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## Handling Threats from Parents

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by Kaylen Tucker

In [last month's column](#), I addressed mediating relationships between parents and teachers, strongly encouraging principals to take proactive steps toward fostering an environment of open communication. Conflicts between parents and teachers, however, are not always resolved at the first level and parents are sometimes dissatisfied—not with the teacher, but with the administrator. Unfortunately, principals can become the target of threats to forego the mediation route in favor of a legal battle.

Some of the most common concerns that prompt parents to threaten legal action are student discipline; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Free Appropriate Public Education classifications and educational benefits; and custody and visitation violations. In our increasingly litigious society, it is important for principals to be prepared to deal with parents—and their threats—fairly and responsibly. Here are some suggestions for managing a situation that has escalated to threats of legal action.

**Don't panic, but take it seriously.** Parents threaten administrators about taking them to court far more often than they actually do. How does a principal decide which threats are “just talk” and which to take more seriously? Trae Kendrick, chief learning officer for the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association, believes principals should take all threats seriously. “While there is rarely a need for panic, there is always a need for principals to be responsive and proactive in dealing with potential legal matters,” she says. Robert Howe cautions that although most threats do not make it to the courtroom, “that does not mean they are dismissed wholesale.” Instead, Howe, who is the executive director of the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association, suggests principals “do nothing with a threat of a lawsuit,” but “report it to their superintendent ... and document the incident in question.”

**Do your homework.** Bonnie Tryon, principal of William H. Golding Elementary School in Cobleskill, New York, advises principals to “do their homework,” which includes “doing everything you can to divert legal action with good communication and good relationships.” When Tryon had to mitigate a conflict about whether a parent with a restraining order was allowed to pick up the child after school, she was able to produce the legally binding paperwork and persuade the parent against breaking the law, despite that parent's threats to call the district attorney. In addition to keeping all custody and restraining orders up-to-date, principals should know their students, their students' families, and any problems they may have had in the past with older siblings, says Tryon. According to Hermitage, Tennessee, principal Teresa Dennis, principals must also train staff members and others who work with students to “keep the best documentation possible.”

**Listen to parents.** Parents threaten lawsuits when they feel they don't have any other recourse. Therefore, it is important to “take the high road in communication with a disgruntled parent” because “if parents get respect, no matter how wrong they may be, a lawsuit is not often the end result,” says Howe. Tryon agrees that most parents just want to be heard and that principals should listen to the warning signs that are always present in their language. Learn to know what to look for, like a sharp, pointed tone or threatening attitude, then redouble your effort to divert a legal contest through communication and relationship-building.

**Use your network.** Though each situation is unique, many principals have faced legal threats and may be able to give you constructive insight. Matt Carver, who is the director of legal services for the School Administrators of Iowa, advises principals to use fellow administrators or legal directors as a sounding board. At the early stages, principals need “mostly practical advice rather than legal,” but they should get their school district involved if the matter becomes more litigious, he says. As for formal support, Dennis thinks “there is

[n]ever a time that you can call and ask for help too soon.” Instead of waiting too long to address a potentially legal issue, “when in doubt or when you want affirmation, use the resources provided by your local system or NAESP,” she says. Benefits for Active and Emeritus NAESP members include the Association’s Legal Benefits Program, which safeguards you against unexpected legal expenses due to actions that may suddenly be directed against you.

Although most threats do not escalate to legal action, principals should be prepared to resolve the matter fueling the threat while maintaining the best interests of multiple stakeholders. Jeanne Cavender, principal of Santa Fe Trail Elementary School in Independence, Missouri, reminds us that principals “must consider the education and safety of every student ... whereas the parent only has their child in mind.”