

# **Factors Impacting Positive School–Home Communication: A Multiple Case Study of Family–School Partnership Practices in Eight Elementary Schools in Hawai‘i**

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## **Abstract**

Studies show that effective partnerships between schools and families improve students’ academic outcomes. Schools often struggle to implement effective strategies with low-income families, however. This multiple case study examines family–school partnership activities at eight demographically diverse schools in the state of Hawai‘i and examines successful family outreach strategies that cut across socioeconomic status. Drawing from interview transcripts, which were selectively coded, the study identified successful modes of communication as identified by participants. Overall, participants reported that personalized, informal, and face-to-face communications were the most effective modes of communication. These findings have implications for K–12 teachers’ online communication with families.

Key Words: family–school–community partnerships, family engagement, case study, socioeconomic status, school–home communication, Hawai‘i

## **Introduction**

Over the past 20 years, numerous studies have shown that effective partnerships among families, teachers, administrators, and community entities improve students’ social, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Abrams &

Gibbs, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012; Sheldon, 2003; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). They also improve student attendance, motivation, and self-esteem (Fan & Williams, 2010). However, schools often struggle to design and implement effective strategies to promote partnerships, especially with minority and low-income families (Daniel, 2015; Emerson et al., 2014; Schmitz, 1999; Soutullo et al., 2016). This may be related to teachers' perceptions of parents as lacking knowledge (Guo & Kilderry, 2018). It may also be related to the link between poverty and other factors including stress, crowded housing, unemployment, limited access to transportation and cultural resources, illness, and isolation that make parenting harder and more stressful (Schmitz, 1999). This stress has been shown to compromise parent and child relationships (Van Oort et al., 2011).

Although parents from minority and low-income backgrounds might have the will and understanding of the need to engage, they sometimes lack the confidence, capacity, and resources of middle class parents (Curry & Holter, 2019; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). They may also be alienated by school practices, particularly if they come from minority or immigrant cultures (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2001; Valdès, 1996), or they may have different understandings of the responsibilities of schools versus parents based on cultural expectations (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Trumbull et al., 2001).

Finally, discourses around parents from low-income backgrounds as “incompetent” or “in need of help,” often based on middle-class values, reinforce existing educational inequalities (Sime & Sheridan, 2014). Relationships may be shaped by teachers' deficit assumptions that minority and low-income parents place a low value on education (Bryan, 2005; McAlister, 2013; Yamauchi et al., 2008). Parents may have different understandings of the responsibilities of parents and teachers (Ratliffe, 2010), or they may not understand the behaviors of school personnel (Trumbull et al., 2001). Studies have shown that these biased preconceptions can be overcome when teachers interact with parents (Yamauchi et al., 2008) and when they include cultural perspectives in their interactions (Ryan et al., 2010).

Differential access to online technology has further stymied educators' abilities to reach out to minority and low-income families. The digital divide, referring to the gap between those who have and do not have consistent digital access, has been identified as a key obstacle to family involvement (Dolan, 2016; Guernsey, 2017; Noguerón-Liu, 2017). According to one study, 33% of low to moderate income families do not have high-speed home internet access (Guernsey, 2017). This digital divide has the potential to further erode family partnerships and students' educational progress.

Researchers have taken varied approaches when studying partnerships around education. Epstein's (2011) seminal work in the 1980s and 90s identified ways that parents could participate in their children's schools. She developed six types of involvement that ranged from parenting, learning at home, and communicating to volunteering, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Although her early work has been criticized as being too schoolcentric (Auerbach, 2012) and for ignoring the importance of culture (Trumbull et al., 2003), these typologies help to operationalize parent involvement and remain widely used by many researchers who study family-school partnerships (Yamauchi et al., 2017). This article focuses on the dimension of communication.

