

Partnering with Parents, Part 1: The Art of Welcoming

Thomas R. Hoerr

Parents are the first and best teachers of their children. ~Estella

Are students' parents important? That probably seems like a silly question. Of course students' parents are important! Everyone knows that children learn best when the school and home work together. We all understand how important it is for parents to support their children's education. It is common knowledge that children benefit when their parents are involved in school.

Yet when we consider how some schools are organized, this question becomes much less silly. Offering rhetoric about the importance of involving parents in the educational enterprise is one thing; taking action to facilitate this involvement is quite another. Given that we do know how important parental involvement is to a child's success in school, it is unfortunate that there is so often a disconnect between what should be and what is. A quick inventory about a school's [institutional habits](#) toward parents can help school leaders reflect on ways to improve the school-parent connections.

Understanding Parents' Feelings About School

Every school leader has an obligation to create an environment in which parents are welcome. This obligation is true of all schools and is even more true of schools in which parents are less likely to feel comfortable. Parents who were successful as students probably will be comfortable entering the school, freely asking questions and offering suggestions and criticisms. We still need to create an environment that welcomes and supports them, but this is relatively easy because they often begin with a high comfort level in school and around educators.

Sometimes parents who weren't particularly successful in school overcome this history, and they willingly interact and get involved. These parents recognize the toll that their school experiences have taken on them. Even though they may not have a high personal comfort level, they are all the more determined to ensure that their child succeeds. They are their child's advocate, working with the teacher however needed.

Other parents for whom school was difficult may have a very different attitude toward education and educators. Entering a school conjures up their personal frustrations and feelings of scholastic inadequacy, and they seem unable to overcome that history. Teachers and principals may find it harder to communicate with these parents. To be fair, some educators don't help themselves in their relationship with parents by slipping into jargon, expecting parents to sit in kid-sized chairs in meetings, and failing to communicate unless there is a problem. Irrespective of parent attitudes, we have an obligation to work with all our students' parents.

When we encounter parents who come to school apprehensive, hesitant, or antagonistic, we have to approach them in the same way we do students: by getting to know them and working with them in an individual way that meets their needs and our own. Some parents

simply require more time in a parent-teacher conference, for example. Once we know this, then we are wise not to schedule another conference immediately after theirs. (If we don't act on our knowledge, we make life harder for ourselves. The next conference invariably begins late, which means the following conference also begins late, and so on.)

Some parents need to be notified whenever there is an issue involving their child at school; other parents assume if something is a big deal, they will be called. Some parents are at the classroom doorstep every morning; other parents need to be cajoled and reminded to attend their parent-teacher conference. Just as with children, the range of parent behaviors and responses is wide. Just as with children, our job is to work against making value judgments. Sometimes we have higher standards for our students' parents and expect them to be without fault or flaw; of course, that is just not realistic. Life is interesting precisely because none of us is perfect.

Expressing frustration about a parent's behavior is natural and appropriate: "I can't believe her mother forgot we were supposed to meet when she was the one who asked to get together!" Drawing negative inferences, however, is not appropriate, difficult as it can be to refrain from doing this. It's neither fair nor logical to follow up the frustration with comments like "She just doesn't care enough!" or "She must not think my time is important." Our job is to remember that parents are supposed to be a child's advocate, and we need to work with them to help children succeed.

Promoting a Welcoming Attitude

I give presentations at conferences, and midway through my talk, I often say, "Now this next photo is the most important one I will share with you." The crowd—those who are still awake, anyway—leans forward in anticipation, fingers poised to write some profound words. But what is this? It's just a picture of a coffee urn sitting on a table!

Well, it's not just a coffee urn. It's the coffee urn in my school's front hall, in the parent welcoming area. Next to the urn is a sign: PARENTS, HAVE A CUP OF COFFEE; LINGER WITH US!

"This photo is of the coffee urn in our parent welcoming area, across from the office," I tell the group. "Having a parent welcoming area and offering free coffee is a statement we make about wanting parents in our school. But what I want to focus on is the phrase on the sign, *linger with us*."

I explain that not all parents drink coffee, and not all parents are in our halls in the morning. Regardless of what a parent drinks or when a parent walks by that area, the word *linger* shouts out. It says that parents are welcome in our school. The couch and chair in the parent welcoming area are inviting, and *linger* reinforces the statement we are making. The word *linger* says that not only are parents welcome here, but they don't even need a particular issue or agenda. We simply value their presence and are pleased when they hang around. (Every year, parents who are new to our school make a point of telling me how they are struck by this message and how much it pleases them.)

Other principals have gone even further in encouraging parents to come and linger in their schools. I know of one local principal who has installed a clothes washer and dryer in her building and makes it available to her students' parents at no charge. She, too, wants parents to feel comfortable about coming to the school and lingering. For her school's parent body, an opportunity to wash and dry clothes at school (instead of going to the Laundromat) is effective. I cite this as a creative example of a principal who does whatever it takes to pull

parents into the building. Once parents are there lingering, perhaps they can become positively involved in other ways. At a minimum, they will have an opportunity to learn about the school's educational philosophy and programs just by looking at what is on the walls. While they are there, they are able to talk to other parents, and the principal can casually chat with them, too. What the coffee pot and washer/dryer share is that they are offered specifically to encourage parents to enter the building and hang around. There are probably as many different ways to do this as there are groups of parents.

Make parents feel that they are involved, and they will help you.

~Mahmoud

I realize that encouraging this kind of parent presence opens the door to some difficulties. Yes, some parents can hang around too much and become intrusive. Yes, there are times when the "Parking Lot Mafia" can take a minor incident and magnify it beyond recognition. But the benefits of parent involvement are worth the potential price. Parents who feel welcome and invited are far more likely to become involved and supportive.

Thomas R. Hoerr has been the head of New City School in St. Louis, Missouri, since 1981. He is the author of [*Becoming a Multiple Intelligences School*](#) and a regular columnist for *Educational Leadership*.

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