


MEMORANDUM

July 27, 2015

TO: The Honorable Chair and Members of The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida

FROM: Alberto M. Carvalho, Superintendent of Schools 

SUBJECT: TRANSMITTAL OF INFORMATION CAPSULE, *EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS*

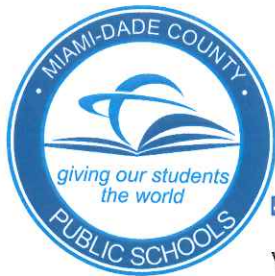
Attached please find a copy of the Information Capsule, *Effective Communication between Educators and Students*. Educators need to find ways to communicate effectively with students. It is often difficult to keep students focused on the materials being presented. Adding to the challenge is that students typically have short attention spans. Researchers estimate that students pay attention for only about 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Students are forced to sit passively for approximately 90 percent of the school day when they would much prefer to be engaged in more physical types of activities. This Information Capsule summarizes factors that influence students' receptiveness to school-wide and classroom presentations.

If you need further information, please contact Ms. Marie Izquierdo, Chief Academic Officer, Office of Academics and Transformation, at 305 995-1451, or Ms. Gisela Feild, Administrative Director, Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis, at 305 995-2943.

AMC:cb
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Attachment

cc: School Board Attorney
Superintendent's Cabinet
Ms. Deborah Karcher
Ms. Gisela Feild
Dr. Aleksandr Shneyderman



INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

At a Glance

Educators need to find ways to communicate effectively with students. It is often difficult to keep students focused on the materials being presented. Adding to the challenge is that students typically have short attention spans. Researchers estimate that students pay attention for only about 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Students are forced to sit passively for approximately 90 percent of the school day when they would much prefer to be engaged in more physical types of activities. This Information Capsule summarizes factors that influence students' receptiveness to school-wide and classroom presentations.

Experts agree that school district personnel must learn the art of interacting and communicating with students in order to provide them with important information and facilitate their learning (Bharti, 2015; Veira, 2015; Burns, 2014; Zauber, 2012; University of Southern California, n.d.-a). School and district staff need students' undivided attention, which can be a real challenge because most students – just like adults - have very short attention spans. Researchers estimate that students pay attention for only about 10 to 20 minutes at a time (Khan, 2012; Vawter, 2009; University of Southern California, n.d.-a). The Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education (2014) uses the following formula to calculate a child's attention span for learning: chronological age + 1. For example, an eight year old would have a nine minute attention span for a particular activity ($8+1=9$).

A veteran teacher, Alexis Wiggins, shadowed a tenth grade student for one day and a twelfth grade student for another day. Her task was to do everything the students were supposed to do. As reported in *The Washington Post*, Ms. Wiggins said she lost count of how many times she and her fellow students were told to be quiet and pay attention. Ms. Wiggins reported that the students she shadowed were required to sit passively and listen during approximately 90 percent of their classes. She said, "By the end of the day, I could not stop yawning and I was desperate to move or stretch" (Strauss, 2014a).

Hanscom (cited in Strauss, 2014b), a pediatric occupational therapist, said that students are expected to sit for longer and longer periods of time during the school day. She noted that when children are asked to sit and pay attention, they often start fidgeting, a strong indicator that they are not getting enough movement throughout the day. She asked, "What happens when the children start fidgeting? We ask them to sit still and pay attention; therefore, their brain goes back to 'sleep.'"

Factors that Influence the Effectiveness of Communications Between Educators and Students

Researchers have found that there are a variety of factors that influence students' receptiveness to school-wide and classroom presentations. These factors are divided into the following five categories: Environment, Content of Presentation, Communicating with Speech, Communicating with Body Language, and Presentation Techniques.

Environment. It is hard for students to focus attention when they are constantly distracted by outside influences. Environmental factors, such as external noise, extreme temperatures, and uncomfortable seating, can cause students to stop paying attention to the speaker and focus on other factors. Students and teachers should be asked to turn off all electronics prior to the commencement of the presentation (Prozesky, 2000; University of Nebraska – Lincoln, n.d.; WikiHow, n.d.).

Content of Presentation. Presentations should be well organized and messages delivered clearly and unambiguously.

