Working With Parent Diversity

If we could somehow take a group snapshot of all the parents of students in schools today, it would be dramatically different from such a photo taken 25, 15, or even five years ago. As one school leader said, “Today’s schools resemble the United Nations!” That diversity offers new opportunities—and poses new challenges—to all schools.

Seeking insights on working with today’s parent diversity, NAESP and The Parent Institute recently surveyed NAESP members for their ideas. After reviewing the thousands of responses, I’d like to share my observations and suggest some strategies you can use right away.

The State of Diversity Is ... Diverse

First, a general observation about what the survey says about diversity in our schools. While it’s not a scientific sample of today’s elementary and middle schools, I was surprised at the range of views on the subject. Most principals accept diversity as a fact of life at their schools and try to find ways to “deal” with it. Some rail against diversity, feeling it is a problem that is holding back their schools. But the number who report that they embrace diversity, and see it as an important enhancement to learning, made me smile. I see a major shift in principals’ attitudes about working with diverse students and families.

Jim Keegan, principal at Mt. Vernon Elementary School in Springfield, Oregon, demonstrates the evolving new attitude: “We are given a great opportunity to teach understanding, compassion, and acceptance. Connecting to the classroom and building diversity into our community is a great teacher.”

Susie Gahan, principal of Fairmont Elementary School in New Albany, Indiana, also expresses what I see as the emerging view: “The benefit [of diversity] in our school is that our students truly are gaining a global experience. The staff has learned about how each culture values its children. We have learned that all cultures value their children and want what is best for them. They will become involved in the school if you find the way to make them feel welcome and valued.”

Innovative Ideas

I was also delighted to read about many imaginative ideas and proactive initiatives, such as:

Looking for natural leaders in various language groups and working with them to develop connections with those groups.

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Emphasizing respect in parent relationships. Willie Jefferson, principal of Pesson Elementary School in New Iberia, Louisiana, suggests, “Always call parents by title rather than by first name even when they are much younger than you.”

Asking for ideas from parents “on what they want and need from school, rather than us telling them what they need.”

Mary Nardo, principal of North Side Elementary School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, says understanding parents as valued partners works in her school.

The Gold Standard

My biggest surprise in reviewing the survey results was the support for conducting home visits. For years I have regarded home visits as the gold standard activity for schools working to build a mutually beneficial relationship with parents. But the trend has been to move away from such close personal contact, with schools citing lack of time, teacher union contracts, parents who do not want visits, and the popular, if flawed, notion that e-mail and other telephone and electronic communication systems are all a school needs.

I didn’t expect home visits to be mentioned frequently, or maybe at all, in this parent diversity survey, but it was. Home visits are being used to embrace diversity. One principal wrote that his school’s kindergarten teachers visit the homes of every child before the start of school, observing: “This helps families to feel comfortable by meeting the teacher in their own setting. They have the option of meeting at school if they do not want the visit in their home, but most do select the home visit.” Others added that taking a translator along on home visits is very helpful.

The survey shows that diversity is a growing reality in our schools, as it is nationally and worldwide. As we embrace diversity and see it as an unprecedented opportunity to boost student learning—and parent involvement—I believe we will see improvements in student achievement like we have never seen before. The best news is that it is already starting to happen!

To read more survey responses, visit the NAESP Web site at www.naesp.org or go to www.parent-institute.com/NAESP/Diversity.

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