Building Powerful Parent Partnerships

Todat, it is 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 they may have learned.

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 uncertainty of the effects of a single-parent family.

Educators can use advanced relationship-building tactics to renew and sustain partnerships with families, thereby addressing some of the key challenges. Communicating effectively with parents is one of the most important roles for educators.

Be flexible with meeting locations. When educators face potentially tense situations, they may consider meeting in a safe environment outside school grounds, such as a classroom or mentor’s office, where they can reframe the conversation and focus on the child. Educators can also send a message to the parent that they are flexible and demonstrate a willingness to work with our learning partners in the home, students are the ultimate beneficiaries. Having the student, parent, and school working in rhythm for the same goal can ensure that the conversation is meaningful and honest.

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 the reader. To minimize this effect, take the conversation into the home, a cafe, or another location away from the school building. This small step can be the catalyst for developing effective partnerships. Some schools, because of the effective communication tactics they use in these visits with all families as a way to foster deeper 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. For a due date.

For the parent struggling with the decisions of the teacher 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 differences, a partnership between parent and school is valued.

Establish a common focus. The final strategy for building strong parental partnerships is to focus on what you and the parent have in common, particularly the concern for the student’s learning and growth. In this space, there is more 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 beneficiaries. 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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Foundations of a Strong School Culture

Many school principals cannot help being preoccupied with test scores. I am no exception and have often been nagged by questions about the most effective preparation. Could we have taught different strategies or employed more practice in a single subject? How do we ask the question of what are the schools in the district? Will my leadership be questioned? Is there a way to build more urgency among the faculty? The never-ending questions can be endlessly preoccupying.

Unfortunately, the questions often prevent us from nurturing the components of a strong school culture from which improved test scores can grow.

This article is not an answer to the question of raising scores for a principal—questions that I’m no way want to minimize. Rather, I suggest beginning from a different perspective. My hope is to provide a reminder of the basic values that foster improvement. Shift away from focusing on testing alone to highlighting the essential elements underlying a strong school culture: an environment where teachers are continually encouraged to say “Help me; thank you; and WOW!” What follows is an outline of three phrases that are fundamental to all great school cultures.

The inspiration for this shift away from testing to a D reduction of stress in the mind of the child can come from an unlikely source: the nonfiction writer Anne Lamott. In an interview titled, “Falling Off the Tightrope,” on beliefnet.com, Lamott spoke of three essential prayers that articulate the most basic human needs: “Help me, thank you,” and “WOW!” I found clear parallels to the culture a principal must work to create.

Ask for Help

One building block of a strong school is setting a help-seeking culture. Faculties need our permission to acknowledge that teaching is incredibly complex and demanding, and they are not expecting to do it alone. This means replacing the hierarchy of the traditional school principal that asking for help is not an indication of incompetence, but of a reflective practitioner who recognizes his or her blind spots and wants to get better. Teaching calls on all parts of our creativity, perspective, content knowledge, common sense, and sense of humor.

It is essential that teachers rely on each other and their collective wisdom and skills when they analyze student work, plan timely interventions, and implement engaging and purposeful curriculum. Test scores only improve in isolated instances, unless there is a school culture where asking for help, collaborating, and learning from each other is the norm. In an environment where teachers are encouraged to say “Help me; thank you; and WOW!” we can safely plant seeds for a help-seeking, collaborative, and collaborative culture.

Show Appreciation

Teachers crave recognition and acknowledgement for their commitment to educating today’s children. Rarely is the thank you forthcoming or in 1:1 ratio to the amount they give. Unhealthy resentment and a sense of isolation can develop unless appreciation becomes part of our school culture.

What does that mean? Again, it is up to the principal to set the example. Write a note of thanks when a teacher goes above and beyond to do extra work that benefits the students. Give them recognition for their efforts.

Ask for a parent volunteer. One of the most effective and engaging forms of student instruction is when the principal asks for help in a way that makes the role an opportunity to improve instruction. Asking for a parent volunteer can be a powerful way of asking for help.

Use every opportunity to thank faculty members publicly—for perseverance and patience with an especially challenging student, for taking the lead on technology innovations, for offering a workshop before school, or for co-leading the next faculty meeting.

Highlighting “thank you” is another way to encourage teachers that there is much to be grateful for if we only look around us. Thank the colleague next door for dismissing one’s case, for bringing up a cup of coffee, for offering reassuring words after a lesson that bombed. Giving thanks to each other is an important way to connect and remember that we are not in this alone. The greater the goal of the children we teach. It builds a foundation of trust not about our creativity, perspective, content knowledge, common sense, and sense of humor.

Despite the stresses of our profession, we often forget how lucky we are to work in community schools. Why are we so fortunate? When we least expect it, miracles happen. The parent, who was inappropriately angry and defensive in a conference, may return a few weeks later because of the words of thanks for a teacher’s forthrightness. A child who struggled finally experiences success. A classroom discussion after the election bombing. Giving thanks to each other can bring hope and healing in isolated instances, unless there is a school culture where asking for help, collaborating, and learning from each other is the norm.

Lucky we are to work in school communities. We should be grateful we are not alone. We should be grateful we are not alone. Where else are we able to slow down and often when we least expect it, make a difference in a child’s life? That’s the WOW! We are the lucky professionals who are surrounded by the possibilities of making simple, but profound, differences in the way children see themselves, experience success, and find a meaningful place in the world.

The need to respond to test scores will not go away. Questions about the most effective instruction and preparation will continue. I believe that a more thoughtful response will be possible when the principal grounds faculty in the belief, “Our culture is a culture of unity, respect, and patience with an especially challenging student.”

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