TEACHERS SHOULD BE POSITIVE ON PARENTS' NIGHT

Parents' Night offers so many possibilities for teachers to sell their programs to parents it could have been invented by a Madison Avenue public relations expert. Unhappily, it is frequently an opportunity lost.

On Parents' Night at our suburban junior high, I and several other parents were surprised to hear teachers describe our children as "weird," "strange," and "impolite." We were assured that our children would "straighten out by the eleventh grade," but in the meantime "they refuse to follow the rules" so "nobody wants to teach seventh grade." Lack of decorum was only part of the complaint. Said one teacher, "They don't know how to deal with concepts." And another, "It's just no use teaching concepts; I stick to the facts.

Nevertheless, we were promised that our children would "know the curriculum." One teacher emphatically: "The curriculum guide says six weeks on _______; I spent six weeks on _______." Another proudly: "I don't believe in this progressive stuff. I stick to the basics." Yet there followed no definition of "the basics"—what they include, how they are developed, their nature, purpose, or content. Where exactly did each class fit into the school's curriculum? What were our children to gain from each class?

Ready for enlightenment, we encountered teachers who followed the maxim, "If you can't say anything nice..." Opening remark: "I have a sore throat and I don't want to talk. Actually, there's not much to say about this course. Any questions?" Glancing at the wall clock (five long minutes to go): "I really can't think of anything else to say. Any questions?" Helplessly: "This course is really not suitable for seventh graders. Any questions?"

Even the habitual "Any questions?" seemed more like a smoke-screen than an invitation. After a particularly negative discourse, one disheartened parent ventured, "If this subject is as boring and irrelevant as you say, why are you teaching it?" The reply: "This course is mandated by the state, and I'm here because I'm certified to teach it." Silence. Then from the back of the room came "No, no, no!" All heads turned as an agitated parent continued, "That is not why you are here; you are here to teach children." Bravo, lady, I thought to myself.

Gathered in the hall between classes, groups of parents considered cutting the rest of "their day" but if they did, what would they tell their children who had begged them to come?

I plunged on to the next class. A pert, red-haired young woman flashed a bright smile and said, "I'm Miss Jones and I really enjoy teaching this class." Twenty-five grateful parents smiled back. Effortlessly, she worked her way through curriculum, skills, evaluation procedures, and classroom rules and regulations without a single negative comment. When the bell rang, I joined several other parents who bolted from their desks to shake her hand.

On the way home I pondered the experience. Parents' Nights weren't new to me; I had attended them for years—but I'd always been on the other side of the teacher's desk. Now I wondered, "Is this what Parents' Night is like for parents? Are teachers truly mired in such negativism?"

As a teacher I recognize that teachers have frustrations but putting our worst foot forward won't help. Instead of alienating parents, teachers can improve their situation by drawing parents closer, helping them understand the educational process, and encouraging them to feel a part of it.

With this in mind, I offer the following basic teacher guide for Parents' Night:

1. Smile.
2. Introduce yourself and welcome parents.
3. Briefly outline the content of your course.
4. List the organizational skills required to understand the course content.
5. Describe the methods you use to develop skills and how they are integrated into the course content.
6. Explain the nature and purpose of your study guides, assignments, and tests.
7. Explain the criteria you use to evaluate a student's performance.
8. If you are not an eloquent speaker, put items 3-7 on paper, run off copies, and distribute them to parents.
9. Say something positive. Examples: "These are really nice boys and girls," "I am delighted to be their teacher." If these words don't come easily, practice.
10. Do not, under any circumstances, recite a litany of complaints.

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