



**Let's Talk About It:
Your Child's Education**

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MRS. GOMEZ

Phone: 123-4567

e-mail: gomez@school.com

Welcome to PTA!



Families and teachers are equal partners

Sometimes it's hard to know how to relate to our children's teachers and principal. They may have more education and authority than we do, and we don't always feel like their equals.

But families and teachers are equals, and teachers want families to be their partners. Teachers are experts at teaching, but families are experts about our own children.

No matter how much or how little education we have, teachers need our help to succeed in their jobs, because children learn best when families are involved with their children's education.

This guide is intended to help families understand how schools and teachers work, so we can make the most of our partnership with them.

It also provides information about what to do when we're having problems with a teacher or school, and information about special programs our children may need.

**Car Wash For
Grant Middle School!**



The culture of public schools

Schools have traditions and customs that we need to know about. Teachers and others who work in schools are busy and may not have time or be able to explain how things work. It's not that they are trying to shut families out. It's just that asking a teacher to explain how school works can be a little bit like asking a fish to describe water.

And of course not all public schools are exactly alike. Some are friendlier than others; some are more informal than others; some are better than others at making people from different cultures feel welcome and understood.

There is also a big difference between elementary, middle and high schools. In elementary schools, teachers expect a lot of family involvement in our children's learning. As students get older, this changes. Middle and high schools want families to come to special events and student conferences, and to make sure our children do their homework, but they usually expect students to be more in charge of their own learning.

At all schools, there are three kinds of family involvement:

- The first is direct involvement in helping our own children learn. Examples of this are making sure that students read at least for 20 minutes a day, or do their homework.
- The second is involvement that supports our student's whole class or the whole school. Examples of this are volunteering in the classroom, helping raise funds for the school, or advocating for changes we think are needed.
- The third way to support our children's success is to be advocates for better schools. We can do this by speaking up when we see unmet needs, and talking to our elected school board members or state legislators about our ideas for improvement.

All three kinds of involvement are important, but the most important is helping our own children learn.

Here are some basic traditions that are common to all public schools:

Teachers need and appreciate family support. Teachers like to meet the families of their students. Usually, schools have a “families’ night” or “back to school night” in the fall, soon after school starts. This is a good time to meet the teacher, and ask questions about what our children will be learning. This is also a good time to ask the teacher how to contact him or her if we have questions during the school year. Some teachers will give us their phone number; others might have another way for us to contact them.

Schools publish calendars that every family should have. Every year when school starts, schools publish a calendar that shows when vacations and holidays are, when school will start late or send students home early, when special events are scheduled that families should attend, and when sports and other activities happen. Every family needs to have this calendar to help us plan child care or other special arrangements.

Parent-teacher conferences are very important. Elementary schools have parent teacher meetings, called conferences, several times a year. Middle and high schools

may have them just once a year. Each teacher meets with the parents or guardians of each child in the class to talk about what the student is learning, and what the teacher will teach the rest of the year. It's extremely important for families to come to these meetings. If we can't come at the date and time the teacher schedules for us, it's important to call the school and ask for a different time. Most schools will try hard to find a time that works for us.

This is also a good time to show appreciation for our children's teachers and other school staff. They are all working hard for our children, and they deserve our thanks.

Teachers and principals respect families who are actively involved in their children's education. Sometimes, teachers get frustrated with families who don't come to their children's parent-teacher conferences or do not respond when they leave a phone message. If we don't come to conferences or respond when they call, they may think we don't care about our child's education. This is true in all schools - elementary, middle and high schools.

Communicating with your children about school

Sometimes when we ask our children how their day at school was, they say “fine.” Or if we ask what they learned today, they might say “oh, nothing.” Families need to get beyond those answers to find out more.

Here are some questions that will help:

- **Did your teacher send anything home with you that I should see?** Especially in elementary school, teachers often send home class newsletters, forms for us to sign, or completed work our children have done in class. If you have an elementary school child, be sure to check his or her backpack, because children often forget to give us these things. That’s why asking this question every day is important.
- **What was the best thing that happened at school today? What was the worst thing that happened?** The answers to these questions will tell us a lot about what our children like and don’t like about school.