Recently, researchers have moved beyond school-managed structural opportunities for parent involvement to a focus on the quality of relationships among teachers, parents, and administrators and on more collaborative partnerships in educational decision making (Kim et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2012). Structural forms of family engagement include those activities that can be measured quantitatively without an examination of the quality of actual relations. While structural activities provide one measure of family engagement, they sometimes fail to capture the extent to which families feel they can communicate with the school, how well families understand what is going on at school, or how happy they are with the school.

Researchers have identified communication as one of the most important variables in promoting positive family-school relations (Gartmeier et al., 2016; Park & Holloway, 2018), and studies show that students do better in school when parents and teachers communicate frequently (Learning Coalition, n.d.). Open, two-way, or transactional communication has been found to best support student success (Kim et al., 2015), particularly for migrant families (Schneider & Arnot, 2018). School communication, whether written or oral, succeeds when it is welcoming and positive (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001) and makes families feel valued (Learning Coalition, n.d.). In addition, researchers have noted the importance of formal and informal communications and recommend that schools create opportunities for both in order to build trust (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Given that communication is central to promoting family-school partnerships, Bakker et al. (2007) suggested that further research on parent engagement is needed for a better understanding about what actually happens between teachers and parents during their communications.

Scholars have found that while face-to-face communication can be critical when relaying personal, sensitive information (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011), both online and face-to-face communication have advantages and disadvantages (Qiu & McDougall, 2013). Although scholars agree on the importance of bidirectional communication in forging family-school partnerships, research on

the relative importance of face-to-face versus online communication has not been explored in scholarship on school–family relations or in K–12 education. Our study sought to understand the types of communications that promote quality partnerships between schools and parents.

The importance of school–family online communication has only increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic when most schools were forced to move to instruction online. The sudden move online “intensified concerns about the digital divide” (Jibilian, 2020, para. 4); students who did not have their own mobile devices or who lived in homes without broadband access experienced difficulties getting access to school. Meanwhile, parents were asked to shoulder more educational responsibilities than ever before, increasing the need for communication with their children’s teachers.

### **Research Questions**

We sought to understand the following:

1. According to stakeholders, how important is face-to-face communication in establishing quality relations between families and schools?
2. How effective do stakeholders perceive online communication to be in promoting quality relations between families and schools?
3. What family–school partnership communication strategies are perceived to be effective in both high and low socioeconomic contexts?

In seeking to understand which modalities best promoted quality relations, this study examined stakeholders’ perceptions of various modes of communication and sought to understand the relative importance of face-to-face versus virtual exchanges.

### **Theoretical Lens**

This study is rooted in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2007), which called for understanding individuals in their larger social contexts, including their schools, families, cultures, and nations, all of which contribute to the growth of children. Rather than attempting to understand individual students based only on their immediate circumstances in a certain time or place, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory posited that a complex system of dynamic factors influences each child. His theory described the microsystem, which is the child’s immediate surroundings such as family and school. The mesosystem describes how those contexts interact with each other and includes family and school interactions. The exosystem includes contexts with indirect effects on children such as parents’ workplaces and larger influences such as government and culture. Finally, the chronosystem includes time, recognizing that children grow and contexts change. While

all of these contexts are important to children’s development, the microsystem of family and school affects children most intimately. Family partnerships fall into the mesosystem and affect how the family and the school work together to support each child. Bronfenbrenner’s work highlighted the importance of working with families without portraying families in a deficit manner (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

## **Methods**

This qualitative multiple case study draws from (a) interviews of three different types of stakeholders, (b) observations of various school events, and (c) existing, publicly available data about each school to examine how the schools developed their partnerships with families. In order to corroborate and increase the accuracy of our findings, we calculated the frequency of certain responses, documented the regularities and peculiarities of responses, and rated the intensity of responses (Reams & Twale, 2008).

### **Setting**

All schools in the study were located in Hawai‘i, a state with a high proportion of immigrant and multilingual families and a high disparity among socioeconomic status (SES; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In addition, a greater proportion of Hawai‘i’s families send their children to one of the 97 private schools in the islands, over 16% versus 10% nationally (Council for American Private Education, 2021; Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, 2021; Lee, 2021). Hawai‘i is unique in that it is the only state with one unified public school district that covers eight islands and includes around 290 diverse public and charter schools with over 180,000 students (Hawaii State Department of Education, 2019).

