

UTLC 2026 · PASSPORT TO POSSIBILITIES

Empathy in Action

Strengthening Family Partnerships
for Student Success

MAYA *Smart*

CENTER FOR URBAN TEACHING
ALVERNO COLLEGE
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I came to this work as a parent



How it started



How it's going

**Her growth
became my
curriculum.**

And, eventually, my
book, *Reading for
Our Lives*.

Think about your last conversation with a parent.

1

How long did it last?

2

How did it make the parent feel?

3

How long did that feeling last?



THE BOOTH

You're the official in the booth

They'll stand in front of you for about a minute.

**You can give them the stamp,
and something more.**

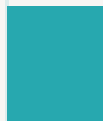
*Then they walk on together, without
you.*



THE TIME YOU GET

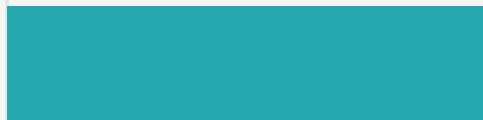
What parents get from you: brief exchanges

Pickup or drop-off
update



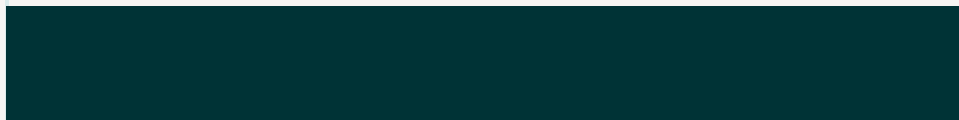
1 min

Hallway chat



5 min

Family conference



10 min

A tale of two back-to-school nights



Second grade



High school

You don't have to intend to be the official. You just are one.

Schools are light on support

Information

Pamphlets, handouts,
articles, links

Accountability

Reading logs, reading
plans, initials

Support

Not a piece of paper. A
feeling.

Support is what makes the information and accountability work.

Most of the journey happens at home

87%

of a child's waking hours, birth to 18,
are spent outside school

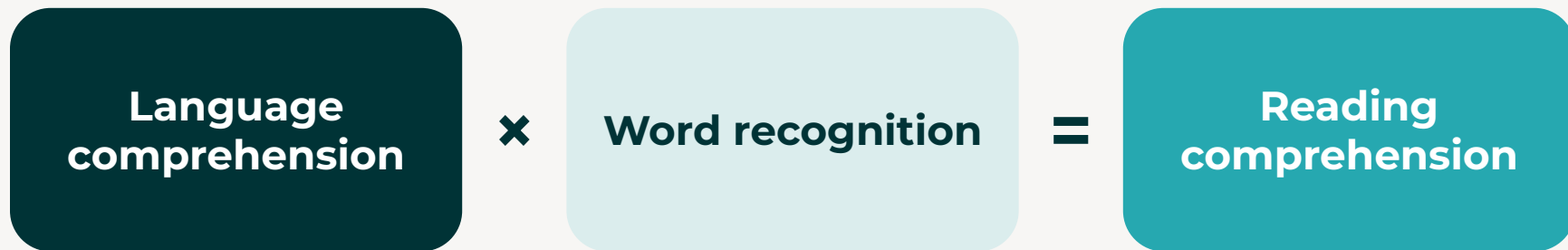
91,000

hours at home and in the community,
roughly

87% Outside school

13%
In school

Talk at home builds the language side of reading



*Built in every conversation
at home*

A child can't understand anything in writing that they wouldn't understand if you said it out loud.

A quick inventory

1

Information

How much did you send home? Count the flyers, newsletters, links.

2

Accountability

What did you ask parents to sign or track?

3

Support

What did you offer that wasn't a piece of paper?

Hardest one to answer? You're not alone. That's the gap.



Empathy in action

Three steps

1

Align

2

Affirm

3

Advise or assign

STEP 1 • ALIGN



Align before you assign

Before a parent reaches you, ask yourself:

How can I be of service?

How can I convey love and support?

Your energy is your impact. Let every form and log be a cue to tune in to yourself.



Affirm before you advise

What happens at home is real learning. Affirming parents makes you a partner in it.

It starts conversations

Parents share their expertise on their child: interests, temperament, struggles.

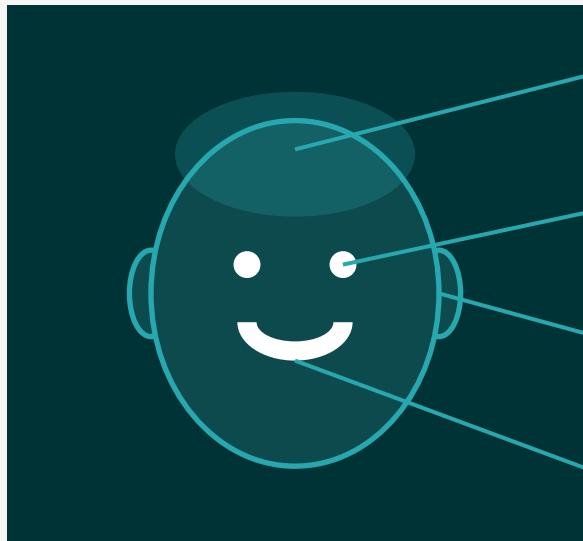
It builds trust

More learning at home, more engagement, and hard news lands softer.

The child is watching

They see that their family is respected here.

Face scan: reaching for strengths



Think • Forehead

What's on this parent's mind for their child?

See • Eyes

What does this parent see in their child?

Hear • Ears

What has this parent heard from their child?

Speak • Mouth

When has this parent spoken up for their child?

In the carpool line, you need one true, specific sentence.



Advise or assign, selectively

One good tip builds a habit. Ten overwhelm. Run your ask through the filter:

Doable

for this parent, on a Tuesday, after a shift?

Memorable

enough to say back in the parking lot?

Impactful

enough to move reading if they did it all year?

Ask for less and you get more.

A go-to tip: the TALK Method

T

Take turns

"So recess was the best part? What happened?"

A

Ask questions

"Why do you think the character did that?"

L

Label and point

"That's a fire extinguisher. The foam blankets the flammable liquids to block oxygen and cool the fuel."

K

Keep the conversation going

"What would you have done if you were there?"

Any language. Any reading level. Five minutes or twenty.

Remember

Parents are already literacy
leaders for their children.

**You're not their
supervisor.**

**You're their
partner.**



BEFORE YOU GO

Your Monday move

Pick one parent you'll see this week.

1

**Align before you
assign**

2

**Affirm before you
advise**

3

**Ask for less, and
you'll get more**

Slides + printable TALK Method card: mayasmart.com/utlc



Take the talk home

Slides + printable TALK Method card

mayasmart.com/utlc