In Praise of Praise

Let me see if I’ve got this right:

You have an important and demanding job. You work long hours, cope with serious frustration, have an impossibly restrictive budget in a depressed economy, and struggle to meet often unrealistic expectations—but still get satisfaction and inspiration from those you work with and the wonderful children entrusted to your care.

Judging from what I see in many principals’ offices, you probably have on display a plaque or two from civic clubs in appreciation for things you’ve done, perhaps a university diploma, and certificates confirming completion of professional training and your membership in your local, state, and national associations. You also are likely to have both some old and recent children’s artwork with sincere crayon-written messages.

In a folder somewhere in your desk, a scrapbook at home, and perhaps in your saved e-mail messages, you also have some thank-you letters and notes from parents and a few children whose lives you changed over the years in ways only you and they may ever know.

Recognition for the work you do is precious, both because it is so heartfelt—and so infrequent. Of course you don’t do your job for the recognition and praise it brings. But it is deeply touching and so much appreciated when it comes.

Having spent many years working with education associations, I know how important and popular professional recognition programs are. We crave, love, and thirst for recognition, prize it, revel in it! We are inspired by it to keep working against tough challenges.

Everyone Responds Well to Praise

Now, please go back and reread the first paragraph of this column, substituting the word “parents” for “you” as appropriate.

Parents are working hard, too. They have frustrations in raising their children and they also have impossible budgets. They love their children and are willing to do anything for them. They want them to get a great education and are doing the absolute best they know how to achieve that. But they get little recognition or praise. Most schools are much more efficiently geared to sending home bad news than good. Almost always when parents receive a personal note or letter from school, it is reporting a problem and likely requesting a conference.

Even though my wife and I are parents of two adult sons with families of their own, if you give us a few minutes we can still put our hands on the two or three “HappyGrams” we received from their teachers over the years about good things they had done at school. We can still recite nearly word for word the positive comments and phone calls we received from a teacher or principal.

A Little Praise Can Work Magic With Parents

I’d like to suggest that right now—or any time—is a good time to give parents some recognition and praise for what they are doing to help their children succeed in school. Every parent will appreciate it, and those who are having the most difficulty will appreciate it the most. Here are some ways to do it.

**Personal praise:**
- A brief, handwritten message on a note card;
- A handwritten note on a child’s class work, homework, or grade card;
- A brief, personal letter on school letterhead;
- A personal e-mail;
- A brief, spontaneous phone call from your office to a parent at home or at work;
- An evening call to parents at home; or
- A face-to-face conversation with a parent at school or anywhere in the community.

**Formal praise at the end of the year:**
- A “Parents Wall of Fame” to honor volunteers;
- A “Thank You Parents!” luncheon;
- “Super Parent Awards” at parent organization meetings;
- A recognition event for parents from each class who made special contributions during the year;
- Personalized parent recognition certificates for room mothers, volunteer program leaders, field trip chaperones, and storytime readers.

Even a little deserved recognition can make a world of difference to parents—and now is a great time to provide it.

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