### **School Characteristics**

Our study focused on elementary schools because family engagement tends to be greatest as children start school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Park & Holloway, 2018; Shumow & Schmidt, 2014). Schools were selected to represent a diversity of sizes, geographies (i.e., rural vs. urban), governance (i.e., private, public, charter), and community SES. Our cases included a total of eight elementary schools: two private, two charter, and four public schools. Of the four public schools, two served urban and two rural communities. The two charter and two private schools were in urban areas, and one of the private schools was religiously affiliated. All of the schools except one were on the island of O‘ahu, the most populous island. School sizes varied from 60 to 1,250 students. All

public schools were Title I schools, indicating low community SES. The ethnic compositions of families at individual schools, when available, are included in the school descriptions that follow. Some demographic data were not available for private or charter schools. Table 1 provides a list of the schools in order of community SES, measured by the percentage of students receiving some type of financial aid. Figures were rounded to protect confidentiality, and all names are pseudonyms. Schools were identified as high (H), medium (M), or low (L) SES based on the percentage of students receiving financial aid. A brief description of each of the schools follows. To anonymize schools, their names were replaced with pseudonyms based on colors in the Hawaiian language.

Table 1. School Characteristics

School	SES	Type	#Students	%Fin Aid	Grade	% LA	% MA	% Haw	% White
‘Ula‘ula	High	Private	200	NA	PK–6	NA	NA	NA	NA
‘Ahinahina	High	Charter	500	NA	PK–5	60	65	NA	25
‘Oma‘oma‘o	Mid	Charter	60	20	K–12	70	37	NA	20
Melemele	Mid	Private	350	25	PK–12	NA	NA	NA	NA
‘Akala	Low	Public	400	65	K–5	45	40	10	<5
‘Alani	Low	Public	1200	65	K–6	45	50	5	<5
Polu	Low	Public	950	100	K–6	30	25	55	10
Poni	Low	Public	350	100	PK–6	15	5	35	10

*Notes.* %FinAid = Percent either receiving financial aid (private schools) or receiving free or reduced lunch (public schools); %LA = percent meeting Language Arts proficiency; %MA = percent meeting Math proficiency; %Haw = percentage Native Hawaiian ancestry; NA = not available.

**‘Ula‘ula Elementary School.** ‘Ula‘ula is a small, private school serving 200 prekindergarten (PreK)–Grade 6 students. The school’s mission, as stated in its handbook, includes an explicit commitment to family/school/community partnerships. The school has a strong alumni network and alumni participation.

**‘Ahinahina Public Charter School.** ‘Ahinahina serves approximately 500 PreK–Grade 5 students. Drawing from families with above average incomes and education levels, the high-SES school focuses on student-centered learning and has progressive attitudes toward assessment and evaluation. Family engagement is an explicit part of the school’s mission.

**‘Oma‘oma‘o Charter School.** A small, urban, mid- to high-SES charter school, ‘Oma‘oma‘o serves approximately 1,000 PreK–Grade 12 students. As a charter school, it recruits students from a variety of ethnic and SES backgrounds.

**Melemele School.** A mid-SES, private, parochial, same-sex school, Melemele serves about 1,000 PreK–Grade 12 students, 70% of whom go on to four-year colleges. The elementary school, located on the same campus as the high school, serves approximately 350 students through Grade 6, including many children of alumni.

**‘Akala Elementary School.** A small, low-SES urban school with multilingual families, ‘Akala Elementary School serves approximately 400 students from PreK–Grade 5, almost 60% of whom are of Chinese American or Filipino American ethnicity. Of students, 65% qualify for free lunch, and almost 30% have limited English proficiency. The local median income is somewhat below the state average, and college graduation levels are on par with the state, about 30%.

