
Dealing With Difficult Parents

One of the most unenviable components of a principal's job is interacting with angry parents. Learning effective strategies can help defuse tense situations and build trust.

BY TODD WHITAKER

One of the most daunting tasks principals face is interacting with hostile or aggressive parents. Quite often, the principal had no direct role in the original conflict. A faculty member did or said something to the parent or, more likely, his or her son or daughter, and the principal receives the brunt of the parent's complaints. Being able to appropriately and effectively deal with parents in such situations is one of the most challenging tasks principals face, especially when the parents may be right.

We Are Doing the Best We Know How
Fortunately, in most schools, only a few students are a real struggle. Although all students have strengths and areas for growth, for the most part, parents do a good job rearing

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their children. The students whom principals must meet with often have parents who demand the most time, worry, and energy from principals. It is important to think positively about these students, and it is equally important to keep that focus when we think of and work with their parents. After all, they are the best parents the students have.

At times, maintaining a positive focus may take effort. Every principal encounters frustrations when dealing with parents. For example, a principal might be disappointed because parent attendance at back-to-school night is low. It's important for the principal to realize that the parents who did attend are important, and he or she cannot give in to the temptation to let the lack of attendance ruin the experience for the parents who did show up. If only 10% of the parents attended the back-to-school night, then it's the principal's responsibility to make sure those 10% feel so special that they not only will attend similar events in the future but also will speak positively about the back-to-school night to others.

Dealing With Yourself

Dealing with difficult parents requires that principals first deal with themselves. There are few absolutes in education. Every rule has an exception and no matter how consistent principals attempt to be, there are times when plans must be adjusted. But however flexible principals must be about some things, there are a few absolutes that involve principals' own actions and approaches.

The best advice I ever received was, "You do not have to prove who is in charge; everybody knows who is in charge." This is so true in schools. Think about the best teachers in your school. How often must they prove who is in charge in their classroom? Almost never. Now think about the least effective classroom managers in your school. How often do they try to prove who is in charge? Most likely, several times every hour! And, as a result, the students in their classrooms try to prove them wrong. This same idea applies when working with challenging parents.

Effective principals never argue, yell, use sarcasm, or behave unprofessionally. The key word in that sentence is *never*. There are several reasons to adopt this credo. One of them is that in every situation there needs to be at least one adult, and the only person you can rely on to act as the adult is you. I also believe that it isn't a good idea to argue with difficult people. You will not win. Difficult people may argue a great deal of time in every aspect of their lives. They argue at home, are confrontational at work, and probably have a great number of tense conversations on a regular basis.

People can control how many arguments they get in. People also determine how often they yell or use sarcasm to make a point. Principals can teach others—students, parents, and faculty and staff members—new ways to interact, not merely polish others' inappropriate skills. If I, as a principal, believe that the difficult people I encounter are doing the best they know how, then one of my missions should be



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to help them learn better behavior. I believe we educators have a responsibility to consistently model appropriate behavior to everyone with whom we come in contact. We should do so 100% of the time. If you question this, ask yourself two questions: Do I expect the students in my school to behave appropriately 100% of the time? and Do I hope that parents treat me with respect and dignity 100% of the time? If your answers to these questions are yes, then *you* must behave professionally 100% of the time.

We Must Be Teachers for Our Teachers

The impetus for developing strategies for working with our most challenging parents is very simple: Such strategies will make our lives easier. At times, principals must work with parents who are angry or upset with them or their schools. If a principal does not resolve a parent's concern successfully, the problem—and the parent's feelings—will continue to fester and will likely escalate. A second and equally important reason for principals to develop successful techniques is to teach the teachers. This is something that all principals must do to help teachers confidently, effectively, and productively interact with parents.

Getting parents calmed down and into “willing to listen” mode is an important step toward addressing their concerns.

What Do I Say?

A track coach at a middle level school where I was principal was not a very effective teacher or coach. There were many things the coach did that I was uncomfortable with, but one of the most significant was how the coach yelled “Run faster!” at athletes during track practice and meets. Now, I am not an expert in track, but I'm sure that the students were running as fast as they could. Yelling “Run faster!” probably was not going to accomplish anything. What the students needed was to learn *how* to run faster.

Simply exhorting teachers to contact parents more often will not change anything. If we would like our new teachers, as well as our more experienced staff members, to initiate contact with parents, it is important that they learn how. It is unrealistic to expect all faculty members to inherently know how to talk to parents. Principals have numerous opportunities to refine and enhance our communication skills with parents. However, even our most veteran faculty members may not have received or made as many phone calls in their entire career as we do in one semester.

For teachers to initiate more contact with parents and be more comfortable when parents contact them, we must teach them what to say. Developing a particular approach to doing something that you are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with can be very helpful in building up your confidence. I first learned this approach when I started asking girls out on dates. I wrote down what I wanted say and even a couple of topics to bring up in case the conversation fizzled. Once I knew how I wanted to start the conversation, I felt more confident dialing the phone. This technique can work for principals and teachers who are not used to initiating contact with parents.

The Best Way to Have the Last Word

There is an old saying that the best way to have the last word is to apologize. This saying may be most applicable and effective in working with difficult parents. I have found that one of the best defusers in any situation is to apologize. However, the specific wording is important because it can help us calm the waters and yet retain our dignity. It is very difficult to say, “I was wrong.” It is even more difficult to say when it is not true. But there is one way we can approach all situations that will help satisfy even the most aggressive parents while allowing us to be honest, and that is to say, “I am sorry that happened.” This phrase is applicable in myriad situations. It is essential to adopt a sympathetic tone and manner when using this technique. Rudeness, arrogance, impatience, or sarcasm makes a bad situation worse.

