

Story Response Exemplar

Linking Classroom Learning and Family Engagement Through Purposeful Family Communication By: Vidya Sundaram, Family Engagement Lab

Tell us a story...

One story that stays with us comes from our work with elementary schools where teachers wanted to help families better understand what students were learning in class. The challenge was both simple and complex: teachers knew families cared deeply about their children's learning, but families often did not have enough specific information to support that learning at home.

This was especially important because students were engaging with rigorous grade-level texts, academic vocabulary, and complex classroom discussions. Teachers were doing that work every day, but many families did not know what questions to ask beyond, "How was school?" or "Did you do your homework?" For multilingual families, there was an additional barrier. Even when teachers wanted to communicate, language differences could make it harder to build a learning partnership.

Share a Practice...

The practice we used was simple: families received short, curriculum-aligned text messages in their preferred language. The messages were not generic reminders. They were connected to what students were actually learning that week. For example, during a unit connected to history or social studies, a family might receive a message inviting their child to be the "teacher" and explain something they learned. A follow-up message might give the caregiver a simple response stem, like, "I hear you saying that..." so the family had a concrete way to keep the conversation going.

What made this practice meaningful was that it did not ask parents to become teachers or curriculum experts. It assumed that families already cared deeply about their child's learning and gave them just enough information to participate. The messages helped families understand the classroom learning, ask better questions, and reinforce important ideas in the flow of everyday life.

How did the teacher know the practice had worked?

One teacher shared a moment that made the connection visible. Her class was discussing a concept from the week's reading, and one student who had often been quieter in class used a key academic vocabulary word from the family message. The teacher realized that

the student and his caregiver had talked about the learning at home. For that student, the home conversation showed up in the classroom. He had more confidence, more academic language, and a stronger connection to the lesson.

Families noticed the difference too. One parent shared that as children get older, families often know less about what is happening in class. These messages gave her something specific to talk about with her child. Another parent said that when she knew what was happening in class, she could support her child's learning with more confidence. She did not need a full lesson plan. She needed an opening — a topic, a question, a connection point.

The practice was not perfect or magical. One lesson we learned is that access alone is not the same as partnership. Sending messages is only powerful when the content is meaningful, timely, and connected to instruction. Families need communication that respects their time and helps them do something real with their child. Teachers need the process to be easy enough that it does not become one more burden. School and district leaders need to see family engagement as part of instruction, not an extra activity on the side.

The strongest moments came when all of those pieces came together: curriculum alignment, translation, teacher trust, and family voice. The practice worked because it made the invisible parts of classroom learning more visible to families. It turned communication into a bridge between school and home.

Reflection

If I were talking to a first-year teacher about this story, I would say: families do not need you to simplify learning or lower expectations. They need you to open a window into what their child is learning and offer a small, doable way to connect. A short message, a thoughtful question, or a sentence stem can change the quality of a conversation at home. And sometimes, that conversation comes back to school when a student raises their hand, uses a new academic word, and sees themselves as someone who belongs in the learning.