

The Paradox of the Anxious Parent

ISACS, November, 2009
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I. Introduction: Parents are an increasingly large part of school life

II. The re-enrollment contract and the “Psychological Contract” are not the same thing.

III. The School Romance: irrational expectations of school

IV. Parental Expectations: Rational and Irrational

1. Parents want rational things from teachers.
 - Someone to teach their child well.
 - Someone who knows and cares about their child.
 - To have their child be part of a moral community
 - To have their child develop meaningful relationships with adults outside the family.
 - To have each teacher contribute to and help ensure their child’s future success.
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2. Some parents may also want irrational things from teachers:
 - To have teachers approve their parenting.
 - To have the teacher regard them as full partners in educating their child (i.e. with an equal or some cases controlling voice)
 - To see the teacher as a parental employee (“I pay your salary”)
 - For the teacher to take the role of being the parent’s therapist.
3. Parents have rational expectations of administrators:
 - Hire great teachers.
 - Provide the school with a coherent mission
 - Inspire teachers and children toward realizing that mission
 - Maintain meaningful contact with parents.
4. And sometimes parents expectation irrational things:
 - Allow parents to dictate the hiring and firing of teachers they don’t like.
 - Get rid of children who are spoiling the experience for their child.
 - Be willing to collude in special treatment for their children.

V. Teacher Expectations: Rational and Irrational

1. Rational expectations that teachers hold for parents:
 - To be seen and respected as professionals
 - To support what they do and the decisions they make.
 - To send children to school ready to learn (fed, awake)
 - To provide information on any home upheavals that may affect their child.
2. Irrational expectations that teachers have for parents:
 - To understand how hard teaching is.
 - To appreciate the sacrifices that teachers make, e.g. of money and adult company.
 - To offer unstinting support and total lack of criticism, no matter what the circumstances.
 - To always believe teacher, even when the child is upset.

3. Rational expectations that teachers have for administrators:
 - To provide a safe environment in which to teach.
 - To offer a high degree of autonomy in the classroom, which is the greatest draw for independent school teachers.
 - To know and appreciate what is going on in their classrooms.
 - To provide support and protection vis-à-vis 5%er parents
4. Irrational expectations that teachers have for administrators:
 - To provide them with a narrow range of easy-to-teach students (as in the mythical olden days when students were “better”)
 - To indulge their eccentricities and guarantee their autonomy, no matter what.
 - To offer unquestioning support with all parents at all times, not matter what.
 - To never discuss things with parents behind their backs.

VI. Administrator Expectations: Rational and Irrational

1. Administrators reasonably expect:
 - Teachers to know their subject well and to be creative with students.
 - Teachers to be professional with children.
 - Teachers to be good colleagues, as well as good in the classroom
 - To understand the mission of the school
2. Administrators unreasonably expect:
 - To be loved (it isn't going to happen with someone with hiring and firing power).
 - To have teachers make them look good.
 - Teachers to be deeply passionate and autonomous while also being cooperative and collegial and non-eccentric.
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3. Administrators have the following rational expectations of parents:
 - To trust the school (to a certain degree).
 - To support the mission of the school.
 - To understand that educators never intentionally hurt children.
 - To understand the moral demands of the community, not just the needs of their individual child.
4. Sometimes administrators have irrational wishes for parents:
 - Love me even when I'm disciplining or criticizing your child.
 - Give the school money without any restrictions as to its use.
 - Always say balanced things about the school (don't gossip).

VII. Four Paradoxes of the Anxious Parent

1. The paradox of control
2. The paradox of choice
3. The paradox of information
4. The paradox of the “great parent.”

VIII. Improving the relationship between teachers and parents

1. Orientation and education
2. De-briefing of parent-teacher conferences
3. Administrative and faculty discussions of problematic cases
4. Generosity of spirit and forgiveness