

THE PARENT-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

In this edition of *CSM*, we investigate how schools can engage parents in constructive dialogue to the benefit of student achievement outcomes while setting boundaries to the parent-school relationship.

A STRATEGY FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT

By Dr Philip SA Cummins

One of the more frequent tasks that our clients ask us to work on with them is in the area of community building, especially the development of strategies for engaging parent support in the school. At CIRCLE – The Centre for Innovation, Research, Creativity and Leadership in Education, we believe strongly in the alignment of students, parents and the school – the “three-cornered partnership” or “three-legged stool” as it is sometimes described to us. **Schools that embrace this concept report to us that they are able to connect with and garner the contribution of their communities most effectively.** What is it, then, that can help us to mobilise the parent body of a school with greatest effect? Which strategies enable us to utilise parents appropriately as part of this compact? This article examines four ways which enable schools to adopt a strategic approach to the building of relationships with the parents of their community.

The 4 P’s For Parents – Essential Capabilities For Building A Strategy For Parent Engagement In Schools

Planning

The cornerstone of any approach to enhancing the quality and quantum of parent engagement in the life of the school is the quality of the planning that relates to it. **Deliberate, targeted and intentional strategy supported by a thorough understanding of the community’s needs, expectations and culture characterises any program of excellence in a community.** Parent strategy is no exception to this. It is routine for schools to plan a calendar of events that attends to parental involvement as organisers and/or attendees. Activity for the sake of activity can easily occupy scant time and consume valuable resources. It is very easy, and unfortunately far too frequent, for schools to construct an agenda of parent events that replicate past practice without a clear understanding of why the event is occurring and how it might be shaped towards the attainment of a long-reaching set of goals. What is less common in the schools with which we have contact is a clear strategic imperative for each and every planned event. This means that each formal, planned event needs a carefully constructed rationale that can be sourced directly from the school’s strategic plan. Without such a rationale, the premise behind the event even occurring should be questioned.

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Preparation

Informal, unpredictable interaction with the parent community is part of the everyday experience of schools. Carpark or sideline conversations, emails and phone calls all call on the resourcefulness of school leaders in a fashion that is often largely reactive, based on accidental (and sometimes inflammatory) encounters that are met through a combination of ad hoc tactics and programmed responses drawn from experience. The nature of such conversations can often be predicted, however, and responses can be practised. **Scenario exercises, specific training in communications, direction of administrative meeting time to deliberately curated conversations that help school leaders rehearse how they might best respond to the concerns and needs of parents as they arise.** The conventional wisdom here is that the sharpest critic can be converted into becoming the strongest supporter through a combination of careful listening, authentic follow up and assiduous attention to detail.

Partnerships

Some parents thrive on their direct participation within the life of the school community – these are the people who attend the P&C, work on the stalls at the fete, who support through fundraising, who read to children and serve at the canteen. Yet, for the vast majority of parents in CIRCLE’s client schools – perhaps 80-85% in most of these schools – **the demands of modern life and careers do not facilitate ready involvement in such activity.** For such parents, their desire to support the school of their children can be realised through an intentional desire on the part of the school to create partnerships that draw on the work context and expertise of their parents. **Canny school leaders recognise how to align their strategic intent with a careful knowledge of who constitutes their parent body.** They also understand how this expertise might be channelled into either continuing or single-instance partnerships that provide opportunities for students to learn, for the curriculum to be enriched or for advancement activity to be furthered.

Politics

The final strategic factor to be considered relates to the politics of the parent community. **Successful school leaders understand how to balance the needs of the formal and the informal, the structured and the organic, the old and the new.** Again, the knowledge archive that they draw on is essential, and a well-prepared database will assist this process greatly. What will make a database even more valuable is the combination of the questions that can be asked of it, the involvement of the leader in the fine-tuning of it and the strategic alignment of the categories of data collected. At the end of the day, we need to know our parents and think like them to engage and direct them towards our shared purpose: better outcomes for more learners. This knowledge relies on both broad and

specific understandings about your parents – the danger of responding to a group average too frequently belies the complexity of the context, needs and expectations of individual families. In other words, **if we ask the right questions and insist that the answers to these questions are put together logically and succinctly, then we can employ a powerful tool to help us know what the prevailing sentiment of the community is and when to lead, listen, concede or hold the line.** Think about the following questions as a starting point for your line of questioning of your community:

1 Who is your community? Who are the key stakeholders you are trying to engage?

2 How narrowly can you segment your stakeholder categories?

3 How do you know what your parent community thinks?

4 How do you know what your parent community wants from your school?

5 What systems do you have in place to collect, identify, sort, analyse and evaluate the type of data that will help you to answer these questions?

