



Changing Perceptions, *Changing Rea*

The fight to overcome negative perceptions in one school community

By Kelly Soter

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When I was called in to meet with the elementary director regarding my candidacy as an elementary school principal, I was undoubtedly nervous and apprehensive. When he offered me a position at a local school, I was thrilled. Then he told me that they would be placing me at Jackson Elementary. Because I grew up in the area, I was well aware of the rumors and negative perceptions of the school and community. I often heard, “You don’t want your kids to go to *that* school” or, “The neighborhood is awful” and the like. To say I was terrified when I was offered the job would be an understatement. I was a brand-new principal and had no idea what I was getting into. I knew without a doubt that I would be in over my head.

Getting ahead of newsworthy situations is important to addressing criticism from parents.



RECOMMENDED READING

Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals the Upward Spiral That Will Change Your Life,
by Barbara Fredrickson

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't,
by Jim Collins

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference,
by Malcolm Gladwell

FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning,
by Mike Schmoker

Teaching With Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It,
by Eric Jensen

What I quickly learned, once I began my work, is that Jackson Elementary is a gem of a school set in the heart of a neighborhood full of families that have high aspirations for their children. I also learned that negative perceptions of our school still existed in the community. I heard disapproving comments from parents who wanted their children to be granted a transfer to another school. I heard it from educators in other school areas when they offered sympathy. I heard it from teachers who did not want to move to our school when we had a vacancy. Perceptions are our own realities—and if we were to move forward, I knew we needed to address not only the negative perceptions, but the stereotypes that often exist in low-income school communities. Here's how we did it.

Insist on a Welcoming Environment

The first moment that any guest, student, or parent enters our doors, we have an opportunity. First impressions are critical, and we at Jackson Elementary hold ourselves to a very high standard. We offer a positive, welcoming environment for *every* child and *every* parent who enters. All visitors are accepted as they are, and we are thrilled to have them.

We must suspend judgment and believe the very best of our families. Take a critical look at how families enter your building. Who greets them? Are people met with eye contact and a smile? How do the vestibules and reception areas look? Can the space be made more visually appealing?

Lead With a Positive Heart

I believe that the families in our school community are doing the absolute best they can. I believe that parents of students want their children to be safe and successful. I believe that our parents are the most influential adults in the lives of our children. I choose to live a life in which I see the positive—the glass is half full.

A positive attitude truly impacts what we see, what we hear, what we accept, and how we make a multitude of decisions each day. Leading our

school community with a positive heart—putting the needs of our children in the center of each initiative and each decision—has allowed our school staff to embrace our vision of building strong and supportive relationships with our families. We believe that every child is just one caring adult away from success and ask ourselves, “Will it be you?”

Tell Your Own Story

One of the most powerful tools in changing minds and perceptions is to be the loudest voice in the room when telling the story of our schools. We tell the story of our schools and our students in honest and reflective ways to educate our community about who we are and who our children are.

I sought out opportunities to get in front of the business community, Rotary Clubs, volunteer organizations, and such. When granted the time to speak in these settings, I told the honest truth of our community—who our students are, where they come from, and what are they capable of becoming.

Be Newsworthy!

In my first few years at Jackson Elementary, I regularly called or sent emails to our local media. Any chance to share the positive things that were happening in our school and with our community partnerships was a golden opportunity to tell our own story.

We grew to have a frequent, positive presence in the media, and as a result, people started asking questions, coming to visit, and offering to partner and provide support in critical ways.



Communication Is Key

Parents need to hear directly from schools. The lines of communication with our students and families are absolutely critical to informing and changing perceptions.

We regularly use social media as a way to share important messages. Getting ahead of a newsworthy situation is important to addressing any misinformation or criticism from our parents. It is a delicate balance between getting the information out to families as soon as possible so they are informed, and waiting to confirm the accuracy of information. As principal, you'll have to find the sweet spot that balances the need for haste with the need for careful review. The goal is to share accurate news, and for families to obtain news and information about our school directly from us.

Be a Community Hub

In schools and communities that serve low-income, highly mobile families, it is essential that the school become much more than a center of academic education. Schools need to serve as critical hubs of support for the neighborhood, a “one-stop shop.”

In addition to the traditional supports offered at our elementary school, we employ a parent outreach coordinator and provide a parent space called the Family Neighborhood Center. These unconventional supports allow our school to connect to families with basic needs and to build trusting relationships with one another.

Weekly support offered at our school includes:

- Fresh fruit and vegetable produce stand
- Clothing closet
- School supplies
- Diapers
- Play & Learn Play Group
- Mom's Club
- Take-home literacy bags
- Lending library
- Parenting education support
- Multi-agency Wrap-Around Team for Family Stability

Supporting children by supporting the families in our community has been our mission and our message for many years. We recognize that in order to truly be of service to the children in our communities, we must start with the homes they live in. This belief has driven our vision and the many services we offer to



families in our communities. An unintended benefit of this vision is that the word is spreading, and our reputation is changing.

Some of the most powerful recommendations of our school come from parents who have benefited from the work our school community is doing. Years ago, many of my conversations with parents centered around negative perceptions of our school. Today, parents stop me to say, “Wow, I had no idea. This is the best school our kids have ever attended.” □

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