Enter the New Generation of Parents

In a recent column, I mentioned that one of the most important things principals can do to effectively engage parents is to treat them like partners instead of as clients. It’s also important to clearly understand that today’s potential parent-partners are much different than the parents you may have worked with when you first started your career.

Here’s a crash course on common characteristics of parents today—the Generation Xers—based on Why School Communication Matters: Strategies from PR Professionals by Kitty Porterfield and Meg Carnes. Following each characteristic I suggest some partnership-appropriate ways to respond.

**Generation X has grown up hearing about “failing schools.”** They grew up with unflattering media stories about schools sparked by the 1983 Nation at Risk report stating that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

*Response:* Show parents the detailed curriculum teachers are following. You have it; most parents have never seen it.

**They are skeptical problem solvers who thrive on collaboration.** They will work with school leaders given the opportunity—or, just as easily, against them if they feel it’s necessary to help their children.

*Response:* Take the initiative to invite parents, individually and in groups, to work with the school on topics of mutual interest such as attendance, discipline, and bullying.

**They think outside the box.** The fact that the school has never done it that way before does not concern them.

*Response:* In newsletter articles and at meetings, invite innovative suggestions and ideas for improving student achievement. Expect some good ones.

**They imagine doing things others before them wouldn’t dare to do—including challenging authority.**

*Response:* Welcome parents’ initiative. Recognize that the same thing that motivates you motivates them: helping their children succeed in school.

**They are family-oriented and receptive to efforts to get families involved.**

*Response:* Capitalize on this.

**They don’t trust institutions to automatically do what’s right.**

*Response:* Communicate quickly and forthrightly. Discuss, publicize, and strictly enforce staff confidentiality and ethics policies.

They don’t trust that their children are always safe at school. In fact, they fear for their safety.

*Response:* Anticipate parents’ concerns and provide information before they request it, especially on health and safety issues.

They are interested in relationships and want to be sure they can trust you.

*Response:* Provide informal opportunities for parents to get to know you and staff members on a social basis such as movie nights, community events, and celebrations.

They expect to communicate with you and your teachers instantly by e-mail, cell phone, and online.

*Response:* Make responding quickly a habit—and publicize your reasonable turnaround time policies.

They expect that your school will have a first-class Web site that is up-to-date and dynamic, with easily accessible information, including ways they can help their children.

*Response:* You should expect the same thing. Make it a priority.

They expect that if a schoolwide problem occurs they will have details about it immediately—including what is being done to make sure it doesn’t happen again—especially if it’s a problem involving their child.

*Response:* Google “key communicator” and set up your own program. It’s simple and effective.

They expect personalized, not generic, communications conveniently available to them day or night.

*Response:* Personalize when you can. Use semi-personalization when you can’t: “Dear Third-Grade Parent,” “Dear Band Booster.”

Since they are almost all working, they value their time and don’t want it to be wasted with school activities that don’t directly help them or their child.

*Response:* Be ruthless about not wasting anyone’s time on things that don’t directly build school success.

Parent partnerships are dynamic and are always a work in progress. However, the payoffs begin immediately—as soon as today’s parents see that you genuinely want to work side by side with them to help children learn. It all starts by seeing parents as partners instead of just clients.

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