6 Who can help you with this in your school?

PARENT ENGAGEMENT: THE CURRENT RESEARCH

By Dr Jenny Povey and Dr Linda Willis

Although there is clear, consistent evidence from the last five decades to show that learner outcomes (attendance, behaviour, school retention, academic achievement and wellbeing) improve when parents engage in student learning and the school, questions about what this engagement looks like and when it might be counterproductive persist. There is some evidence to suggest that traditional forms of involvement, such as attending school events and checking homework make a positive difference to student learning however, **more subtle aspects of parent engagement “such as creating an atmosphere in the home in which education is valued, and in which high expectations and levels of support are established”¹ appear to be most effective.**

Parent engagement may be broadly defined as the behaviours, values, attitudes and activities of parents that promote their child’s academic development, ability to learn and educational outcomes.² However, with “helicopter parents” who may be considered as interferers in teachers’ work, and, more recently, “bulldozer parents” where some parents appear to act as if it is their right to bully and threaten school leaders³, it is little wonder that some principals and teachers may wonder whether cultivating positive parent-school relationships is worth it. This thinking appears to be borne out by the findings of a 2014 survey

of Queensland State School principals as part of the Parental Engagement in Schools (PES) project, which demonstrated that 20 per cent of principals did not support parent involvement in school governance and 10 per cent held negative views about the school’s parent organisation.⁴

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The question then is: **How can schools engage with parents in ways that will benefit student learning outcomes while simultaneously developing mutually acceptable and beneficial parent-school relationships?** Working together, actively listening, exchanging information and ideas in substantive conversations and building trusting relationships seem key to this process. Povey’s, co-author of this article, research points to the importance of a positive school climate⁵ and the **central role that principals, as the leaders in their school, play in shaping the climate and facilitating parent engagement through their leadership style, communication, attitudes and expectations.**⁶ Principals who

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value parent engagement may be more likely to provide training opportunities for teaching staff to build their skills in working with parents—something that over 80 per cent of Australian teachers identified as their greatest professional development need.⁷ Driving a positive parent engagement climate in the school may entail principals adopting a less traditional approach, such as encouraging parents to engage with their children’s learning on their own terms, rethinking traditional forms of contact with parents and creating opportunities for parents to contribute to decision-making in meaningful ways. The results from our 2014 PES survey showed that parents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities and secondary schools, lacked confidence to engage with, and felt unwelcome in, schools.⁸ **If the school climate encourages parents to believe that they have the skills to contribute and the school staff and the children of parents at the school value their engagement, this appears to encourage parents to engage with schools and their children around learning.**

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One way in which schools can improve their climate around parent engagement is to build each teacher’s ‘agentivity’. This can occur by assisting teachers to challenge traditional approaches to parent contact and relationships and actively consider creative alternatives. In a recent Brisbane workshop

with Canadian researcher and teacher-educator, Dr Pushor, whose work involves examining how quality relationships with parents, particularly first-nation parents, may be developed through, what she terms, *A Curriculum of Parents*,⁹ several examples of how teachers could agentively engage with families were discussed. For example, instead of traditional parent-teacher interviews where five minutes may be allocated to discussing a student's learning over a school semester, **student interview times could be combined and the parents invited to visit the classroom for three hours to work simultaneously on a scrapbooking project with their child.**

