

What Do Parents Want from Principals and Teachers?

It's not "professionalism" that parents want but rather the "personal touch."



As a former principal, I cannot recall a single day in that office when I did not meet with at least four or five parents or help a teacher prepare to meet with a parent. Many of those interactions were pleasant, even delightful, but plenty were not. My fellow principals and I would often spend considerable amounts of professional development time with spontaneous recitations of the latest "unpleasantness" with a parent or group of parents. We—principals and teachers—all tried to help each other cope with parental demands by developing skills in focusing the conference on the issue (Fisher and Ury 1981) or through judicious repetition of the appropriate and clearly stated school or district policy (Canter and Canter 1976). Yet nearly all of us walked away from many of the conferences wondering, "What do parents want?"

Just what do parents want from principals and teachers? What do they say when we ask them?

Parent/School Communication Study

I am conducting an ongoing study at the University of Pittsburgh that is examining the relationship between

schools and families in four school systems. By talking with school personnel and parents, we are identifying the mechanisms that schools provide to promote school and parent/family communications. We then ask parents (or guardians or any custodial adults) to evaluate their experiences with school communications and to suggest improvements. We also ask them to

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reflect on the worst and the best experiences they have had with any school.

Personal interviews were used to collect the data. The interviews were conducted with parents, principals, and teachers. School documents on communications were also reviewed. The report here represents only a portion of this study. A complete report is forthcoming.

Although we interviewed school personnel from both public and private schools, this report focuses on the parents' responses. Other research has looked at the perceptions of school personnel (see, for example, Epstein and Becker 1982, Goldring 1986, Nasstrom 1981). The major limitation of this study is the regional nature of the population. Thus, caution must be exercised in generalizing these parents' responses to parents' perceptions nationally, but the stories they tell can provide school people everywhere insight into their own school/family relationships.

Historically, the research on parents and public policy focused primarily on families and schools facing crises concerning students. The findings concluded that socioeconomic status dif-

ferences between teachers (or other school personnel) and the families-in-crisis increase the alienation of parents from schools (Lightfoot 1978, Schaefer 1983). However, the University of Pittsburgh research, thus far, refutes this conclusion. We are finding that all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications.

What Do Parents Want: Professionalism?

The responses we have collected indicate that existing school mechanisms can both enhance and detract from school and family relations. In a classic example of misunderstood cues, the reported preferences of parents are *not* what school personnel think they are. School personnel passionately believe that a professional, businesslike manner will win the respect and support of parents. The responses of parents to questions about their contacts with the school reveal that they view "professionalism" on the part of teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, or principals as *undesirable*. Parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with school people who are "too businesslike," "patronizing," or who "talk down to us."

When specific incidents that generated parental disapproval were checked with the school personnel involved, the school people reported they were trying to "do what is best for them [the students or parents]." One principal said that "sometimes people don't know what is best for them." Thus, the responses of school personnel generally supported what one father reported as a tendency to ignore or respond inappropriately to parents' questions or desires. Our findings in this area replicate Corwin and Wagenaar's (1976) conclusion that teacher-parent disagreements increased with the seniority, training, and formality of the teacher.

Patronage?

Parents reported a "personal touch" as the most enhancing factor in school relations. Teachers or principals who

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take a personal interest in the children will call parents to alert them to problems, both academic and social.

Parents predicated their allegiance to the school on whether their children liked the teachers, but they were not seeking special favors. Parents were not looking for teachers or schools that only do things children like. They said that kids *need* discipline, and they genuinely appreciated teachers who provided it appropriately and with their knowledge. Parents who found out about student-teacher disagreements from the child without any information from the teacher, though, usually became very angry and were slow to forget. However, they acknowledged the need for teachers to handle situations as they arise—"Why wait eight hours until the kid gets home?"—but they appreciated teachers' keeping them informed of the incidents as soon as possible. In such instances, parents were not requesting special consideration, just timely information.

Partnership?

Parents spoke favorably of the activities that schools provided for them. Especially popular were programs that supported them as partners in fighting drugs or in understanding the development of their children.

Parents also valued schools that acknowledged working parents' needs. Parents' work schedules often interfered with their becoming more involved in the day-to-day activities of the school, including attendance at

their children's plays or other performances. If the events are held only at one time, day or night, not all parents are able to attend. Parents suggested that schools schedule a day and a night performance, so that parents who work different shifts can attend.

The traditional school-parent communications device, the parent-teacher conference, received mixed reviews. The good news is that parents appreciate teachers who arrange conference times around their work schedules. On the down side, they rated negatively almost everything else about the conference. Some parents resented the formality of the conference and the limited time often allotted for it.

Dislike of the formality of the conference is probably directly related to the "professional-client" nature of the exchange. The degree to which parents dislike "professionalism" has already been mentioned. Parents would prefer a less formal relationship with their child's teachers. They suggested more regular, informal contacts by teachers through less time-consuming phone calls or notes (if students are reliable in delivering them). The message from parents about conferences was summed up by one father, who said, "Save the conferences for the *big* things."

Some parents viewed the limited conference time period (10 minutes in some cases) as a way teachers or other school professionals avoid finding out

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what the parent knows about the child. As one mother put it, "Ten minutes is ridiculous, especially when other parents are waiting right outside the door. I need time to tell the teacher about how my child is at home, too." The lack of interest in the parents' perspec-

tives on their children caused parents to view all that school people said with suspicion.

The Message from Parents

Parents respect school personnel who return that respect. School people are

not likely to earn parents' respect by adhering to a cold, businesslike approach. Personal attention, which means timely information on an informal basis, is most likely to win parents' esteem. The parents we interviewed also want to be included in the dialogue about their children's education, to share important perceptions they have about their children with the people at school. They do not want a "professional-client" relationship with schools in the education of their children. Rather, they want to be equal partners with schools in the rearing of the children. Schools that demand parental support without reciprocating will be likely to experience increasing discord. Lessons from the parents in this study may help schools increase their successes with a diverse student population and with their families. □

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