- **Do you have homework assignments tonight? What are they, and when are they due?** Family help and encouragement on school assignments can make a huge difference in our children's success. Even if students don't have specific assignments, there are always things they should practice, like spelling, math, or reading.
- **What book are you reading?** Almost all students are reading a book - and if they aren't, they should be. If our child isn't reading a book, it's time for a visit to the school or public library. (Students can also read on the Internet if it is available to them.) Every student should read at home for at least 20 minutes a day. Families who read with their children put them on a path to academic success. Those of us who don't speak or read English can still help by having our children read to us or look at a picture book or photos and describe what they see to us, so we learn together. Reading with our children in our own language also helps develop reading skills, too.
- **Who did you eat lunch with?** Children's and teens' friends are an important influence on their lives and on their success in school. Families need to know who our children's friends are. We can get to know our children's friends by inviting them to our house to visit, or to go with us on a family outing.

Communicating with teachers about your children

Most families are a little bit nervous when we go to meet with our children's teachers. We worry that our child might not measure up to the teacher's expectations. If our child is struggling in school, we might be afraid the teacher will think it's because we're not good enough parents.

But teachers are often nervous, too. They might be worried that if our children aren't doing well, we will think it's their fault for not being a good enough teacher. And if we are from a different culture than the teacher, she might be worried because she doesn't know what our customs or expectations are.

Also, teachers chose their careers because they like to work with children. So some teachers are more comfortable with their students than they are with their students' families. We can help them be more comfortable with us if we simply understand that they are human beings who have fears and insecurities just like we do.

Here are some ideas to help us communicate with our children's teachers:

- **Teachers work hard, and they deserve to be thanked.** It's a good idea to begin a meeting with a teacher by thanking him or her for teaching our child. If our child has told us about something he or she really likes about the teacher, the teacher will be pleased to know about it.
- **Teachers are tightly scheduled, so be on time for all meetings.** Whether we are coming to a parent-teacher conference or any other meeting, it's really important to be on time. Also, teachers don't have time for long meetings. It's a good idea to ask at the beginning how much time the teacher has to talk with us.
- **If we need an interpreter, we should ask for one before the meeting.** The school will probably need some time to arrange for an interpreter. Even if our English is pretty good, an interpreter can be helpful. We really need to be able to understand 100% of what the teacher says - and the teacher needs to understand 100% of what we say. We may also want to ask for a little extra time, because working with an interpreter means the meeting will take longer.



- **Teachers like to know about changes in our family that might affect our children.** If there is a new baby, a parent in the military being deployed overseas, a divorce, or a death in our family, it can affect a child's ability to cope with the stresses of school. If our child's teacher knows about it, he or she can offer special support to our child.
- **Sometimes teachers and schools need help to understand unfamiliar cultures and traditions.** If we have customs or beliefs or special holidays that we want our children's school to respect and understand, we need to let the teacher know. If our child's teacher is doing something that bothers us because it runs counter to our culture, we need to explain what it is and why it troubles us.



ATTENDANCE

8:00 AM.

ENGLISH

Today's SCHEDULE

- 8-10 English
- 10-11 Lesson 1
- 11-12 Lunch
- 12-1 Lesson 2
- 1-3 Math



The rules of schools

School attendance

Daily attendance at school is very important. Children have a right to an education, and parents have a legal responsibility to see that they attend. Courts enforce these rules.

But the importance of regular school attendance isn't about following the rules; it's about giving our children the best chance for success. Missing school puts our children at a big disadvantage. If they miss the class where a key idea or lesson is delivered, they quickly get behind. And sometimes, children who get behind get discouraged and give up. This is something none of us wants for our children.

Of course children should stay at home if they are sick. And of course we should all be sure our children eat well and get plenty of sleep so they stay as healthy as possible. But we should also always try to schedule dentist, doctor, or other appointments for our children at times that don't conflict with school.

Nearly all schools also have an attendance policy that requires a written note or a phone call from the parent or guardian explaining why a student is absent, whether it's because of illness or for some other reason.