According to Pushor, these kinds of activities open up immediate and ongoing opportunities for exchange between teachers and parents as they learn with and from one another about each learner, what students know, how they learn and what is important to the parents and teacher for each child's future development and learning.¹⁰ As well, teachers can be encouraged to make positive phone calls and home visits in order to connect with families. Connecting with families in these ways appears to mitigate parent-teacher miscommunication and possible confrontations as parents feel like they have a voice and are an integral part of the school community. Teachers can also

“Together, the teacher and parents developed a community-relevant curriculum for the students which they codelivered”

be encouraged to reconsider ways they might involve parents in the classroom. Rather than inviting parents to supervise student reading or activity groups as occurs customarily, teachers may consider inviting parents to work alongside them at mutually suitable times each week for several weeks, or longer, to codevelop and coteach aspects of the formal curriculum.

In a recent Queensland study by Willis, coauthor of this article¹¹, for example, two parents of children in a Year 8 classroom were invited to coteach with an English and Social Studies teacher. Together, the teacher and parents developed a community-relevant curriculum for the students which they codelivered (seventy minutes of class time each week) over eight months. The teacher and parents adopted an inquiry approach to coteach the topics of War and Refugees and Our Local Area. The findings showed that working collaboratively as coteachers contributed to student learning particularly because the parents were able to bring knowledge and resources into the classroom from the community. Although the parents experienced increased self-efficacy with respect to student learning and knowledge and understanding of the curriculum, the teacher's agentivity throughout the study led to an enhanced sense of professionalism which was not expected.

The next stage of the PES project is to use the data collected from Queensland State Schools to identify schools in disadvantaged communities that appear to have higher levels of parent engagement than similar schools. **The PES project team is seeking funding to investigate how principal leadership facilitates engagement by identifying, analysing and evaluating the range of practices used to support parent involvement in the environment of each school.** The impact of school leadership will be considered to support subsequent research about how effective engagement practices may be successfully transferred among principals, for example through mentoring, in similar schools.

- 1 Emerson, L (et al) (2012), *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*. http://www.aracy.org.au/publicationsresources/command/download_file/id/77/ filename/Parental_engagement_in_learning_and_schooling_Lessons_from_research_BUREAU_ARACY_August_2012.pdf; http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/involvement/PE_Policy2010.pdf
- 2 <http://www.etfo.ca/Resources/ForTeachers/Documents/Research%20for%20Teachers%20-%20Number%201%20-%20Parent%20Engagement.pdf>

- 3 Department of Education and Training (2015), *Making my school better* <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/makingmyschoolbetter.pdf>
- 4 Riley, P (2015) The Australian Principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey, http://www.principalhealth.org.au/2015_Final_Report.pdf
- 5 Povey, J (et al) (2016), Engaging parents in schools and building parent-school partnerships: The role of school and parent organisation leadership. *LCC Working Paper Series 2016-07*, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland <http://www.lifecoursecentre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2016-07-LCC-Working-Paper-Povey-et-al.1.pdf>
- 6 Kaplan Toren, N, & Seginer, R (2015) "Classroom climate, parental educational involvement, and student school functioning in early adolescence: a longitudinal study" in *Social Psychology of Education*, 18(4), 811. doi: 10.1007/s11218-015-9316-8.
- 7 Barr, J, & Saltmarsh, S (2014), "It all comes down to the leadership: The role of the school principal in fostering parent-school engagement" in *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(4), 491-505. doi: 10.1177/1741143213502189
- 8 Doecke, B (et al) (2008), *National mapping of teacher professional learning project: Final report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- 9 Povey, Op cit.
- 10 Pushor, D & the Parent Engagement Collaborative, *Portals of promise: Transforming beliefs and practices through a curriculum of parents* (Rotterdam, 2013).
- 11 Willis, LD (2013), Parent-teacher engagement: A coteaching and cogenerative dialoguing approach. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

PARENTS AS ALLIES IN CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND WELLBEING

