

For Parents to Trust You With the Big Things, First Take Care of the Little Things

Schools frequently wish they enjoyed more positive interactions with parents.¹ Teachers often lament the “good old days,” when parents trusted teachers and school administrators almost implicitly—and would not question, let alone protest, the advice or approach of educational professionals.

Parents still evaluate what happens at school through the lens of their own educational experiences, or the experiences of their older children. They may also bring expert information to bear—even the findings of educational research—on their ongoing conversation with school community members about their children’s progress and learning experiences.

Consider, too, that teachers sometimes perceive a power differential between themselves and the parents of their students. Private-independent school parents often work in the highest echelons of the corporate world—or operate their own businesses. Their processes and strategies shift with greater speed and frequency than is possible in schools. They often struggle to understand why it seems so hard and takes so long for the school to make what to them seems to be obviously needed changes.

To bring these two “cultures” together—that of your faculty and your parents—you may have to get parents’ attention by ensuring nothing stands in the way of your professional, collegial partnership. Ironically, if you want to get parents’ attention for the big things, you need to first ensure you are taking care of all the little things. When too many of your school’s relationships with parents are contentious, it’s an indication there are obvious things you must address to foster credibility in any conversation meant to encourage parental self-evaluation or impact the family’s parenting style and approach.

To measure the “health” of your parent relationships, consider first the frequency with which you find yourself adjudicating parent complaints. If you devote serious person hours—and multiple persons’ hours—to ameliorate parent dissatisfaction, focus your attention on the following areas.

- Look at your structures, processes, and protocols to see if they are articulated in a way that describes for parents what a healthy partnership looks like—and that makes a mission case for why it matters. Introduce structures, processes, and protocols designed to elicit the parent behavior the school needs to ensure the success of all its students.²
- Consider that the real problem might be the *lack* of structures, processes, and protocols. Absent the explanation of what you want or need to have happen, people create their own narratives—and action steps to bring their narratives to fruition.
- If most of your parent complaints speak to the lack of information, focus your primary attention on anticipating their information needs and providing accurate, concise updates in a timely manner. (This should be well before a parent takes the initiative to call the school for needed details). Note: This represents another operational assessment

opportunity. Ask the school’s receptionist to count the frequency and focus of parents’ calls to the school seeking general instructions and information.

- Two great artifacts to evaluate to determine the tone and nature of the school-to-family partnership are the parent and student handbooks. If they read like a laundry list of what *not* to do—rather than describing what constructive, positive partnerships look like—you may be setting the wrong tone for the school-to-family partnership from the beginning. Give parents a sense of the ideal, something to which they can aspire. Note: Some schools’ student handbooks read like a “short history of poor behavior at the school.” Sometimes, the reader may even discern distinctly different voices and styles within a single handbook, representing years of purported violations and the many different types and tones of administrators’ responses to the behavior at the time of the violation or breach.
- Establish and sustain a culture of audacious client-centeredness. In a highly predictable and supportive way, promote a culture that values and rewards “taking care of” parents by anticipating their needs, mitigating obstacles, and delivering substantive feedback about their children’s progress. The reward will be fewer complaining parents and healthier parent-to-school partnerships. That shift has a direct positive effect on the school culture. Faculty satisfaction will improve from having tamped down the rate at which parents “come at” the school in anger or frustration.
- If you see ample evidence that parents are not reading important school-to-family communications, as evidenced by their lack of engagement or lack of clarity on what to do when, evaluate the scope, frequency, style, and length of your communications. You may be saturating them in communications they cannot possibly track in real time. If you are not sure, ask them. Short surveys (10 questions or fewer) about the ways they prefer to communicate and receive school information can help develop strategies to streamline communications.
- Pay particular attention to the most valued communication from a parent’s point of view—report cards and progress reports. These should include substantive feedback about their child’s progress and development in a way that reflects the school’s deep knowledge of the child and his or her experience at school. One of the biggest mistakes schools can make in an era of online gradebooks is to compel parents to log in with a username and password to retrieve vital information about their children’s progress. It is fine to make the information “also available” in this way, but schools should continue to transmit report cards and progress reports directly to each family—in print or in electronic form. If the information is shared electronically, it should only require parents to click on a link, not require them to remember a unique set of login and password credentials.

In short, you can't be an authority on important matters if you are not demonstrating efficacy in taking care of families most basic needs with high degrees of consistency and predictability. Once you master your authority, the outcome for families is a happier, more constructive school-to-family partnerships and deeper relationships with each child's teachers. Parents come to trust the school to lead them to make decisions about the bigger things—for example, how to parent their children toward independence and greater maturity—when they feel certain the school is taking care of their families' most basic needs. [I&P](#)

¹ See "Marketing Communications and the Parent," *Ideas & Perspectives*, 40-9-35.

² See "21st Century Education and Your School's Parents," *I&P*, 38-1-1.