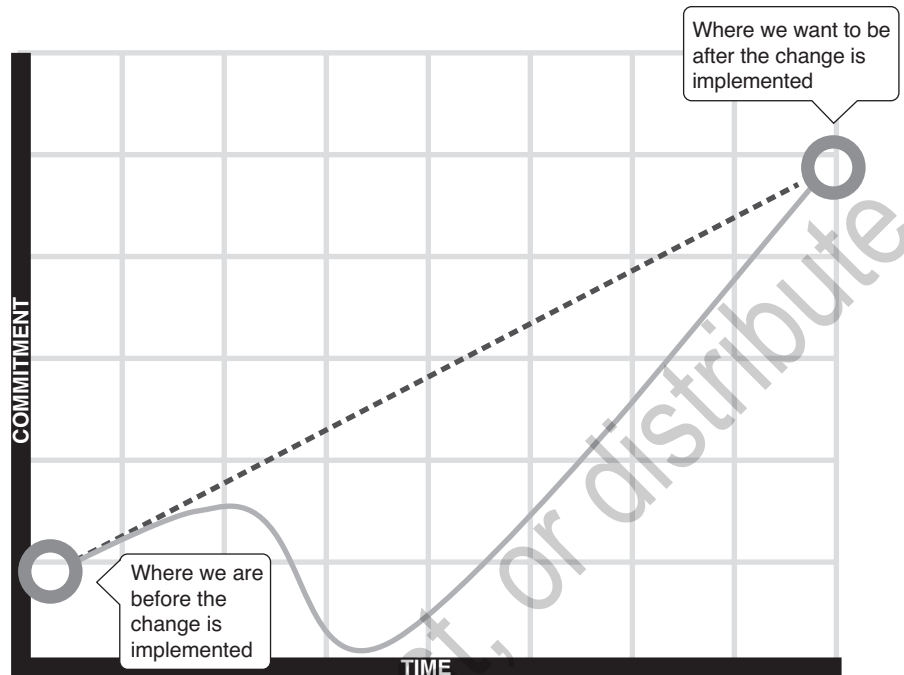




Figure 1.2



## ACTIVITY

### Process Exercise

Spend some time reviewing how you process change in your organization.

1. Is your organization used to developing processes that are measured and evaluated over time? If not, what do you think will have to occur in order to become process oriented?
2. Is the leadership of your organization truly committed to the work of family engagement? If so, how will that commitment be translated to your entire organization?
3. Are you willing to examine the culture of your organization, both the positive and negative attributes, in order to bring about improvement?

## THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

The ingredients to successfully engage every family are as specific as any favorite recipe. Regardless of how well you implement and evaluate your success, if the support of leadership is missing, the recipe will not turn out as expected. Strong, committed, courageous leadership is essential to long-term success.

Several years ago, a question was asked about successful family engagement programs that had been launched in schools around the country. The question was simple: Was there a commonality between those programs that were successful and those that were not? After pondering this question for a while, the answer was clear: Yes. The commonality was supportive and purposeful leadership. Superintendents and central office staff who stood up and set a vision and direction for a school district that was inclusive of families had better results. Principals and building leaders who championed the cause saw more consistent and better measurable results as well.

Of all of the leadership qualities one can possess, it seems that courage is an absolute necessity if leaders wish to engage every family. Changing the direction of organizations and having the will to make changes that can begin as uncomfortable are essential ingredients in engaging every family. Courage comes from facing and overcoming fear. Many people in organizations fear change. Creating the conditions to engage every family will likely be a significant departure from standard practice at your school or in your district.

In many workshops over the years, some teachers and school staff members have approached me to share two specific ideas: First, they want me to know that the concepts and information I am presenting are ones that they believe in and value. The second statement they make is the alarming one. Often, they tell me that they do not perceive that their leadership (district or building) places value on the topic. I have been repeatedly asked what teachers can do to convince leadership that the practice of family engagement is worthwhile and brings about better achievement. My usual response is to persuade them to try the ideas and share the positive results with their leaders as an effort to begin to change the culture.

With these ideas and the notion that families will choose you, the sky is the limit as to your success in engaging every family.