Some of us have important holidays or traditional celebrations that aren't recognized by the school calendar. This can be a problem for families from many different faiths and cultures. When it's really important to us to keep our children home for a religious, cultural, or family event, we need to contact our children's teachers in advance and let them know about our plans. They will want to know what day or days our children will miss. We should ask them if there are assignments our children can do at home to make up for the class time they will miss, and whether there are any other ways to make up the missed class time.

Student behavior and discipline

Schools vary in their policies and practices about student discipline. Some are more strict and regimented than others. But the purpose of all school discipline is to create a safe place where all students can learn, and to teach students to respect and get along with each other, their teachers, and other adults in the school and in their lives.

Teachers and other school employees in Washington are not allowed to hit, paddle or use any form of corporal punishment. But they do have the authority to impose other forms of discipline when students break the rules. The most serious disciplinary measures are suspension (which means the student can't come to school for a given number of days), or expulsion (which means the child can't come back to that school).

If our child is breaking the rules and getting in trouble, we want to know about it right away. Sometimes, though, if the problem is minor and the teacher is busy, we might not hear about it unless our children tell us, or unless we are in regular contact with the teacher. If the problem is serious, the school will contact us.

It's not uncommon for our child to have a different version of a discipline problem than the teacher or school principal. When that happens, we're in a difficult position, and we have to be careful.

Dealing with school discipline issues is very hard for families. We want to be sure that the school is being fair to our child, but we also want our children to be accountable for learning to control themselves and to behave responsibly. And of course, we want our child to get a good education.



If we have a disagreement with the school about a discipline problem, it's often a good idea to take a member of our family or a level-headed friend with us when we meet with the teacher or principal. It's also very important to have an interpreter if we need one. And it's important to establish, at the beginning of the meeting, that our goal is to make sure that our child is both accountable and educated.

Here are some questions to ask in this situation:

- Has my child's behavior or academic performance at school changed? If so, do we know why?
- Have his or her friends changed?
- Has he or she had any unexplained absences?
- Has he or she been the victim of any bullying behavior by other students?
- Is there an ongoing conflict between my child and a teacher or other school staff?
- What disciplinary measure is most likely to get my child back on track?
- What should we do to address the root cause of my child's behavior?

It's helpful, in a situation like this, to take notes (or ask your friend to take notes) so you have a record of the meeting. If English is not your first language, it is fine to take notes in your own language.

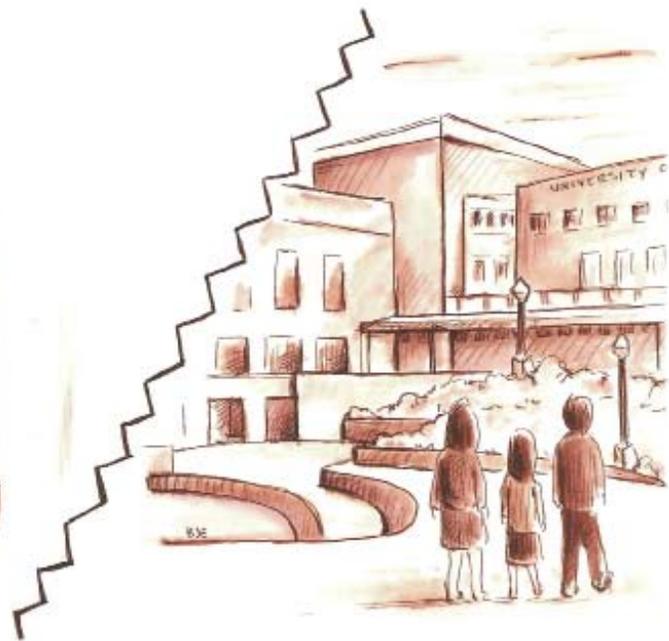
It's also a good idea to summarize, at the end of the meeting, what you and the teacher or principal have agreed to.

If you don't agree with the school's decision about a disciplinary matter, you have the right to appeal. Every school district has a policy that spells out how to do this.

Learning for life

In today's world, everyone needs a good education to make a decent living and to be a good citizen. But beyond the practical reasons for getting a good education, there is also a more basic, human joy in learning for its own sake. We are all born to learn; it's a basic part of human nature.

That's why it's so important that we do all we can to make sure our children enjoy school, and feel rewarded and encouraged when they work hard at learning. Children need to know their families care about their education and have high expectations for them.