By Dr Julie Hodges

Recently, I was fortunate to be able to attend 'A Day with Debbie Pushor', hosted by the Queensland Federation of Parents and Friends of Catholic Schools. Pushor is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. She began the day by sharing her narrative of being first a teacher, a school principal and then a parent "I felt like an intruder in someone else's space...there was so much I realized at that moment that I did not know – what to do, where to be, how long to stay...I felt invisible, peripheral, ignored."¹² I imagine that this story may well be familiar to many teacher-parents, certainly Pushor's experiences resonated with my own. As I waved goodbye to my son on his first day of school, I too left feeling like an outsider, relegated to being a bit-player in his education. It occurred to me that if, as a teacher who had some understanding of how to 'speak schools', **how then did those parents who were not familiar with 'edu-speak' feel?** While I involved myself in the school-life of both my children - fetes, reading in the classroom, concerts, sporting events, and homework, I must admit that I always felt that I was at arm's-length from the action - a position that I accepted as *de rigueur*.

"It is clear that powerful social and economic factors still prevent many parents from fully participating in schooling. The research showed that schools, rather than parents, are often 'hard to reach', and **while parents, teachers and pupils tend to agree that parental engagement is a 'good thing', they also hold very different views about the purpose of engaging parents**".¹³

It seems reasonable to accept that parents and teachers are invested in the best outcomes for young people – however, **the role constructed for teachers and for parents in terms of parental engagement appears to be confused and the relationship between these players can be adversarial**.¹⁴ Pushor's personal experiences provided a catalyst for her to work with pre-service teachers to address this predicament. This important work focused on the positioning of parents as a fundamental part of the business of schools. Pushor is clear about the difference between education and schooling and emphasises that **while parents are involved in the life-long education of their children, we, as teachers, walk alongside parents for just a year or two as partners in their child's education journey**.¹⁵

So what exactly are we talking about?

Firstly, **parent engagement needs to be differentiated from parent involvement.** According to Pushor, parent involvement describes “activities which parents are invited to, to serve the school’s agenda, to do the things educators deem important”, such as helping with an excursion or serving on the tuck shop. Parent engagement “describes activities which are mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship”. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2012) propose that parental engagement involves beliefs, behaviours and processes and is best captured by the following definition.¹⁶

“Parent engagement is an intentional and collaborative strategy by school communities to support and leverage the knowledge, capacities and social capital of families to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for all children and young people.”

ARACY describing two key aspects of engagement: family-led learning and family-school partnerships, which further articulates the benefits of involving parents being in their child’s education. These aspects are outlined below in Table 1.

FAMILY-LED LEARNING	FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP
<p>SETTING A HIGH BAR: The expectations that parents set for their children are influential in children’s own value of learning and their sense of academic competence.</p>	<p>PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION: Developing regular, positive channels of communication with a child’s teacher is essential to building a strong partnership between home and school.</p>
<p>CONVERSATIONS: Talking to children about what they are learning, their relationships, what they like, what they’re good at, what’s happening in the news, discussing ‘big ideas’ will help to stimulate cognitive development. These conversations will foster a strong parent-child relationship.</p>	<p>SCHOOL-BASED INVOLVEMENT: While attending school events does not have a strong, direct effect on academic outcomes, such involvement can help children develop a sense of connectedness to, and value of the school community, which can indirectly influence their academic and developmental outcomes.</p>
<p>READING TOGETHER: Helps children to develop a confidence and enjoyment of reading</p>	<p>BENEFITS OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher grades • Higher graduation rates • Better attendance • Higher motivation and self-efficacy for learning • Better school connectedness • Improved behaviour • Better overall wellbeing
<p>CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: Supporting children’s independent learning by making books available and talking about what they’re reading, visiting galleries, watching documentaries and movies, creating a designated space at home that is conducive to independent work, and limiting screen time!</p>	
<p>SUPPORTING WELLBEING: Encouraging strong, healthy relationships with a child’s peers, teachers and the school community can influence children’s connections to school and subsequently their wellbeing.</p>	

Fast forward to 2016 and, sadly, while much has been written and said about the importance of the partnership between a child’s home and their school, in reality not much has changed. While it seems reasonable to accept that both parents and teachers are invested in the best outcomes for young people - the relationship between these two key players can still be adversarial. The Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey (PHWBS)¹⁷

provides evidence for this antagonistic relationship. So, while there is evidence of the importance and the benefits of engaging parents in their child’s education, there is much work to be done. “Educators are positioned as holders of professional knowledge of teaching and learning, as experts in the education process.

