

How to Write an Effective Newsletter Column

One of the most dreaded obligations for an elementary school principal is writing a weekly column for the school newsletter. Although teachers routinely challenge students to write clearly, thoughtfully, and authentically, few principals welcome this challenge.

Writing requires a synthesis of facts and information, organization and mechanics, and, to be effective, commitment to a point of view. Plus, it's a risk. When we write, we expose ourselves—something that doesn't happen in quite the same way when dashing off an e-mail, sending a memo, or writing up a classroom observation. Although a principal's message in a weekly newsletter is an expectation in most schools, writing is not listed as a quality of effective leadership on the typical principal evaluation. I would like to suggest that writing a column—if recognized as an opportunity to clarify and articulate the values that guide us—can have an enormous impact on a school, as well as a source of confirmation and confidence for the solitary principal. Writing is well worth the bother.

A Three-Step Process

How to write an effective principal's column is a skill that can be learned. Many principals routinely resort to a “nuts-and-bolts” format to keep parents informed of the everyday events of school life, but the principal's message can offer much-needed insight into the complexity of learning and the demands of educating children. For example, parents worry about how they can support their child, such as how much to help with homework, and the principal has an important perspective to offer. The goal is not to provide answers—no one wants to be told what to do—but to suggest how parents can be more thoughtful and deliberate in raising confident, competent, and considerate children.

Getting started. Give yourself permission to experiment with your newsletter. Use your column to raise important challenges that schools face and how they are handled. Although writing about the decisions you make and the values that guide your leadership can



feel awkward at first, let parents know that periodically you will write with a different purpose than a straightforward update on school events. Explain that you will be writing with a perspective that comes from experience gleaned from working with many different teachers, children, and families. Don't pretend that your school—and its leader—have all the answers.

Picking a topic. Think of the unresolved dilemmas that are part of a typical school day and the topics are endless. These are often the challenges that arise in exchanges with parents,

situations in which it is difficult to step back and gain perspective on the spot. Writing provides a second chance. A few examples of my column topics from last year include:

- *Parent conferences.* After a faculty meeting in which it was clear that teachers were uneasy meeting with parents, I made suggestions for productive conversations.
- *Transitions.* After a parent complained, “My daughter hasn't been herself since the end of May. What's going on at school?” I acknowledged that change is difficult for all of us, whether at the beginning or end of the school year, and that children are no different. I wrote about how we help at school, and ways to help at home.

- *Social dilemmas.* In response to parents who expect the school to put a permanent end to teasing, bullying, unkindness, exclusion, or hurt of any kind, I wrote about the inevitable ups and downs of children's friendships, and provided suggestions that help parents to listen and support, rather than interfere.

Organizing your thoughts. Once you have a topic, find a format that works for you. A three-paragraph piece may be enough—no one wants to read more than that, anyhow. Three paragraphs

are manageable and not as daunting as writing a lengthier column. Begin by introducing the topic. This can be a quote from a conversation, a vignette from school, or an illustration from a relevant article or book. Try to capture the essence of the topic from the get-go. For example:

- *On regression in June:* "In the ebb and flow of the school year, the last month deserves special mention and understanding. It is unlike any other time of year."
- *On friendships:* "Your child comes home from school and wails, 'Ruthie says I can't play with her anymore.' What should a parent do and say?"
- *On conferences:* "Few teachers slept well the night before conferences began."

In the second paragraph, raise the questions that are on your mind, and probably on the minds of parents and teachers. This means elaborating on the topic introduced in the first paragraph. Take a risk by acknowledging and articulating the common ground and common concerns we share with parents.

The ending is the most difficult part. Be willing to say what you and your school can do and what you can't do. Remember that all you can offer is perspective. There are no blueprints on how to educate responsible, competent, and resilient children.

The principal's day is filled with demands, details, and decisions. It is a draining, rewarding, lonely, and exhilarating job that requires common sense, a sense of humor, and perspective. Writing—especially in a weekly newsletter—is an underused mechanism for clarifying values for ourselves and for the school community. Take a risk. The only thing to lose is the illusion of perfection and a boring newsletter filled with a laundry list of events.

Good luck! 📧

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