

Building Powerful Parent Partnerships

Today, it's difficult to prevent the stresses of society from affecting schools' partnerships with families. With poverty at record levels, higher numbers of single-parent homes, and more negative influences for children, families are struggling. The reality is that now, more than ever, partnerships between school and home need to be nurtured every day. If educators hope to build deep, meaningful relationships with all families, they can no longer simply rely on the basics of relationship-building. Instead, they need to pay special attention to these relationships and use a unique skill set.

When educators face potentially tense situations with parents, ideally, they should approach them with finesse: employing active listening, developing deep empathy, conveying a genuine concern for the child, and resisting the urge to take the intensity of the conversation personally. Today, though, more challenging situations with parents can arise, fueled by underlying issues such as the inequity of educational opportunities, school safety concerns, and the pressure to maintain a healthy family.

Educators can use advanced relationship-building tactics to renew parents' sense of hope and trust. To develop sustainable partnerships with families, consider integrating the following strategies.

Be flexible with meeting locations.

For many parents, school was not a successful place. It was a place where being in the principal's office or meeting with a teacher had negative connotations. Crossing the threshold of the schoolhouse door can often bring back memories of, and sometimes physical reactions to, their time as a student. To minimize this effect, take the conversation into the home, a cafe, or another space outside of the school building.

This small step can be the catalyst for developing effective partnerships. Some schools, because of the effectiveness of this strategy, schedule home visits with all families as a way to foster and deepen relationships.

Redefine engagement. Parents struggling with their relationships

with the school may have limited experience or exposure to the successful aspects of the school. Invite these parents to serve the school in a non-traditional manner. Opportunities to engage in the school community could include coming 30 minutes prior to an event to help with check-in, being a supervisor for an outing, or making a reminder phone call to a few families about a due date.

For the parent struggling with the decisions of the teachers and school, volunteering in this way can provide a new lens of perception. The invitation also sends a message to the parent that, regardless of existing issues, a partnership between parent and school is valued.

Use varied communication. Our ever-accelerating world creates barriers to effective communication. One example of this is the overuse of email. Email leaves the tone of a message to subjective interpretation, which can be hazardous in a strained partnership.

Teachers and school leaders certainly don't have time to personalize every encounter with a parent who has a question or a concern, but it is amazing how a simple face-to-face encounter can defuse a situation. Taking these moments to speak personally to a parent about a problem or making a phone call rather than sending an email can often remove the tension from a struggling relationship.

Be fully present. Stressed parents will often enter school spaces with crossed

arms, furrowed brows, and sighs of frustration. Maintain positive non-verbal behaviors, such as smiling, nodding for understanding, and leaning into the conversation, to demonstrate a sense of being fully present. Maintaining a sense of calm and supportive energy in body language and thoughts can allow communication to become much more open and productive.

Establish a common focus. The final strategy for building strong parent partnerships is to focus on what you and the parent have in common: concern for the student's learning and growth. In this space, there is common ground. Schools and parents both want an excellent education for students, and by maintaining a focus on this area of unity, tension and frustration can be reduced or eliminated.

Educators need to remember that the road to strong relationships with all parents is paved with deep care for the individual child. When school personnel are flexible and demonstrate a willingness to work with our learning partners in the home, students are the ultimate benefactors. Having the student, parent, and school working in rhythm for the same long-term goals and dreams is essential for sustaining long-term, powerful relationships. □

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