Parents are peripheral to the school’s core agenda of teaching and learning, positioned only to support educators in helping them realize the school’s intentioned outcomes for children.

This story of school is often taken for granted, left unquestioned, and it gets lived out in repetitive cycles of meet the teacher nights, parent-teacher conferences, reporting processes, volunteer activities, holiday celebrations and so on.”¹⁸

12 Pushor, D & Parent Engagement Collaborative, *Portals of Promise: Transforming Beliefs and Practices through a Curriculum of Parents* (Rotterdam, 2013).

13 Harris, A, & Goodall, J (2008) “Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning”, *Educational Research*, 50:3, 277-289

14 Emerson, L (et al) (2012), *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra.*

15 Pushor, *Op cit.*

16 Emerson, *Op cit.*

17 Progressing Education Capital in the ACT, Technical Report: Our evidence base – Progressing Parental Engagement (ARACY, 2015). http://www.det.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/686548/52741-DET-Parental-Engagement-A4-Booklet_FA3_ACC.pdf

18 Pushor, D (2010), “Welcoming parents: Educators as guest hosts on school landscapes” in *Education Canada*, Vol 47(4).

WE NEED TO TRUST OUR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

By Annette Rome

Many characterise wellbeing as having three main elements: identity, relationships and community. For a young person, each of these elements should be clearly formed, strong and functional. I would suggest that it is the same for organisations such as schools. Schools have a biological/organic element which focuses on the living beings within and those who are connected to them: students, teachers and their broader communities. As one considers a young person’s growth, there is no doubt that their identity is fluid and morphs over time, and with experience and influence. Youths and adolescents are sometimes described as cups which are filled with fragments resulting out of their accumulated experiences which attribute to what we call ‘identity’. It is the same with schools, in that each school has its own identity and culture. Similarly, schools form relationships that build on student/student, student/staff and staff/staff interactions. Beyond the school, the tier of ‘community’ links in educational partnerships (with other institutions and organisations such as the IB, DET, CEO), as well as the most important of partnerships: the school and the family. Unlike a formal relationship with an outside organisation, the school/family partnership is always a personal and sometimes a financial contract in the case of independent and Catholic schools, with a (generally) elastic and fluid component. **The management of such a fluid and usually intensely emotional space can sometimes be challenging.**

How Can We Develop The School/Family Relationship In Ways That Benefit The Learning And Wellbeing Of The Students?

Good communication: People hate surprises that affect their time and plans. Families are busy units, as are schools, and this is probably one of the biggest drivers of anxiety in a community. There is much in leadership theory that reflects on the importance of people knowing what they need to do and having the capacity to do it. As a result, the schools that benefit the most from their family relationships are those that have clear timelines and processes for events and procedures.

Where sudden changes need to be made in these environments, media such as Apps and text alerts which support instantaneous communication provide a solution to a changed date, late bus, or sick teacher scenario.

Listen carefully: An integral element of communication is listening to each other. Being respectful listeners of suggestions and feedback from families and having a channel to do that is something that benefits both families and schools. Regular Principal fora, ideas boxes (either actual or virtual) and a relatively 'open door' policy can prevent minor issues from becoming major ones. **Where a school may draw the line, however, is when either educational knowledge or legal guidelines are challenged. This is where reference to behavioural guidelines, through a policy or procedure, may assist. It depersonalises the interactions and can refocus energies on what is best for the child.**

Building Relational Trust: Putting it simply, schools have the educational knowledge. While schools and families work together to raise children, there are some points of differentiation. Schools educate hundreds or thousands of students at any given time. They have learnt through many years of experience what works and what does not and their practice is generally research backed. As such, **schools should be credited with a high level of trust by families.** However, the voice of the professional is rarely heard. There is a pressure on the profession to state clearly and more effectively its capacity to employ professional knowledge. Teachers and school leaders ARE experts in raising children and they should not shy away from proclaiming such professional expertise. **This is a key step in developing professional trust between schools and families.**

For families, they certainly know their children best but do they know what is best for their child? Where children are involved, emotion, as a way of knowing what is best, is used to make decisions, particularly by parents. Like any good medical practitioner, a good educator will listen to a parent and sift through the information to decide which is relevant to the child's education. Where challenges move beyond mainstream wellbeing and educational concerns, schools may refer out. The support services that assist in these areas of school life are growing immensely and schools are increasingly linking in to such services. Schools often act as 'case managers' for families to enable them to negotiate their way through the educational support space.