**‘Alani Elementary School.** A large, low-SES public school with multilingual families, ‘Alani serves 1,300 K–Grade 6 students. A Title I school, 56% of the school’s student body receives free or reduced lunch. The school serves families that are predominantly Filipino American and has a large group of English language learning students.

**Polu Elementary School.** A low-SES, rural school, Polu Elementary School serves approximately 900 students from PreK–Grade 6, over half of whom are Native Hawaiian. Of their students, 75% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and proficiency levels on mathematics and language arts assessments are significantly lower than the state average at all grade levels. The school is working to increase parent engagement in the school.

**Poni Elementary School.** A small, low-SES rural school with multilingual families, Poni Elementary School serves approximately 350 students from PreK–Grade 5, 35% of whom are Native Hawaiian, and 30% of whom are Micronesian. Of all students, 93% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and almost 30% have limited English proficiency. In addition to low academic achievement levels, the school struggles with chronic absenteeism.

## **Participants**

At each of the eight elementary schools, we interviewed between 8–25 stakeholders including teachers, administrators, and parents. We talked with 56 teachers, 37 parents, and 19 administrators across the eight schools for a total of 112 participants. On average there were 14 participants from each school (range: 8–25), including seven teachers (range: 3–16), five parents (range: 1–8), and two administrators (range: 1–4). Using mostly snowball sampling, participants were identified through multiple means including referrals from other stakeholders, word of mouth, face-to-face invitations, invitations from the researchers or principals through email, and referrals from school personnel. We

sometimes recruited teachers through the parents in their homerooms or asked the Parent Coordinator or teachers to refer them. Additional parent participants were often referred by other parents. All participants volunteered and signed consent forms.

### **Data Sources**

We collected interviews, observations, and documents from each school. The data for this study comes primarily from interview transcripts. See the Appendix for the interview questions, listed by participant groups. We interviewed all participants in English at times and places of their convenience. We contacted them by email or telephone to set up appointments. Most participants were interviewed at their schools; we interviewed a small number of parents at their homes or community locations such as coffee shops. Interviews generally took between 20 and 60 minutes and were audiorecorded and transcribed with participants' permission.

### **Data Analysis**

We used grounded theory to analyze the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We triangulated interview transcripts, from which our coding derived, against school observations and publicly available data. Following open coding, which included an interrater reliability test among team members, we selectively coded data to identify positive modes of communication.

Following selective coding, we quantified the number of positive mentions of certain modes of communication. Through this process of data conversion, qualitative data were counted to ascertain the frequency of certain responses and rate the intensity of responses. Organizing the data along a spectrum from non-face-to-face to face-to-face communication, we identified the modes of communication participants found most successful.

#### *Open Coding*

Following an interrater reliability test with a sample batch of five transcripts, team members identified eight broad categories that were applied to all schools. All interviews were transcribed and coded by at least two of the three researchers. Team members coded the transcripts separately and then discussed the codes. The eight categories are:

- Barriers (506 references)
- Communication (425 references)
- Opportunity for parental engagement (335 references)
- Quality relations (203 references)
- Teacher support for parents (140 references)

- Community engagement (61 references)
- Parent support for academics at home (59 references)
- Definition of family, school, and community partnerships (112)

The category of Communication, the second largest category, included 16 communication categories that participants independently identified.

#### Modes of Communication

- General (123 references)
- Face-to-face (47 references)
- Digital communication (44 references)
- On-campus events (39 references)
- Newsletter (32 references)
- Phone (27 references)
- Parent/cultural liaison (26 references)
- Events (21 references)
- Surveys (15 references)
- Positive messages (12 references)
- Board of Directors (10 references)
- Parent–teacher conferences (9 references)
- Letters (7 references)
- Communication folder (6 references)
- Report cards (6 references)
- Syllabus (1 reference)
- TOTAL (425 references)

These mentions were not necessarily positive statements about the mode of communication. To identify successful modes of communication, we conducted a second round of coding.

