

OPINION

The Power of Parent-Teacher Relations

Danielle M. Mbadu 28 March 2008

Call me idealistic, but I am one of the few educators I know who actually looks forward to parent-teacher conferences. In fact, I love them! I value, relish, and work at my relationships with parents, and so far, after five years of teaching, my experiences have been overwhelmingly positive. I find parent-teacher conferences exciting and I always feel energized and ready to take on the world once they are over. I am passionate about my work, so any excuse to talk about my students makes me happy. I think this is one of the reasons I enjoy meeting parents as much as I do. I'm not saying that every conference has been positive, or that I don't tell it like it is, but I think that the love I have for my students comes across to their parents.

One of these moments that sticks out in my memory is from my first year of teaching. A former student who had left our school due to behavior issues transferred back for the spring semester. He had a reputation for being tough, bad, and defiant. I admit that I was nervous when I found out I was going to be teaching him, but I put on a brave face. As time went on, I began to wonder what all the fuss was about. We got along well from day one—he was polite and friendly, and I really enjoyed him. Then parent-teacher conferences rolled around and his mom came in to talk to me. When I said how much I enjoyed her son, and told her that he was getting a "B" in my class, she started to cry. I didn't know how to react. She told me that a teacher had never said anything nice about her son. That blew me away. To think that she had only heard bad news about her son made me realize what power we teachers have. I genuinely enjoyed this student, and he did do well in my class. I will never forget that mother's reaction.

I talk to parents all the time—at games and concerts, through e-mail, on the phone, before and after school. However, not all of this talk is academic. Yes, we discuss the child, but we also talk, at times, like acquaintances, chatting about sports, the books we're reading, the proverbial weather, anything. I think this is another reason why I am successful interacting with parents. I see them as friends and allies, not foes. I

love supporting my kids, and that, in turn, supports my standing with parents. I am an advocate for their children.

Teachers may have certain expectations for individual students, and parents may have another. I expect my students to do their best and meet my high standards, but sometimes their parents don't care (or so it seems) if their child even turns in a homework assignment. I've worked with so many students who had unlimited potential or unique leadership qualities, and when I asked their parents why homework was not turned in, or why their son or daughter would not engage in class, I heard, "Well, he's headed to the NFL so we just need him to pass," or "She's got to come home and help me around the house so there is no time for homework." I completely understand that many parents are pushed to the limits and are trying their best, but attitudes like this are frustrating for a teacher, especially when a student has potential but appears unmotivated. It would be easy for a teacher to dismiss that student and let them slip through the cracks.

This is a slippery slope. If a teacher doesn't have a good relationship with her students and their parents, she may be unaware of behind-the-scenes issues that may be causing the lack of motivation. A divorce or sickness in the family, trouble with friends, or fighting at home—these are just some situations that may take a child's focus away from schoolwork. A teacher needs to work *with* parents and students to assess certain behavior, not just assume that a student (or parent) does not care. Sometimes all it takes is pulling a student aside after class and showing legitimate concern. Ask if something is wrong, or make an impromptu phone call home and gently outline a classroom situation. Don't be afraid to request a classroom meeting with the parent(s) and child. A lot of issues come to the light in those intimate closed situations simply because there is a forum for it.

I firmly believe that the types of relationships and encounters that are in place between teachers and parents can have a profound effect on student learning and growth. In my experiences, the parents that I am in contact with the most frequently, whether through e-mail, open houses, or face-to-face communication, have the children who do the best in my class. One reason for this is that those students know that their mom or dad and I are in touch with each other. In those instances when parents and teachers are working together, the students know there is support. That means a lot to students, even if they do not freely admit it.

I have seen countless student transformations after reaching out to their families. Perhaps the most striking was Patrick's. Patrick was a wonderful class participant, always contributing unique and insightful thoughts to class discussions. However, he would not turn in homework. I finally called Patrick's mom and explained the situation, and she promised that things would change. Lo and behold, Patrick showed up one morning before school to make up all of his past-due assignments, even though he would not receive full credit for them. Once he was caught up with those, he was not late with another assignment again.

My passion for teaching and for my students forces me to reach out to parents and families. I couldn't teach another way. I find joy in discussing my students with their parents and developing strategies to improve their education. Yes, there are times when I wish parents would leave me alone at 7:15 in the morning, or that I would not have to spend my free period e-mailing and calling them, but the end result is always worth it. I love my students, and if interacting with their parents helps me to teach and reach these children better, how could I *not* go out of my way for them? Teacher education programs and school administrations need to prepare teachers for positive parent interactions, and stress why they are so important! We need more schools where parent relationships are prized the way I prize them, and where both teachers and parents feel comfortable and welcome meeting, discussing, and working for the good of our kids.

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