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The fight to overcome negative perceptions in one school community

By Kelly Soter
When I was called in to meet with the elementary director regarding my candidacy as an elementary school principal, I was undoubtedly nervous and apprehensive. When he offered me a position at a local school, I was thrilled. Then he told me that they would be placing me at Jackson Elementary. Because I grew up in the area, I was well aware of the rumors and negative perceptions of the school and community. I often heard, “You don’t want your kids to go to that school” or, “The neighborhood is awful” and the like. To say I was terrified when I was offered the job would be an understatement. I was a brand-new principal and had no idea what I was getting into. I knew without a doubt that I would be in over my head.
What I quickly learned, once I began my work, is that Jackson Elementary is a gem of a school set in the heart of a neighborhood full of families that have high aspirations for their children. I also learned that negative perceptions of our school still existed in the community. I heard disapproving comments from parents who wanted their children to be granted a transfer to another school. I heard it from educators in other school areas when they offered sympathy. I heard it from teachers who did not want to move to our school when we had a vacancy. Perceptions are our own realities—and if we were to move forward, I knew we needed to address not only the negative perceptions, but the stereotypes that often exist in low-income school communities. Here’s how we did it.

**Insist on a Welcoming Environment**

The first moment that any guest, student, or parent enters our doors, we have an opportunity. First impressions are critical, and we at Jackson Elementary hold ourselves to a very high standard. We offer a positive, welcoming environment for every child and every parent who enters. All visitors are accepted as they are, and we are thrilled to have them.

We must suspend judgment and believe the very best of our families. Take a critical look at how families enter your building. Who greets them? Are people met with eye contact and a smile? How do the vestibules and reception areas look? Can the space be made more visually appealing?

**Lead With a Positive Heart**

I believe that the families in our school community are doing the absolute best they can. I believe that parents of students want their children to be safe and successful. I believe that our parents are the most influential adults in the lives of our children. I choose to live a life in which I see the positive—the glass is half full.

A positive attitude truly impacts what we see, what we hear, and what we accept.
Communication Is Key

Parents need to hear directly from schools. The lines of communication with our students and families are absolutely critical to informing and changing perceptions.

We regularly use social media as a way to share important messages. Getting ahead of a newsworthy situation is important to addressing any misinformation or criticism from our parents. It is a delicate balance between getting the information out to families as soon as possible so they are informed, and waiting to confirm the accuracy of information. As principal, you’ll have to find the sweet spot that balances the need for haste with the need for careful review. The goal is to share accurate news, and for families to obtain news and information about our school directly from us.

Be a Community Hub

In schools and communities that serve low-income, highly mobile families, it is essential that the school become much more than a center of academic education. Schools need to serve as critical hubs of support for the neighborhood, a “one-stop shop.”

In addition to the traditional supports offered at our elementary school, we employ a parent outreach coordinator and provide a parent space called the Family Neighborhood Center. These unconventional supports allow our school to connect to families with basic needs and to build trusting relationships with one another.

Weekly support offered at our school includes:

- Fresh fruit and vegetable produce stand
- Clothing closet
- School supplies
- Diapers
- Play & Learn Play Group
- Mom’s Club
- Take-home literacy bags
- Lending library
- Parenting education support
- Multi-agency Wrap-Around Team for Family Stability

Supporting children by supporting the families in our community has been our mission and our message for many years. We recognize that in order to truly be of service to the children in our communities, we must start with the homes they live in. This belief has driven our vision and the many services we offer to families in our communities. An unintended benefit of this vision is that the word is spreading, and our reputation is changing.

Some of the most powerful recommendations of our school come from parents who have benefited from the work our school community is doing. Years ago, many of my conversations with parents centered around negative perceptions of our school. Today, parents stop me to say, “Wow, I had no idea. This is the best school our kids have ever attended.”

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