Everyone can go to college

In today's high-tech economy, nearly all students will need education or job training beyond high school to get good jobs. That's why it's a good idea to start talking to your child early - from the time they start kindergarten - about preparing to go to college.

There are two kinds of colleges: community and technical colleges take two years or less and prepare students for specific jobs or transfer to a four-year college or university; four-year colleges and universities prepare students for professions such as doctor, lawyer, scientist, or teacher.

Washington's community and technical colleges have an "open door" policy, which means they accept all students, regardless of their past academic performance. If they aren't ready to do college level work, students can take remedial classes that get them ready for it. Community and technical colleges also offer English instruction and job training for adults of all ages.



Students don't have to be geniuses to go to a four-year college or university; any student who works reasonably hard and gets decent grades can go. But students have to take the right kinds of high school classes - and the right number of high school classes - to prepare.

Families need to start planning for college when students are in middle school. Taking advanced math and science classes in middle school can help students have a head start on being ready for college, so be sure to ask your child's teacher about them.

When your student starts high school, ask the high school counselor for information about college admissions right away. The counselor will explain which classes your child should take each high school year to be ready for a four-year college or university.

Students in Washington high schools can also earn college credits for free during their junior and senior years. They can enroll in community and technical college classes, and get both high school and college credit. This program is called "Running Start." Some students who do this graduate from high school with two full years of college credit already completed. There are similar programs that allow high school students to prepare for apprenticeship programs and get job training while they are still in high school.

Washington has many programs to help students go to college. It's a good idea for families to ask a lot of questions about college opportunities. Your school counselor is the best place to start. Here is a sample of what is available:

The College Bound Scholarship is available to all students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (this means students from families that have moderate or low incomes.) Families must sign up for this program when students are in the 7th and 8th grades. The scholarship covers the full cost of tuition and books at a two- or four-year public college. Students must promise to stay in school, demonstrate good citizenship, and graduate from high school.

Federal and state financial aid is available to students from middle- and low-income families. High school counselors can help you apply for this aid.

Early outreach programs offer tutoring, mentors, and visits to college campuses for many students. These programs often start in middle school. Some serve specific kinds of students - students who are interested in science, or students from a specific ethnic group, culture or income level. Ask your middle school or high school counselor for information about these programs. Students who participate in them are often awarded scholarships.

Skills Centers offer job skills training to high school students. A Skills Center serves many school districts, and offers programs that would be too expensive for one school district to support by itself. Usually, students can go part of the school day to their high school, and part of the day to a Skills Center. They can learn skills such as cooking, auto repair, computer programming, or carpentry. Some Skills Center programs are directly connected to apprenticeship programs or other job preparation programs in community and technical colleges.

Tech prep is a program that allows students to enroll in job skills programs at community and technical colleges for free, while they are still in high school.

High school counselors can help you learn more about these programs.

Test Taking Tips

- Make sure that your child does all daily school work, homework and reading assignments so your child will know what she is being tested on.
- Spread out test preparation over a number of days so that your child won't be forced to cram the night before a test. Make sure that he gets enough sleep before a test.
- You may be nervous or worried about your child taking a test, but try to be calm around your child. You don't want her to be nervous too.
- Encourage your child to do well, but don't pressure him. You may stress him out, and it is important for your child to stay relaxed before and during a test.
- Provide a quiet, well-lighted area with few distractions for your child to study in.
- Mark test days on your calendar so you and your child are both aware of testing dates.
- Your child needs to eat a healthy breakfast before taking a test. Avoid heavy foods that may make her sleepy and avoid high sugar foods that may make her hyper.
- Make sure that your child gets up early enough to get to school on time and is relaxed.
- If your child is struggling with test taking, talk to him about it and meet with the teacher to find out the best way to help your child.

State testing: how students' progress is assessed

Washington has academic standards and tests that measure whether students meet these standards. The tests are given every spring to students in grades 3-8 and in 10th grade of high school. Through the 2008-09 school year, the state test is called the WASL, or Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Beginning in the 2009-10 school year, the grades 3-8 test will be called the Measurements of Student Progress and the high school test will be called the High School Proficiency Test. It is the goal of the state to computerize the tests statewide by 2012.