#### *Selective Coding*

The second round of coding sought to further elucidate modes of communication and identify those communication strategies independently identified by participants as successful or “positive.” Positive references included phrases such as “really well,” “really good,” “like,” “love,” “appreciate,” “successful,” “important,” or “effective.” Less overtly positive mentions including phrases such as “better,” “easy,” “quick,” “expectation,” “trying to,” or “I think” were not included. Individual participants sometimes made multiple references to the same mode of communication. The successful modes of communication included the following (the number in parentheses indicates the number of positive mentions):

### Successful Modes of Communication

- Informal before or after school (23)
- School events (14)
- Letters/communication log (13)
- Phone call (12)
- Talking (10)
- Cultural Liaison (8)
- Newsletter (8)
- Beginning of year (7)
- Texting (6)
- Web portal (3)
- Formal meeting (3)
- Voice recording (2)
- Governance (2)
- Survey (1)
- TOTAL (112)

We divided the larger category of Digital Communication into Texting, Email, and Web portal. We then merged communication folders (such as notes in student notebooks) and emails to form the broad category of Letters. We renamed or recategorized other categories for uniformity. Mentions of general positive communications, such as “call me or email” that referenced more than one mode of communication, were added to multiple columns.

We organized data along a spectrum of non-face-to-face to face-to-face communication (see Figure 1). Nonpersonalized communication included surveys, newsletters, and web portals. Face-to-face communications included both informal and formal exchanges such as school events, formal meetings like parent–student conferences, and participation in school governance. Personalized communication included notes or emails, phone calls, or conversation.

## Results

Although individual participants said they preferred a wide variety of modes of communication, three important themes emerged:

1. Personalized (one-to-one) versus nonpersonalized (mass) communications,
2. Face-to-face versus non face-to-face communication, and
3. Formal versus informal communication.

Overall, participants reported that personalized, face-to-face, informal communication best supported positive family–school partnerships.

Figure 1. Positive References to Communication Modes

		Communication Modes													
SES		survey	web portal/pictures	newsletter (digital or paper)	texting app (class dojo)	voice recording	letters/email or comm log	a call	talking	beginning of year	informal before or after school	cultural liaison	school events	formal meeting	governance
<b>Non-personalized</b> (X 1:1)	H	1	1	3											
	M		1	4	2					1					
	L		1	1	3	2				2					
<b>Personalized</b> (1:1)	H					3	2	1							
	M					2									
	L				1	8	10	5	3						
<b>Face-to-Face</b> (f2f)	H							3	1	9		2		2	
	M							1		5		2	2		
	L									9	8	10	1		
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>

### Personalized Versus Nonpersonalized Communication

Surprisingly, one of the factors that emerged as most salient was not whether communication occurred face-to-face but rather that communication was personalized. Including some face-to-face communication which were also personalized, there were 88 positive mentions of personalized communication and only 22 positive mentions of nonpersonalized communication (see Figure 1). These personalized modes of communication included notes or emails, phone calls, conversations (modality not specified), and face-to-face talks before or after school. Personalized communication in the forms of letters and talks at school events were mentioned by all SES groups.

### Face-to-Face Versus Other Forms of Communication

Face-to-face exchanges garnered 55 positive references compared with 57 positive mentions of non-face-to-face communication (see Figure 1). Talking in person before or after school (23 references) and at school events (14 references) was identified by the greatest number of participants as their preferred mode of communication for all SES groups. The preference for informal face-to-face talks before or after school is supported by qualitative data in which certain participants repeated the importance of face-to-face interactions for them personally. One parent at ‘Ula‘ula, for example, repeated the following sentiment three times, “For me, I gotta be face-to-face.” A teacher at ‘Oma‘oma‘o, a mid-SES school, agreed, saying, talks before school “were our best communications.” But not all face-to-face communication promoted good relations. As explained below, formality emerged as an important third factor.

