Alleviating Teachers' Fear of Parents

By Inside Private School Management

Fear is a big factor for both parents and faculty members when they come together for parent-teacher conferences, says Michael G. Thompson, Ph.D., of Cambridge, MA. The common ground they share, the student, can be a starting point for removing the fear factor and preventing problems at conferences, adds Thompson, a child psychologist and training consultant to private schools on parent conferences.

Preparing for Teacher Conferences

The head of school and other administrators can prepare teachers for conferences. This can reduce their stress and ensure parents are better informed, says Thompson, who also serves on the faculty of the New Head's Institute of the National Association of Independent Schools. Here are several strategies the head of school can provide teachers to help them be more effective in dealing with parents:

1) Personalize the relationship. The teacher should ask the parent what his or her hopes and fears are for the child before the first conference by calling or meeting with the parent, says Thompson. If the teacher can find out what the parents' hope, he or she has accepted one of the tenderest and closely held parts of them, their child, says Thompson. If the teacher is gracious in dealing with this information, it can build trust, and parents will realize that the teacher is interested in what is best for their child.

To act on the parents' information, Thompson suggests teachers' claim the child by making a specific, positive observation to the parents. The teacher really needs to say something to the parent to show he or she has claim to the child, and knows the child beyond tests, he says. Saying she's a very good artist doesn't quite do it. It's better to say, "We were working on something the other day, and I saw how quick she was at using color creatively." The teacher shows more involvement and interest for the child's development. Teaching faculty how to deal with people with different styles or agendas is important, too. Thompson relates how a teacher told him that the father of a second-grader asked her early in the school year where his son would be in terms of learning by December. The teacher told the father the child would be exactly where he needs to be. She didn't realize that the father's concept of time was based on business quarters. During the last quarter, or December, his business tallied up its annual profits and losses. As a result, the father was unhappy over the teacher's vague answer, and the teacher felt intimidated when he asked her to predict his son's tangible progress.
2) Have teachers prepare agendas and goals. Teachers should know what is expected to happen at a conference before the parent sets foot in the school, says Thompson. He recommends teachers prepare an agenda for each child's conference, and send it or discuss it in advance with parents so they can add their own topics for discussion.

The agenda topics, like the student's performance in certain classes or parents concerns about homework, can help the teacher to prepare for a more effective conference that will answer the parents questions. It can also signal in advance if the parent is angry about his or her child's education at the school.

Once the teacher knows what parents expect from the conference, the head of school or other supervisor can help the teacher anticipate problems and prepare responses, says Thompson. Ask the teacher, "How do you want the meeting to go? Do you need me there? How will you handle this question knowing that this is what happened with the parent last year?" These questions help teachers anticipate questions or hostility that could arise during a conference, and prepare answers.

3) Ask parents if they got what they wanted out of the conference. Parents often end up in the hall after a conference wondering if it hadn't been a complete waste of their time, says Thompson. If you have a meeting with a well-planned agenda, the teacher can say, "Did you get what you wanted out of this meeting?" If the parent is unhappy, this statement opens up opportunity for more discussion, he adds. If parents are not satisfied with the outcome, the teacher should be prepared to schedule another meeting and bring in the head of school to resolve problems or differences.

4) Give the teacher a debriefing. What a debriefing does is to give the teacher a chance to say, "I felt this worked really successfully here, but I didn't feel this part of the conference was successful." He or she can reflect on strengths and skills, says Thompson.

He also recommends heads of school and administrators debrief teachers who deal with known problem parents to track the issues that arise. Then the administrator will be prepared each year to teach other faculty members to deal with those parents.

Red-flag Problem Parents

The head of school and division heads can reduce stress for themselves and teachers by anticipating problems in parent-teacher meetings, says Thompson. A really brutal family should be red-flagged from year to year by the administrator. He or she should also sit in on the conference, says Thompson. The head and the teacher should rehearse what the parents could say during the meeting, says Thompson. The head may have a sense of what a parent will settle with. If they are pushy and aggressive, the head may also have to be honest and recognize that the school might have to back down a bit. Then the head of school can discuss the meeting with the teacher and explain where the school will give ground. Doing this in advance helps the teacher realize that, despite the outcome of the meeting, he or she has the head's support. It also avoids bitterness toward the parent and the head of the school.
Parent and Teacher Fears

When parents and teachers meet for a conference, they have one thing in common: Fear. Psychologist Michael G. Thompson identifies seven sources of fear for parents and teachers:

Sources of parent fears: 1. Parenting is inherently difficult and no one is expert at it. 2. Child-rearing mistakes are on display through your child's behavior in ways that you cannot know. 3. All parents are trapped by their love, their hope and their anxieties. 4. In important ways, parents may not know as much about their child as his or her teacher. 5. Teachers have immense power over children's lives. 6. Parents may feel trapped by and with their child's school. 7. Parents bring their professional skills to bear on their relationships with teachers even though they may not be helpful in a school situation.

Sources of teacher fears: 1. Teaching, like parenting, is an inherently difficult job: organic, hard to measure, and intensely personal. 2. Teachers are always seen by parents through the distorting eyes of children. 3. Teachers who perform well and effectively do not always get the credit. 4. Teachers are not accorded enough respect in our culture, and it puts them at a psychological disadvantage. 5. Every teacher has been scarred by at least one threatening, out-of-control parent. 6. Teachers' fear that parent influence with school administrators means their jobs could be at risk. 7. Good teachers see the world through the eyes of adults and also through the eyes of children.

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