- **Know your audience.** Educators should have an understanding of the level of knowledge students already possess, ensuring that presentations are not overly simple or complex (University of Southern California, n.d.-a).
- **Limit presentations to a few key points.** Experts suggest that presentations cover only a few key points. They recommend that presenters choose three main points and make sure everything they say relates to and strengthens those points (Santi, 2010; Prozesky, 2000; WikiHow, n.d.).
- **Keep presentations as short as possible.** Experts caution against rambling, which dilutes the message the presenter is trying to convey and makes it more likely that students' attention will wander (Daum, 2013; WikiHow, n.d.).
- **Repeat the message.** Communication is an ongoing process and students may have to hear key ideas and concepts multiple times before they understand and incorporate them into their thinking. Research shows that within one hour, people forget an average of 50 percent of the information that was presented to them. Within 24 hours, they forget an average of 70 percent of the new information, and within one week, they forget an average of 90 percent of the information (Brown University, 2015; Kohn, 2014; Daum, 2013; Peterson, n.d.; University of Southern California, n.d.-b).
- **Make presentations relevant to students' lives.** Most of the time, people do not pay full attention to a presentation unless they find the information being communicated valuable on a personal level. Researchers recommend that educators connect topics to student interests, experiences, and prior knowledge. Presenters should provide examples or anecdotes that students can relate to, since students have higher retention rates when they make emotional connections to the information than when they just hear a lot of rules and facts (Brown University, 2015; Veira, 2015; Phillips, 2012; University of Nebraska – Lincoln, n.d.).

- **Show respect for students.** Respect is the foundation of effective communication, especially between students and educators. To encourage students, educators should use words that describe rather than judge (Zauber, 2012; Prozesky, 2000; Peterson, n.d.; University of Nebraska – Lincoln, n.d.). Fellows at University of Southern California’s Center for Excellence in Teaching (n.d.-b) recommended that educators minimize messages that can be interpreted as accusatory, such as “Try harder” or “You could do better if you wanted to.” When a veteran teacher shadowed high school students for two days, as described earlier in this paper, she observed that teachers directed “a good deal of sarcasm and snark” at students (Strauss, 2014a).
- **Create interactive presentations.** Researchers have concluded that students’ young brains learn less by listening and more through interaction (Wyeth, 2014; Phillips, 2012; Vawter, 2009). A study of college students conducted by Bunce and colleagues (summarized in Washington University in St. Louis, 2013) found that students reported fewer attention lapses when they were engaged in active learning than when they sat through lectures. The researchers also found that students reported fewer attention lapses during lectures when the lectures followed a period of active learning, such as a demonstration or question segment.
- **Be authentic.** Communication experts say that as soon as the presenter becomes inauthentic, he or she loses any chance of real communication with students. Students have the ability to see through false praise, bribery, and other forms of manipulation, especially once they enter middle and senior high school (Linsin, 2012; Santi, 2010). According to Osterweil (2003), “The ‘do-it-because-I-said-so’ approach to talking with teens doesn’t work.”
- **Use humor.** Humor has been found to help educators engage students during presentations. But experts warn against overreliance on humor or using it to sidestep awkward issues. For example, if a presenter is giggling and joking his or her way through a topic, students will not take the communication seriously (Wyeth, 2014; Zauber, 2012, WikiHow, n.d.).

Communicating with Speech. Speakers should ensure that they are articulate, vocally interesting, and enunciate clearly.

- **Use variations in voice.** Many times, it is not what is said, but the way it is said that makes an impact. Dr. Albert Mehrabian (cited in The Nonverbal Group, 2011) conducted several studies on nonverbal communication. He found that on average seven percent of any message is conveyed through words, 38 percent through certain vocal elements, and 55 percent through nonverbal elements. Experts have therefore recommended that presenters change the pitch, rhythm, loudness, and inflections of their voices to keep students engaged (Cherry, 2015; Zauber, 2012; Peterson, n.d.; University of Nebraska – Lincoln, n.d.; University of Southern California, n.d.-a).

Experts also recommend the strategic use of pauses. Pausing causes students to lean in and listen, and makes communications seem more compelling (Brown University, 2015; Prozesky, 2000; University of Southern California, n.d.-a; WikiHow, n.d.).

According to Norma Michael (cited in WikiHow, n.d.), a monotone is not pleasing to the ear, so communication should be enhanced through the use of “vocal color.” Michael recommended that presenters use the following techniques:

- Raise the pitch and volume of one’s voice when transitioning from one topic or point to another;
 - Increase the volume of one’s voice and slow the delivery whenever making a special point or summing up; and
 - Speak briskly, but pause to emphasize key words when requesting action.
- **Speak clearly.** Presenters should project their voices so they are easily heard. They should also make sure they are not talking too fast so students have the opportunity to absorb the materials that are being presented (Brown University, 2015; Prozesky, 2000).
 - **Avoid jargon and overly complex language.** Experts say that good communicators always choose simple, straightforward words. When addressing students, educators should avoid abstract and overly formal language, colloquialisms, and jargon, which tend to obscure the presentation’s key points (DeMers, 2014; Prozesky, 2000; Peterson, n.d.; University of Waterloo, n.d.; WikiHow, n.d.).
 - **Avoid reading the presentation.** The Center for Excellence in Teaching at the University of Southern California (n.d.-a) stated that students become bored when educators read from notes or PowerPoint presentations. Staff at the Center say that the best presentations are those that appear to be spontaneous but have been practiced in advance.

Communicating with Body Language. Communication does not take place only through words. Nonverbal communication, or body language, also conveys powerful messages to students.