“Like any good medical practitioner, a good educator will listen to a parent and sift through the information to decide which is relevant to the child's education.”

Someone who has written wisely on this topic is Celia Lashlie, a feisty and clever no-nonsense woman who sadly died last year. While being most famous for her Good Man Project about “growing gorgeous boys into good men”, she wrote a lot about the power of mothers (and fathers) to either do great good or inadvertently make it worse for our young people by “over parenting”.¹⁹ She writes extensively about the bridge that young people need to cross as they approach adolescence. That, as parents, we need to let our children go and leave it to trusted adults (teachers, coaches, significant adults) to encourage and guide the young person across the bridge; hopefully to emerge on the other side as a highly functioning young adult. It is very hard to let go – any parent will tell you that – and it is particularly difficult, as every child needs to make their own journey across their own bridge. I think senior schools operate as ‘bridge builders’ giving each younger child and their family a way forward that is crafted and refined by experience and provides a safe and structured environment for appropriate risk taking. The direction and nature of the bridge however, depends on the foundation provided by the partnership between family, school and community in those early years.

“I think senior schools operate as ‘bridge builders’ giving each younger child and their family a way forward that is crafted and refined by experience and provides a safe and structured environment for appropriate risk taking.”

In summary, wellbeing of an organisation is dependent on its strong and healthy links with community, especially the students' families. **The management of this crucial partnership is one that is best served by strong and regular communication, a high degree of relational trust and, if appropriate, clear guidelines.**

- Schools need to share their level of staff expertise regarding educational and wellbeing knowledge with the broader community at every opportunity.
- Schools should communicate regularly and effectively with families in an organised and timely way.
- Stronger family/school code of conduct/policy/guidelines may be required.

¹⁹ Lashlie, C, *Power of mothers* (Auckland, 2010).

PAINFUL PARENTS

Dr Steve Bagi

Let's start on a positive note. Most parents work positively alongside their child's teacher. They show interest in the progress of their child, work with areas that have been identified for development and speak highly of their child's teacher to others. In most cases parents and teachers form a helpful alliance. Sadly, not all parents are like this. Some can exhibit negative behaviours that can be quite upsetting and cause considerable stress to teachers.

What Factors Have Contributed To The Presence Of Painful Parents?

In my days as a school student in the 1970's, my parents had minimal contact with my teachers and hardly ever went onto school grounds. My impression is that they had an implicit trust in the school and the teaching provided and only made contact when there was a rare parent-teacher meeting or once a year event. This is a very different picture to the involvement and potential over-involvement of many parents today. These changes have been influenced by:

GENERATIONAL CHANGES: In recent decades, much has been written about the changes regarding parental involvement in the lives of their children. A term that is frequently used is that of a 'helicopter parent', "... a form of over-parenting in which parents apply overly involved and developmentally inappropriate tactics to their children."²⁰ The reference to helicopters reflects their constant hovering over the child, and readiness to land and become involved in issues that the child may experience or that the parent perceives as needing to be addressed by the teacher. Howe argues, that while 'helicopter parenting' was displayed by Baby Boomer parents, there is now a new trend emerging among Gen X who are described as being 'stealth fighter' parents. "Stealth-fighter parents choose when and where they will attack. If the issue seems below their threshold of importance, they save their energy and let it go entirely. But if it crosses their threshold, they will strike — rapidly, in force, and often with no warning."²¹ **These Gen X "stealth fighter" parents will quickly escalate the issue, be more confrontational and may bypass the teacher quickly to seek intervention from school leaders.** The generational shifts have, for the most part, produced many positive outcomes in terms of student wellbeing and educational outcomes but it has also enabled some parents to become problematic.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES: The proliferation of communication through technological advances has led to a culture in which teachers are easily accessible to parents. Parents can phone, send texts as well as a barrage of unnecessary and negative emails to the teacher. The internet also enables parents to have access to articles and material which may lead them to believe that they are well versed in pedagogy and can identify the mistakes that the teacher is making.