### **Formal Versus Informal Communication**

The relative formality of the exchange emerged as a third important factor not captured on Figure 1. While participants overwhelmingly identified talking in person (before or after school and at school events) as a successful mode of communication, high stakes face-to-face meetings such as parent–teacher conferences did not garner a high number of mentions. The formality of the exchanges emerged as a salient factor. A parent at ‘Ula‘ula, a high-SES school, shared that when she gets “random emails [or] when we see them on campus... ‘She [child] did this today. She’s talking about this.’ ...I feel like they love my child. They love my child.” Like this mother, many participants said that the mode of communication was less important than the relative formality of the exchange; they appreciated low stakes, informal exchanges. One parent at ‘Oma‘oma‘o, a mid-SES school, shared, “One-to-one stuff off the cuff... [is] so much richer than every open house and every parent–teacher conference, which are completely constrained.” Another teacher at Poni Elementary, a low-SES school, similarly emphasized the importance of communication, “especially in more informal settings.”

Informal communications helped parents feel connected. One principal at a low-SES school commented that the use of texting apps such as “Remind” or “Class Dojo,” which facilitated mass informal texting, had proven highly successful at their school. “The parents just cannot believe how accessible the teacher feels to them,” this principal said.

### **The Role of SES**

Low-SES schools reported greater challenges to engaging families who were sometimes unable to attend school events due to work during the hours after school or who did not speak English as a first language. Meanwhile, at high-SES schools, oftentimes parents who did not work had time to be involved in governance and curriculum. For these reasons, low-SES schools used less traditional methods of communication when partnering with families. For example, low-SES schools, which often served a greater proportion of multilingual families, reported success reaching out to families through cultural liaisons, the use of translators (including electronic translators) during parent–teacher meetings, mass voicemail messages (as opposed to written emails or letters), and home visits. These methods of communication were not reported at all schools in the study but were reported to be particularly successful among the low-SES schools.

#### *Cultural Liaison*

Cultural liaisons are school staff of the same ethnicity as parents and who speak their language. These individuals played an important role in bridging

cultural and linguistic differences between the school and its families at Poni Elementary School, a school with a large population of families who spoke the same language. Three school stakeholders independently identified the cultural liaison eight times as key to the school's family outreach. Because the cultural liaison spoke the language of many families at the school and lived in their neighborhood, informal exchanges in person before or after school paved the way for positive family engagement. According to the cultural liaison, "just talking to them...personally, one on one" was the most effective way to forge partnerships. He served as a point person for teachers having difficulty with particular students and for family members. Because of his position as a member of the community, the cultural liaison was able to make home visits, talk to parents at church, and sometimes gave students who had missed the school bus a ride to school. The cultural liaison readily engaged in positive, informal exchanges afforded to him by his position in the community and was identified as integral to family partnerships at this school.

#### *Scheduling Events Convenient for Families*

Holding events off campus closer to families also appeared to be successful for Poni Elementary. Faculty held off campus parent-teacher conferences and reading nights. These special events allowed for personalized, face-to-face interactions and drew parents who were not able to go to the school due to transportation difficulties. Similarly, two participants at 'Akala and 'Alani Elementary Schools mentioned successful coffee hours held on campus in the morning; these coffee hours accommodated parents who couldn't make it to events after school.

#### *Voice Recording*

To communicate with families at 'Alani, a large school with many English language learners, the administrators used mass voicemail messages, which the school found "really effective with reminders." The effectiveness of the mass voicemails suggests that some parents may have been more comfortable with oral English communication than with written communication. Unlike a note or newsletter home which might get lost or go unread, mass voicemails allowed the school to quickly communicate using a modality that worked for parents.

## **Discussion**

Overall, we found that participants differed with regard to the type of communication they found successful. This is in keeping with other researchers who have found that a one-size-fits-all home communication strategy does not work for many (Schneider & Arnot, 2018).

**How important is face-to-face communication in establishing quality relations between families and schools?**

With regard to our first research question, we found that face-to-face communication was the preferred mode of communication for many. Although it proved to be the most popular mode of communication across all SES groups, not all face-to-face communication elicited positive mentions. Informal face-to-face interactions elicited the most positive mentions. Furthermore, face-to-face communication was not necessary to promote positive relations. Personalized, one-to-one communication through notes, emails, or phone calls also were identified as positive across all SES groups.