Imagine that you receive a phone call from an irate parent who is a consistent pain in the neck. The parent belligerently exclaims that their son, David, was being picked on in the hallway at school that day and nobody did anything about it. Your investigation reveals that a couple of other boys shoved David against the wall, threatened him, and called him names.

Obviously, you know little more about the situation than what the parent has just told you. But you can still say, “Mrs. Smith, I am sorry that happened. I appreciate you calling to share this information and I will make sure to look into it tomorrow and visit with David to see if he has any more details to share. I will also make sure that I visit with the other boys that were involved, but I sure am sorry that happened.”

Examine closely what you said. You did not assume any responsibility for the incident, but you expressed regret that it happened. You might be thinking to yourself, “I am not sorry that it happened; that is a lie.” Well, it isn't if you add a second part to the statement. With the rudest and most unpleasant parents to work with I say out loud, “I sure am sorry that happened.” But to myself I add, “Had it not happened, I would be doing something other than talking with you right now!” And that is the truth. Many principals would rather schedule a root canal in lieu of meeting with their most challenging parents. This technique enabled me to help the parents feel that I am seeing things from their

point of view while allowing me to retain my dignity in the situation.

This approach is appropriate face-to-face. If a parent marches into your office and vents about a situation concerning their child, stating that you are sorry that it happened may be very beneficial. If the parent's complaints are about a teacher, this is also a productive approach. You are not blaming or defending your staff member; you are truly sorry that the situation occurred. Getting parents calmed down and into "willing to listen" mode is an important step toward addressing their concerns.

Even if you initiate the conversation, this tool is appropriate. If I have to call a parent and share that his or her child was caught cheating on a test or is being held after school, I say that I really am sorry that it happened. This helps develop some common ground with a parent. Because, regardless of his or her disposition, the parent is probably sorry that it happened, too. And in any type of negotiation, establishing some commonalities is an important step to settling the issue in a way that both sides can live with.

An Ear, Not an Answer

Even the most irate parents often want someone to listen to them more than they want someone to solve their problems. They may live in an environment where they feel no one listens. The structure of their workplace may not allow them to share their feelings, perspectives, or thoughts. And, honestly, many of the most challenging parents have children who probably don't listen too well to them, either. Therefore, by conveying that they are on the parents' side and are attempting to see things from their point of view, principals can calm parents down and build trust.

Please Don't Talk to Me Like That

It's important to allow people to let off steam. Everyone feels frustrated at times, and sometimes venting is all it takes for someone to calm down. But sometimes the tirade continues a little too long, becomes too ugly, or turns into a personal attack. In such cases, I have learned a technique that I call the "Please Don't Talk to Me Like That" strategy.

If a parent has pushed my tolerance to the limit or if he or she is being inappropriately personal or rude, I respond by saying "Please don't talk to me like that. I will never speak to you like that, and I will never speak to your child like that." This is not a threat or an order. Nobody likes to be told what to do, especially someone who is already angry. Instead, it is a very reasonable and professional request and a promise to treat the parent and the student with respect. Another benefit to this strategy is that it doesn't contain any inflammatory language. I never want to incite an upset person.

Like all communications, the style and approach used greatly determine the strategy's effectiveness. It's important to be very calm and speak slowly, gently, and with confidence. I try not to interrupt the other person, although I might if the diatribe is becoming ridiculous. The more heated the other party is, the slower and calmer I force myself to be.

When I was a principal, I eventually had such confi-

dence in the professionalism of my faculty and staff members that I even included them in my assurance. I was able to say, "Please don't talk to me like that. I will never speak to you like that, and I will never speak to your child like that. And no one in this school will ever speak to you or your child like that." I could only do this when I had a truly professional faculty. If even one staff member yelled or spoke in an unprofessional tone, I had not kept my commitment and the parent really did have something to be upset about.

Little Pitchers Have Big Ears

If we say things we do not want students to repeat, we had better make sure they do not overhear us. I will allow a parent to vent to me, but I will not allow a parent to act inappropriately in front of his or her child. I am happy to meet with parents to discuss problems, and we have no secrets to keep from their children. But I will not allow parents to model improper behavior toward educators in front of students. Obviously, students can be asked to leave the room for face-to-face conversations. However, if a parent calls you in the evening, you cannot monitor who overhears his or her side of the conversation. Often the student is in the room with the parent.

If I feel that the student is listening to the parent speaking inappropriately, I will say to the parent, "I hope that there is no chance that your child can hear this conversation. I would be very disappointed if he or she could hear you talking in this manner to anyone in our school. I would never want your child to get the impression that we can ever talk to someone in our school in that tone of voice, so I hope there is no chance your child can hear you speaking to me this way."

I am sure that this did not always work, but I felt that it was doing two things: First, it helped the parents understand that it was wrong to allow their children to be privy to the conversations. Second, it helped the parents get control of themselves and stop their inappropriate behavior.

The more challenging the parents are, the more their child needs educators to be the voice of reason and to always model the way a person *should* act. No one likes to deal with hostile parents, but effective educators do it anyway. Working with such parents is an essential part of a principal's role as a school leader. PL

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