

Creative Communication Strategies

One day I received a phone call from a parent whose child had been teased by another child in the school lunchroom. The parent wanted immediate satisfaction, and I simply listened to the details so I could figure out my course of action.

As I talked with this parent, I remembered my own challenges with my first-grade son and told the parent: “I’ve just dealt with the same situation with my own son, so I know how you feel.” I proceeded to tell the parent how my son tried to solve his own problem first before seeking adult assistance. I described how my son took a small, extra snack to school in his lunch the next day for his own bully as a way to tell him that he was my son’s “friend.” The student never bothered my son again; in fact, he actually started treating him nicely because of my child’s attempt to peacefully and proactively solve his own problems.

Sharing my story with this parent could have backfired, but the goal was to try to address the parent’s complaint by developing a skill-set for life-long problem solving. I could have simply intervened as the principal, but this parent told me she would try my son’s solution first, and it worked out positively for her child too.

Sharing successes or challenges from your own life is one way to create a meaningful connection with parents and boost their involvement and support. Many parents have had terrible school experiences themselves as kids, and as a result often feel ambivalent about their children’s schooling. Although these parents value school, their own prior experiences might have shaped their current perceptions about teachers, administrators, or even the bureau-

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cracy of school systems at large.

I’d be lying if I said that I haven’t encountered obstacles while trying to work with parents, but the more I practice effective communication strategies and creative methods for increasing positive parental involvement, the more my efforts will ultimately help my students achieve better results. The outcome: happier students who have parents and school staff working side by side in their lives.

Common Ground

Getting a great turnout of parents and students to school events presents a typical problem for teachers and administrators. In the past, I’ve tried newsletters and memos (which the students may or may not have taken home) to promote school activities. I’ve also had students make posters or use morning announcements to inform everyone of upcoming events. Although these traditional methods

start the process for increasing parent attendance at events, we must also consider universal “What might everyone have in common?” angles to attract attention.

At our school, teachers and parents brainstormed some characteristics that parents most likely would have in common. We felt that most, if not all, of our parents owned a refrigerator or a CD/DVD player. So we purchased some bright card-stock, some magnetic strips, and presto: Excited students took home Save the Date magnets (which were made by teachers and parents during a school planning team meeting) to put on their refrigerators. Alternatively, schools could put a sound bite or a video clip on a 50 cent CD or DVD to create a personal invitation to an upcoming program. Our events attracted strong participation because we used creative communication strategies that were accessible to larger parent audiences.

Assistance, Please

I encountered a student having an incredibly bad day after he arrived late to school one morning. He was hungry, tired, and ended up swearing at his teacher because he “hated math.” Rather than pursue formal discipline for this child because of his outburst, I called his father and used this simple introduction: “Mr. Jenkins, this is Rick Jetter from Spruce School, and I’m calling you because I need your help.” Rather than calling a parent to inform him of negative student behavior, I extended a humble call for assistance.

I quickly learned from the parent about a family pet that died the night before. An explicit, humble attitude can sometimes help you gain an ally in a parent and help you to learn about the potential root causes of students’ particular behaviors. I wasn’t calling Mr. Jenkins as the almighty school principal who knows everything about his child. I called as an equal adult in his son’s life who also wanted his child to succeed in school.

New Angles on Achievement

As I visited classrooms throughout the school one day to see what students were working on, I noticed one particular student struggling with a graphic organizer while he read. The assignment required him to sequence events from a story. After assisting the student myself for a few moments, I headed to my office to call his mother.

Was he in trouble? No.

We've all probably heard about the strategy of calling parents to report the positive things that we see their children doing each day in order to build up a better, trusting, good-faith relationship—especially if we sense we might need those parents to assist with addressing school behavior or increasing academic achievement issues. But this time I wasn't communicating to a parent in this manner. Instead, I used a different angle for promoting school success. I informed the parent that while I was working with her child, I noticed the struggle that he had with graphic organizers and sequencing. I offered to send home some templates so that her child could use the graphic organizer visuals to group and sequence daily chores, functions of the house, or other responsibilities.

This call did two major things: First, the parent appreciated that I knew the details about her child's learning and where he was struggling. Second, I gave the parent a home-link recommendation for carrying out a similar academic task in order to promote the message and practical application of why we're at school in the first place: to help students achieve.

As we place more emphasis on student achievement and use creative communication strategies to promote our desire for involved, supportive parents, we can only expect to see our students benefit from such a powerful school and home relationship. 

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