The state tests not only help schools assess how they are teaching our state learning standards, but more importantly, help identify strengths and weaknesses of our students so they receive extra assistance, if needed.

If your child's state testing scores show that he or she isn't meeting the state's academic standards, you should ask the school to provide extra help, and be sure your student understands what he or she needs to do to improve.



MECHANICS & ASTRONOMY

ASTRONOMY

GEOLOGY & STATISTICS

STATISTICS

POLITICAL SCIENCE

SCIENCE

MATH

ALGEBRA

ENGLISH

WRITING

PLAN FOR GRADUATION

BJE

High school graduation requirements

Only the high school test has real consequences for students. High school students are required to pass a state assessment in reading and writing in order to graduate. Currently, students do not have to pass a math assessment to graduate. But those who do not pass must earn two math credits after 10th grade. Students get several chances to take the test, and if they don't pass, can take alternatives to show their basic skills. One way is to assemble a portfolio, or collection of evidence, of their classroom work that demonstrates their skills and knowledge.

Meeting the academic standards required for high school graduation can be difficult for students who aren't fluent in English. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to test all students. Washington's legislature is trying to figure out how to help these students more. One way is for Spanish and Russian students to listen to questions in their native language on an audio CD. Students then must answer in English.

In addition to meeting standard in reading and writing, high school students must also complete the required number of credits, make a plan for after graduation and create a "senior project" that shows how they have learned to use their skills in the real world.



Special programs and resources

Special education

Washington schools have programs for children who have disabilities or special health problems of all kinds.

Not all disabilities are obvious. Sometimes children have a hard time learning to read because they have a condition called dyslexia, which means they don't see words and letters in the same way others do. There are many other disabilities that can affect learning, too. If you aren't sure whether your child has a disability, you can ask your school to provide tests to find out.

If your child does have a disability, he or she has a right to a school program tailored to his or her needs. This is true no matter how slight or how severe the disability is. There is a statewide program for students with disabilities called "Special Education."

There are a lot of laws and rules to protect the rights of students with disabilities. There is also a special budget to provide extra funding for these students.

If you ever have problems getting what you need for a child with a disability, there is a **Special Education Ombudsman** whose job is to help you understand the system and solve problems.

The number is 360-725-6075.

**Me llamo...
Señora Tan**

Soy Profesora

**My name is...
Mrs. Tan**

I am a Teacher



Learning English

Children who don't speak English have a right to special help to learn it. Some schools that have a lot of immigrant students have special programs (often called Transitional Bilingual Programs) for this purpose.

While all children have a right to special help to learn English, there are times and places where this can be hard to achieve. For instance, if a school has only one or two immigrant children, creating a special program for them can be hard for the school. They might not have enough money to hire a qualified teacher for such a small number of students.

There are other problems for English language learners, too. Sometimes schools struggle to find enough well-prepared teachers. And educators and policy makers disagree among themselves about the right way to teach English, and about how much time students need to master it. Schools all over the United States struggle with these issues, and no one has yet found the perfect solution. Families who care about improving English language instruction for our students can help by being strong advocates for improving these programs.

Some schools offer “dual language” programs for immigrant and local children, and teach in both the immigrant language (most often Spanish) and English. People like these programs because all the children become bilingual. These programs are gaining in popularity, but they are only possible when there is a group of immigrant children who all speak the same language, and local children whose families support this idea.

Ideally, our education system should help all immigrant children master English without losing their fluency in their family’s language, but this is very hard to do in schools that don’t have bilingual teachers and programs. Families who want their children to retain their home language often enroll them in special after-school or weekend programs provided by their own community.

When families and teachers disagree

If a family has a disagreement with a teacher that we can't resolve, we can ask to speak to the school principal. We should try to be pleasant and persuasive, and to keep an open mind so that we can find a solution we agree on.

But, if we've done that and we're still not satisfied, we can keep going up - to the school superintendent, and, if necessary, to the elected school board that governs our school district.

If we need help working our way through a conflict, or we just don't feel we're getting anywhere, the state Office of the Education Ombudsman can help. The toll-free number to call is 1-866-297-2597. Ombudsmen help families and schools resolve conflicts so that children can learn.



