Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater?

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ecently I was caught off guard by some of the drastically different responses to a question posed by The Parent Institute on a national survey of elementary and secondary school principals, superintendents, Title I directors, counselors, and other school leaders. We asked, “What are your greatest concerns about parent involvement today?”

Many leaders were very pleased with the involvement they have and want to do even more to help parents build their parenting skills. Comments like these were typical:

- “Parents have responded to all our requests. They have come and worked at the school; they have come for conferences, PTO meetings, and anything else.”
- “Our parental involvement has been superb!”
- “Although parents are more involved than in the past, many don’t have the skills to help their children. I need more programs for parents that further their knowledge about parenting, inform them about community services, and help them understand today’s academic rigors.”
- “Parent support is very important. If the parents are supportive, the students are less likely to have school problems.”

What surprised me, however, was the number of negative comments from educators, such as these:

- “Parents do not care about their child’s education.”
- “Parents tend to see themselves as adversaries with the school instead of partners.”
- “I really don’t think schools are able to adequately address parent involvement. We are so busy testing, retesting, and figuring out ways to improve test scores that programs like parent involvement become a side issue.”
- “We have four active parents in a school of 600!”

I am concerned about what appears to be an increasing number of educators who dismiss parent involvement. I understand how educators can be discouraged. It takes time and effort to get and keep parents involved. Some parents are overbearing, demanding, rude, and increasingly litigious. The No Child Left Behind Act forces school leaders to focus disproportionately on tests and making adequate yearly progress—often at the expense of other priorities such as parent involvement.

Are We Alienating Our Best Supporters?

Through thick and thin, the strongest political base for schools has always been the parents of children in school. But the 2007 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools showed that just 53 percent of public school parents would now give the public schools in their community a grade of A or B—down from 62 percent in 2001. In addition, the estimated number of students being home-schooled in the U.S. increased by 29 percent from 1999 to 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Carole Kennedy, former NAESP president and veteran education leader, recently told me she sees many disenfranchised parents who have nothing good to say about the schools their children attend. “They just want them to survive and graduate,” she says. Kennedy believes many educators today see parent involvement as a distraction—and when that happens, adversarial positions replace advocacy. “The challenge,” she says, “is to help those teachers and principals change their attitude toward parents and see them as the last opportunity to save public schools.”

Now, more than ever, is the time to build and maintain parent support. Four decades of research document the indisputable influence parents have on children’s education—and the fact that basic school efforts to welcome parents, respect them, and show them how they can help their children learn can produce significant gains in student achievement.

Is parent involvement easy? No, but neither is anything else that makes a difference for children. This is no time to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It’s time to make parent involvement work!

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Why do you think some educators are so negative about parent involvement today? Do you think schools are losing the support of today’s parents? What are the best, most manageable ways you have found to get parents effectively involved? Share your thoughts at www.parent-institute.com/blog.