

A Simple Plan to Make Parents Feel Welcome

Attempting to engage with 100 percent of families ensures you can reach more of them

By Jesse Kraft

As principal, I want my school to be welcoming, and I want to be viewed as approachable to all parents. Yet my actions at school events didn't always match my intentions. Sure, I'd smile and greet parents as they came by, but many families would fade into the crowd, largely missed as I'd hang out on the sidelines and chat with the more familiar assistant principals, PTA officers, and staff members in attendance.

Most parents probably don't expect to be greeted personally by the principal at an event where there are hundreds in attendance. But equitable practices require school leaders to understand the people we interact

with—our staff, our students, and the parents with whom we seek to form partnerships. When we take the time to try to really see students' parents and families, we appreciate their culture, their religion, their ethnicity, and their identity. These efforts signal that we welcome them and that they have value in our school.

To do this, I set a goal to greet 100 percent of family members at evening events. I would no longer station myself on the sidelines, and I wouldn't let greetings be incidental. I would intentionally set out to say hello to, and make eye contact with, every single person who visited. My hope was that I'd make more connections to families I didn't know and that parents would recognize the effort, feel more comfortable, and view our school as a welcoming place.

Making It Happen

My first attempt was at back-to-school night. The event had a set end time, and the school's main entrance is the best path to the parking lot. I stationed myself in the center of the lobby a few minutes before the end time. At first, I did great: The first wave of parents was light, and I said, "Thanks for coming," "Have a great night," and "How'd we do?" I made eye contact and was feeling energized. Then another wave of parents rushed through.

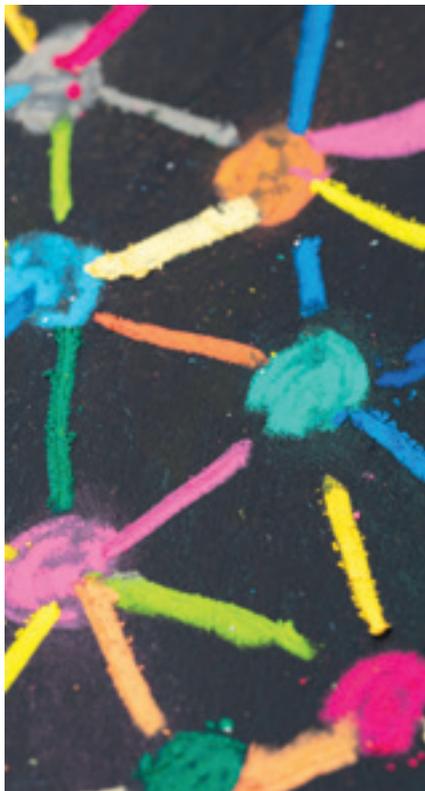
I probably looked a bit manic trying to catch the eyes of a few hundred people in a span of a few seconds, and some people were getting by me. A few parents tried to parlay my farewell into a longer conversation, and

I would acknowledge their request while asking them to give me a few minutes to say goodbye to everyone. I didn't achieve 100 percent engagement that night, but I made many more connections than I previously had with my off-to-the-side, nonchalant approach.

My next attempt was a family movie night sponsored by the PTA. During the event, families come to the school cafeteria to watch a movie, setting themselves up in lawn chairs and blankets. I wasn't able to be in the lobby as families came in, so I walked through the cafeteria and made a quick visit to each blanket or beach chair to greet everyone. I didn't linger. I simply stopped by, smiled, shook hands where appropriate, and said, "Thanks for coming."

This was easier than I thought. Kids wanted me to visit their seats and blankets, and parents reacted with smiles. Because I interacted with everyone, it made it easier to correct a few children for misbehaving during the movie. Parents immediately supported my corrections.

I didn't stop there, however. New parents are a subset that I needed to engage, so I spoke to the registrar—whose responsibility it is to know all new parents—about my goal. To make the best first impression, I asked her to interrupt me anytime she enrolled a new student, so I could personally meet the child and parent. If I was in a closed-door meeting, she could interrupt. If I was in a classroom, she could summon me. It costs me about a minute to have each face-to-face interaction, but they have been worth it!



Check Yourself

Unintentional biases can seep into our interactions. My school is racially and ethnically diverse, with 42 different languages spoken at home. I reflected on past interactions before I set my goal, and I thought I might have been guilty of leaving some parents out—I might naturally have talked more often or more deeply with white families, fathers, PTA officers, sports fans, or anyone else who has commonalities with me. What message is that sending? Aiming for 100 percent helps minimize the risk of leaving people out.

Even when I'm getting to everyone, I must still try to watch myself "from the balcony." I take note to see whether I have the same eye contact, smile, and enthusiasm for all parents, regardless of race, gender, etc. People are accustomed to facing some kind of bias, intentional or not. I hope to surprise them with an equal amount of warmth.

Even if they miss a goodbye because the crowd was too large or someone else needs me, they see and hear my attempts to connect with everyone.

Here's the best part: This strategy doesn't have to be perfect. I often fall short! But the effort is rewarded. Most parents can sense good intentions. Even if they miss a goodbye because the crowd was too large or someone else needs me, they see and hear my attempts to connect with everyone. The intended message is out there—we see you, we welcome you, and you're one of us! Who wouldn't feel good about that? 

Jesse Kraft is principal of Coates Elementary School in Centreville, Virginia.

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