**How effective is online communication in promoting quality relations between families and schools?**

We found that online communication did promote quality school-home relations. While not as popular as informal face-to-face communication, participants across SES groups identified newsletters (including digital newsletters) as a successful mode of communication. Similarly, written communications (online and on paper) comprised one of the most popular modes of communication (see Figure 1). Online communication used effectively, for example to share pictures of students on a class website, was extremely popular among some parents. By using the class websites as a place to share pictures, the teachers at one school created an online space that was informal in that the exchanges were low stakes.

**What family-school partnership communication strategies were effective in both high- and low-socioeconomic contexts?**

We found that websites, newsletters, notes/emails, informal conversations before or after school, and talks at school events were identified by participants at high-, medium-, and low-SES schools as positive modes of communication (see Figure 1). These modes of communication included formal non-face-to-face communication (websites and newsletters), personalized non-face-to-face communications (e.g., notes and emails), and informal face-to-face talks. Among these, however, face-to-face communication proved most popular. Unscheduled chats before or after school, including unscheduled conversations at school events, proved to be the most popular method of communication by far. This was true in both low- and high-SES contexts.

While many of the same modes of communication proved successful across SES groups, schools serving lower SES communities often faced a greater proportion of multilingual families, who were more difficult to communicate with as a result of language barriers. As a result, communication with these families

required greater flexibility, and the schools needed additional resources including translators, cultural liaisons, and voicemail messaging systems. Addressing these language barriers helped to make school accessible for parents, facilitate bidirectional communication, and created a welcoming environment. For example, although mass voicemails did not allow for two-way communication, this strategy demonstrated creativity, flexibility, and responsiveness to parents' communication needs at 'Alani Elementary School, which had a large population of parents who did not speak English well.

### **Relationships**

Bidirectional communication, important to forging family–school partnerships (Kim et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2012), occurred most naturally in one-on-one, informal exchanges. These informal exchanges made room for communicating about topics other than problems, which has been identified as key to a positive relationship (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2018). Informal emails, for example, were sometimes transformational. One teacher at a high-SES school shared,

I wrote his mother about something wonderful he had done. She wrote me back, “To tell you the truth, when I saw your name on the email, [I thought] what has he done now?” The year before, she called me [at] home and was threatening to take him out of school because of something I said.

This exchange speaks to the importance of reaching out to parents to build rapport and establish trust before a high stakes event occurs.

Other teachers at Polu Elementary similarly shared the importance of low stakes interactions. These teachers said that introducing themselves at the beginning of the year in “a non-intimidating way” “to make [parents] feel comfortable” sometimes led to increased contact later on in the year. This idea of low stakes interactions is related to the idea of “positive” and “open” communication widely encouraged in literature on family–school–community partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ramirez, 2002).

### **Campus Spaces**

The importance of informal face-to-face communication on campus also points out the importance of providing physical spaces for parents on campus. Access to schools physically and socially is important for family members to feel welcome and invited to collaborate, a cornerstone of family–school–community partnerships. While this study points out the possibilities of informal personalized remote communication, our study also reinforces research that

has suggested that “schools need to create spaces to learn from...families. By creating these spaces, schools may also foster trust and share power with families” (Pavlakis, 2018, p. 1067).

Similar to other studies, our findings reiterate the importance of holding events at locations and at times convenient for families (LeRocque, 2013). Scheduling partnership events in geographic locations or at times that are more convenient for families can increase family attendance. These activities provide opportunities for school personnel to see families in their own contexts, learn more about their strengths, deepen relationships (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), and broaden definitions of parent engagement (Ferrara, 2009).

