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 relating to parents. Instead, they need to pay special attention to these relationships and use a unique skill set.

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 stressed or challenged can arise, fueled by underlying issues such as the inequity of educational opportunities, school safety concerns, and the stress parents feel about their own 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:

- **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 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 embedded more practice instead of focusing on test scores? Where do we hope to take these 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 questions, posing for a principal—questions that I in 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 components underlying a strong school culture: an environment where teachers are continually encouraged to say “Help me; thank you; and WOW!” What follows is an attempt to combine the phrases and why they are important. The inspiration for this shift away from testing to a preliminary focus on culture comes 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; 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 helping-seek culture. Faculty need our permission to acknowledge that teaching is incredibly complex and demanding, and they are not expected to do it alone. This means redirecting the blame of the odd score or test bomb. A 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 the 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 in an environment that offers instruction becomes the norm. “Help me, help me” must be heard from every corner of our buildings. The ability to look critically at test scores will follow.

### Show Appreciation

Teachers crave recognition and acknowledgement for their commitment to educating today’s children. Rarely is the thanks forthcoming or acknowledged. Unhealthy resentment and a sense of competition, friendship, and bravery that makes one’s heart sing. Where else are we able to slowly, 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 “Help me; thank you; and WOW!” as foundational of a strong school culture.

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