- **Make eye contact with students.** Eye contact builds rapport and helps to convince students of the speaker’s trustworthiness. Inability to maintain eye contact, on the other hand, is frequently seen as an indicator that the speaker is being deceptive (Brown University, 2015; Cherry, 2015; Zauber, 2012; Prozesky, 2000).
- **Move around the room.** Remaining behind a desk or podium sends the signal that the educator does not want to make contact with students and makes him or her appear unapproachable. In addition, when educators move around the room during presentations, they convey energy and enthusiasm for the message they are presenting (Brown University, 2015; Zauber, 2012; Prozesky, 2000; University of Southern California, n.d.-a). Morgan (2009) suggested that speakers move toward the audience

when they want to emphasize a point because that subconsciously tells the audience that the point is important.

Another purpose served by moving around the room during presentations is to keep students focused on the message. Phillips (2012) recommended introducing some type of change into presentations at least every seven minutes in order to hold individuals' attention. He suggested speaking from one area of the room for a few minutes and then walking to a different area and speaking from there.

- **Honor students' personal space.** People often refer to their need for "personal space." It has been recommended that speakers stand about three to four feet away from students. Standing too close can make students feel uncomfortable, while standing too far away can indicate a lack of interest in students (University of Nebraska – Lincoln, n.d.).
- **Project confidence.** Studies suggest that if a presenter appears confident, others are more likely to agree with what he or she is saying. Conversely, the less confident a speaker appears, the more likely it is that listeners will disagree with what he or she is saying (Brown University, 2015; Bergmann, 2009; University of Waterloo, n.d.). According to Zaubler (2012), "Lack of confidence is a red flag to students."
- **Use hand gestures to highlight important points.** Hand gestures can increase student receptiveness to the presenter and the message he or she is trying to convey. In contrast, folded arms or hands stuffed into one's pockets send the signal that the speaker does not want to make contact with the students. Experts caution that excessive gesturing should be avoided because it can divert attention from the points the speaker is trying to make (Brown University, 2015; Zaubler, 2012; Prozesky, 2000; University of Southern California, n.d.-a).
- **Smile.** Facial expressions are responsible for a large proportion of nonverbal communication. Experts say that a smile conveys encouragement and indicates that presenters value the information they are providing. Negative facial expressions, such as frowns or raised eyebrows, should be avoided (Brown University, 2015; Cherry, 2015; Zaubler, 2012; Prozesky, 2000; University of Southern California, n.d.-a; WikiHow, n.d.).
- **Stand up straight.** Poor posture is not only physically unhealthy, but it can convey a negative attitude and lack of respect for students (Brown University, 2015; Zaubler, 2012; Prozesky, 2000).

Presentation Techniques. Presenters have a very different experience than their audiences. Presenters have adrenaline flowing because they are in the spotlight and physically moving throughout the presentation. Students, on the other hand, are sitting in chairs, unable to move around freely, and thus more likely to lose focus on the presentation. To help keep students focused, researchers recommend the following presentation techniques.

- **Take frequent breaks.** Based on the short attention span evidenced in both children and adults, it has been suggested that presenters give students the opportunity to take frequent mini-stretch breaks. Phillips (2012) reported that seven to 10 minutes is the longest block of time anyone will pay attention to one particular topic. If the topic is one that the student does not have a great deal of interest in, he or she will tune out much more quickly.
- **Use presentation aids.** Students learn in different ways – some need to hear ideas, others need to see ideas written down. Communicating information in a variety of formats allows presenters to meet the needs of different learners. Presenters should consider the tools they can use to supplement their verbal presentations, such as videos, animations, audio clips, posters, charts, diagrams, and practical demonstrations (Brown University, 2015; Prozesky, 2000; University of Southern California, n.d.-a). Peterson (n.d.) suggested, “Offer something for students to look at, hold, or do that will reinforce your message.”
- **Check for understanding.** Educators should check regularly to see if students understand the main points of the presentation. Furrowed eyebrows, for example, may indicate that a student is trying to understand a concept, but not fully succeeding. The simple question, “Do you understand?” usually does not elicit much information, as most students will either nod or sit passively. To be certain that students understand the material being presented, it has been suggested that presenters ask each student to write down one sentence that summarizes the presentation or lecture (Brown University, 2015; DeMers, 2014; Prozesky, 2000; Peterson, n.d.; WikiHow, n.d.).

Summary

Experts agree that school district personnel must learn the art of interacting and communicating with students in order to provide them with important information and facilitate their learning. School and district staff need students’ undivided attention, which can be a real challenge because most students – just like adults - have very short attention spans. Researchers estimate that students pay attention for only about 10 to 20 minutes at a time.

This Information Capsule summarized factors that influence students’ receptiveness to school-wide and classroom presentations. These factors are divided into five categories: Environment, Content of Presentation, Communicating with Speech, Communicating with Body Language, and Presentation Techniques.

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