### **Online Communication**

Finally, although this study stemmed from an interest in engaging families, it offers insights for engaging parents in a distance learning environment, which became more normalized after the school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Online communication to support K–12 educational outcomes has been shown to be effective (Blanco & Blanco, 2011; Yang et al., 2020). Participants’ responses in this study show that while face-to-face communication remains important for building beneficial relationships, positive relations can be forged remotely through written exchanges, especially informal and one-on-one communication. These communications occurred through personalized positive emails, pictures posted on class websites, and even texting apps such as “Remind” and “Class Dojo,” which allowed teachers to text parents brief updates and allowed for quick informal communication between teachers and parents.

### **Limitations/Future Studies**

It bears repeating that different populations and different individuals may prefer different modes of communication for different purposes and occasions. While this study points to the importance of informal, personalized, face-to-face communications across a range of very different schools and demographics, these findings will not apply to all individuals or all school populations.

While this study investigated the characteristics of different modes of communication, we did not explore the content of those communications, recently identified as an important next step in research (Bakker et al., 2007). Our case studies, whose data collection spanned years, illustrate the difficulty of exploring the content of parent–family communications. Because many important school–family communications occur informally, they are difficult to capture.

Finally, our analysis is limited by the complex nature of most communications, which have overlapping characteristics. Communications can be

non-face-to-face and yet personalized, as in many online communications. They can be face-to-face and formal as in a school event. The overlapping nature of these characteristics makes it difficult to identify unique factors that are salient in promoting positive engagement.

In addition, because the modes of communications were self-identified by participants themselves, the nature of the communication in our study was sometimes vague—for example, “talking” or “random emails [or] when we see them on campus.” While this study offers insights into school stakeholders’ self-identified preferences for communication, using questionnaires for data collection in future studies may allow researchers to better explore the preferred modes of communication and their salient characteristics. The modes of communication detailed here provide a useful starting point to develop such a questionnaire.

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## Appendix. Interview Questions

### Teachers:

1. What is your age, gender, ethnicity, age(s) of child(ren)? How long have you been in Hawai‘i? Years at current school?
2. What is your definition of family, school, and community partnerships?
3. What do you do now to partner with the school?
4. How effective are you in partnering with the school?
5. What have you done in the past to partner with the school?
6. What barriers do you find when you try to partner with the school?
7. What have you found to be successful when partnering with the school?
8. What does your child’s teacher do to support partnerships with you?
9. What does the school do to support partnerships with you?
10. What does the principal do to support partnerships with you?
11. What do you perceive as the role of the principal in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
12. What do you perceive as the role of the teachers in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
13. What do you perceive as the role of families in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
14. What kinds of supports do you feel that you need to partner better with the school?

### Family Members:

1. What is your age, gender, ethnicity, age(s) of child(ren)? How long have you been in Hawai‘i? Years attended current school?

2. What is your definition of family, school, and community partnerships?
3. What do you do now to partner with the school?
4. How effective are you in partnering with the school?
5. What have you done in the past to partner with the school?
6. What barriers do you find when you try to partner with the school?
7. What have you found to be successful when partnering with the school?
8. What does your child's teacher do to support partnerships with you?
9. What does the school do to support partnerships with you?
10. What does the principal do to support partnerships with you?
11. What do you perceive as the role of the principal in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
12. What do you perceive as the role of the teachers in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
13. What do you perceive as the role of families in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
14. What kinds of supports do you feel that you need to partner better with the school?

### Principals:

1. What is your age, gender, ethnicity, years of teaching/administrative experience, years in HIDOE, years at this school?
2. What is your definition of family, school, and community partnerships?
3. What do you do now to partner with parents?
4. How effective are you in partnering with families?
5. How effective is your school in partnering with families?
6. What strategies have you tried in the past to partner with families?
7. What barriers exist to partner with families?
8. What have you found to be successful when partnering with families?
9. What do you perceive as the role of the principal in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
10. What do you perceive as the role of the teachers in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
11. What do you perceive as the role of families in establishing the climate for family, school, and community partnerships in your school?
12. What kinds of supports do you feel that you need to partner better with families?
13. What kinds of supports do teachers need to partner better with families?
14. What kinds of supports does your school need to better partner with families?