Connect and Engage

When I was a superintendent, I often found myself feeling conflicted over what I had to do as the leader of a large complex system, and what I wished I could do as the parent of three young children (now ages 7, 12, and 13). I was, literally, the parent in the system with the most resources available to navigate through the rules, regulations, and policies so that I could understand how to partner and engage with the school to help my children succeed. Yet, I often felt either overwhelmed by all the information coming at me from my kids’ schools, or I felt dissatisfied that I didn’t know enough about what was really happening with them every day.

2015 PDK/Gallup poll results show that, overall, parents trust their local schools and teachers, although there is a range of perspectives among different demographic groups. And parents tend to believe that who is teaching their child and what their child is learning are the most important factors to improve schools. Moreover, when parents look for evidence to judge a school’s success, they tend to value student work, student levels of engagement, and their hope for the future. While standardized tests play a role in public education, the public has grown weary of their over-emphasis. So how can principals tell their schools’ stories and show parents that the school is organizing for success? There are several principles that school leaders can follow to engage parents in authentic ways that build trust and relationships, and will lead to more support and success for children.

Transparency. When I was superintendent, I was always struck by how some principals wouldn’t want to share bad news, or simply any news. They didn’t realize three things: Parents are going to find out anyway; in the absence of information, people tend to make up their own stories; and most people are understanding and forgiving when a leader is forthright about a situation. It’s always better to get ahead of a situation and frame the story in a way that will lead to a productive outcome.

Cultural proficiency. We are in an ever-changing world and our schools are becoming more diverse each year. It is a core competency of leadership to be culturally proficient, and school leaders have an enormous responsibility to acknowledge that race plays a role in society and public schools. Cultural proficiency is a life-long journey of reflection, engagement, and understanding. School leaders must show parents—and students—of all backgrounds that they’re valued in school, and leaders must model that behavior for teachers and other employees. Schools can engage in study circles, book studies, or other kinds of training to learn how to become culturally proficient. There is no excuse for not doing so, and it will reap great rewards.

When school leaders spend their time simply describing the new math curriculum, science program, or technology purchase, they only get so far, even if the PowerPoint slides are beautiful.

The same goes for communicating and engaging with parents. Parents want to see evidence of student work, they want to see classrooms, and some even want to see the budget, school improvement plan, or data.

When school leaders spend their time simply describing the new math curriculum, science program, or technology purchase, they only get so far, even if the PowerPoint slides are beautiful. Rather, try putting parents in small groups and have them do actual math work, or a science experiment, or work on the new devices. I know one principal of a school who started regular walkthroughs of classrooms with parents, with language translation. It served to build community, relationships, and trust between the school staff and families because the focus was on what kids were doing in classrooms every day, and that’s what parents are interested in.

Get personal. Peter Block, who writes about community engagement, talks about “knee-to-knee” conversation during which people come together in community to informally talk about the issues at hand. This builds trust and relationships and helps school leaders connect with parents at a personal level that can reap great rewards.

Explain why. Simon Sinek has a TED Talk and a book about the power of “why.” He tells us to start with why to inspire people. All too often we focus our energies on the what and the how, such as the school improvement plan or the new discipline policy. We don’t spend enough time talking with families—or students for that matter—about why we’re taking the school in a certain direction. How often do we spend our time with parents talking about the plan rather than the dream?

Vary your strategy. School leaders should engage and communicate with families “7 times, 7 ways,” as AT&T used to say. There’s no one best way to engage with people. What works for some won’t for others, and principals have to continually review their
approach to determine what’s working and why. Social media must be part of the strategy. Whether it’s Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, social media can be a great way to show the school community what’s happening, what the school leader values, and to recognize great classroom practice. Of course, privacy issues and district policies have to be navigated, but social media can be an effective part of a school leader’s repertoire when engaging with families.

Effectively engaging with families can often be seen as an add-on to the day-to-day effort of running a school. Yet, if a school leader sees it as an essential part of their work and a way to increase trust and build community, the investment will pay off in powerful ways.

Joshua P. Starr is chief executive officer of the PDK International Family of Associations.

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