Ballot Drop
Box

Ballot Drop

BALLOT

RJE

Education, politics, and families

Washington schools get most of their money from state government. Every two years, the state legislature passes a budget that tells schools how much they will get for various programs and expenses. School districts raise the rest of the money for schools by asking local voters to pass school levies. Levies are local property taxes for schools. These local levies usually make up 15 - 20% of the school district budget.

There are 295 school districts in the state of Washington, and each school district is governed by an elected school board. Members of school boards (also called Directors) are elected by the voters of each community. School board members hire and supervise the Superintendent, develop local education laws and rules (called board or district policies) and approve the district's budget and academic programs. The state legislature also makes other laws and rules that school districts must follow.

At both the state and local level, the voices of families are very important. Families can make a big difference in the quality of our children's education by speaking up at local school board meetings, and by contacting our state legislators to let them know what we think our children need.



STUDENT
LEARNING

Education
FOR OUR
CHILDREN

SCHOOL
BOARD

PLEASE
COME IN!

There are also many parent organizations that work to improve our schools. The biggest is the PTA (Parent Teacher Association). It is a national organization that has a state office in Washington and local chapters at most schools. Ask your school secretary about how to contact the school's PTA.

There are also other organizations families can connect with to support better education for our children. See the back of this booklet for a list.

Squeaky wheels

There is an old saying that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." It means that if we are silent, our problems (or our children's problems) won't be addressed.

This might be the most important thing to remember about how to make sure our children get the education they need: We have to speak up when there is a problem. We know our children better than anyone else, and we are likely to be the first to recognize when they are not learning all they can.

Sometimes all that's needed is a conversation with a teacher. Other times what's needed is a change in a state law or a local school district policy. Either way, in a democracy it's up to us to speak up for our children, and to be the most effective advocates for them we can be. Their future depends on us.

PERSISTENCE

SUCCESS



Resources

Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is the primary agency charged with overseeing K-12 education in Washington state. OSPI administers basic education programs and implements education reform.

www.k12.wa.us
360-725-6000

The Office of the Education Ombudsman (OEO) provides information about the school system and family and community involvement in education. They also help resolve conflict between families and schools, and provide policymakers with recommendations to improve the education system.

www.waparentslearn.org
1-866-297-2597

The Commission on Hispanic Affairs improves public policy development and the delivery of government services to the Hispanic community.

www.cha.wa.gov
1-800-443-0294

Governor's Office of Indian Affairs serves as liaison between state and tribal governments in an advisory, resource, consultation, and educational capacity.

www.goia.wa.gov
360-902-8827

The Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs improves the well-being of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) by insuring their access to participation in the fields of government, business, education, and other areas.

www.capaa.wa.gov
360-725-5667

The Commission on African American Affairs defines issues pertaining to the rights and needs of African Americans and to advise state agencies.

www.caa.wa.gov
360-725-5664

Partnership for Learning is an independent, statewide nonprofit organization that communicates about Washington State's school improvement efforts and the need to better prepare ALL of our high school graduates for the demands of today's global society.

www.partnership4learning.org
1-800-550-KIDS

Washington Department of Early Learning focuses on children's earliest years of life, offering information and resources for children's first and most important teachers - parents.

www.del.wa.gov
360-725-4665

Washington P.A.V.E. is a parent directed organization that works with families, individuals with disabilities, professionals and community members in all walks of life and with all types of disabilities.

www.washingtonpave.org
1-800-5-PARENT

Washington State Association for Multicultural Education is an association of representatives from public and private school districts, colleges, universities, local and state governmental agencies, organizations, businesses, and other groups which advocate for and support multicultural diversity and international education.

www.wsame.org
wsame@mindspring.com

The League of Education Voters works to improve Washington's public schools through a grassroots statewide network of advocates.

www.educationvoters.org
206-728-6448

The Washington State PTA is a nonprofit, membership association which seeks to bring together the home, school and community on behalf of all children and youth.

www.wastatepta.org
1-800-562-3804

Written by: Sally Brownfield
Illustrated by: Bobbi Jo Epperson

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