THE INCREASING MARKETISATION AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION: Parents can take on an unbalanced “value for money” perspective and feel that their financial commitment buys them a right to “have a say”.²² Although it is reasonable to expect the school to provide a safe environment and a high quality of education, it becomes unreasonable when parents believe that their money buys outcomes. One teacher shared their concerns with me when they reflected on a parent who had angrily approached them, telling them that they weren’t paying \$X to get poor grades from their child. This pressure on student performance is exacerbated by the high stakes testing and interschool performance data and media attention.²³ **League tables and inter-school comparisons can also lead parents to voice their concerns if the school isn’t meeting their expectations.**

BOUNDARIES THAT PAINFUL PARENTS CROSS: Parents can play an invaluable part in the education of their children. Teachers appreciate appropriate involvement and feedback from parents. Most parents will act with civility and build a co-operative relationship with the teacher, while sadly others will cross some behavioural boundaries which can leave teachers stressed and even traumatised. Some of these boundaries involve:

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS. Parents with increasingly high expectations can contribute to significant stress in the lives of their children and their teachers.²⁴ These expectations may relate to student outcomes or specific expectations of the teacher on how they teach, communicate with parents and handle the parent’s concerns. These expectations can be quite unhelpful to the teacher if they concern the teacher’s pedagogy. Baek (2010) found that those parents who were more highly educated and were from a higher socio-economic background were more likely to intervene in school matters, monitor the teacher’s performance and raise questions on teaching methods.²⁵

EXCESSIVE AND INAPPROPRIATE CONTACT WITH THE TEACHER. While parents have been given more access to the teacher over the past few decades, they can cross boundaries with the amount and type of contact that they have with the class teacher. Although serving a vital role in communication, the volume of email correspondence has added to the workload of teachers. It is not only the time that it takes to respond to emails that is of concern, but also the ease with which parents can now complain or express negativity through this medium.²⁶

BULLYING BEHAVIOURS. One aspect of school bullying that is often overlooked is parental bullying of teachers and school leaders. There is no doubt that teachers can experience bullying from school parents as well as from colleagues and school leaders.²⁷ This bullying may come from individuals or groups and can cause the staff member who is being bullied to experience emotional and physical suffering which may influence their sense of professional efficacy.²⁸ **It is at these levels of dysfunctional contact with the teacher that school leaders need to intervene.**

How Teachers And Schools Can Respond To Painful Parents

It is important for teachers and school leaders to respond appropriately to painful parents. This response can range from having a direct conversation with the parent addressing areas of concern through to the school taking more formal and legal actions to protect the teacher.

Some suggestions for working with painful parents are:

- **Have clear guidelines for healthy parental involvement.** These guidelines could be incorporated into parent handbooks, introduction nights or through the school’s website and could include examples of helpful and unhelpful parent actions. Parents can be asked to sign a statement which indicates their understanding of, and commitment to the parental involvement framework.
- **Have clear grievance policies so that the parents can take the appropriate channel to address their concerns.** It is important to take the painful parent’s issues seriously. There may be some truth in their complaints. In this process, professional mediation may be required to hopefully ease the conflict between parent and teacher.
- **Provide training for teachers on how to work with painful parents.** It is important for the teachers to know that the parent who was causing them grief may actually behave in a similar fashion to others as well, thus, they shouldn’t take it personally and they can learn how to respond more effectively to these parents.
- **Provide counselling and coaching support for teachers who are struggling with parents.** Be prepared to set boundaries and take action against parents who are causing concern.

Are you dealing with some painful parents at the moment? If so, what are some practical steps that you can take to create a more positive relationship with them?

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