

Be a Teacher Parents Like to See

By Joe Neff

What do parents think when they find out at the end of the summer that you will be teaching their children? When parents look forward to working with you, there's an opportunity to form partnerships that will help their children (and you) have a great year. How can you convince parents that you are on their side, that you are someone they can work with?

Here are seven strategies that will win parents' confidence and support.

Create Trust

When mom and dad walk Maggie up to your door on the first day of class, they want to know who you are and why they should trust you with their child.

Your most powerful tool for establishing trust is your reputation. Reputation sits in the classroom before a student walks in the door. Unless you are a new teacher, you already have a reputation.

In 13 years of coaching volleyball at my previous school, I never had a parent chew me out because I had gained a reputation as being fair. But during my first season at my new school, an angry mom caught me after our first home game and let me know rather clearly that I hadn't played her daughter enough. I didn't have a reputation that preceded me. I still had to earn my reputation as a coach.

Your first months and years are critical. Can parents count on you? Are you fair? Do you care? Do you admit mistakes? It's a lot easier to



establish a good reputation than to fix a damaged one.

If your reputation is weak, attack it aggressively. Be open about rumors without being defensive. Let people see that you deserve their trust.

Give parents reasons to trust you. For example, email a note to parents weekly about great things happening with students and your joy. Humility doesn't mean that you can't say positive things about your background, your family, your walk with God, your accomplishments, and your dreams for the students. Tell parents what excites you and why you love to teach. Parents want to trust you—make it easy for them.

Communicate Care

Parents will see you as an advocate and friend if they know that you care for their children. Tell students that you care, and show them your love. If you are frantically finishing grading a test and Marshall says, "Teacher," don't say, "Not now." Instead look him in the eye and listen. This might not be a life changing moment, but it will show you care.

Find ways to value your students. Spend lunchtime with students in pairs. Go where the students are when you don't have to. Volunteer to coach. Lead a club. Disciple three students one day a week.

If the students know that you care about them, their parents will hear about it. But help it along. For example, the principal of my children's elementary school calls the parents of every new student after the first day of school in the fall. He cares. And we know it.

Your expectations also show your care for students. If you set high goals but don't provide support to help every student succeed, parents will conclude that you don't care. High expectations and rules are good, but only if they don't become an end in themselves.

Show that You Know

Parents want assurance that you know how special and unique their child is. Always have something good to say when you see a parent in the carpool line or in the grocery store. In a world where criticisms abound, kind words are treasured, often for a lifetime. Can you, right now, think of something positive to say about every student in your class?

My wife, Dana, and I recently bumped into one of my daughter's teachers at the mall. She told us how much she appreciated our daughter's artistic talent. It would take a mountain of problems for us to think that this teacher doesn't know our daughter.

The time that you spend in class sharing summer stories and having a student of the week pays dividends beyond just getting to know the students. Those little things give you a window into the way that God is at work in the lives of these special children of His. They also give you insights that can strengthen communication with moms and dads.

Bend without Breaking

Parents look forward to working with teachers who have convictions, but they want those convictions applied with compassion. We should know when we can bend. Flexibility isn't a sign of weakness; rather, it shows that you can adapt to a variety of situations.

A few years ago my daughter was having trouble finishing math assignments. The teacher kept her in at recess to finish up, but my wife and

I wanted our daughter to bring the work home so I could either push her or help her, depending on the reason her work wasn't getting done. Even though I was principal of the school, I had to struggle with the teacher to let us work with our daughter. While I respect the teacher's convictions, her inflexibility showed us that she didn't want to work together.

Draw your lines carefully. Is it really that important for Sandy to answer 20 questions, or will 10 fit the need even if everybody else is doing 20? Acknowledge differences among students, and remember that in education one size doesn't fit all.

Be a Living Word

When I read admissions applications for our school, I am humbled by the fact that parents entrust their children to us. Parents expect many things from a Christian school, but at or near the top of their list is the desire that their children develop a clear understanding of God's world and their role in it as His disciples. And parents trust us to be a big part of that.

Being a model—a living word to communicate God's truth to children—is the most important way to get along with parents and the most important part of our job as teachers. How can you make yourself more contagious, a person whom parents appreciate and who has a positive impact on students? First, make sure your walk with God is exciting, a life worth emulating. Second, open up. Talk about God throughout the day, share what He is doing in your life, tell stories, let students see what a mature and growing Christian does. And don't be afraid to admit mistakes—it makes you real.

Openness about your life with God shapes students and attracts parents.

Promote the Positive

Parents like teachers who build up instead of tearing down. In Ephesians 4:15 the apostle Paul tells believers to speak the truth in love. Love considers what truths should be spoken and how. There are certainly times to confront and correct,

but those times should be corralled into careful communications. Here are some suggestions:

- If there is a problem, either face it or forget it. Never complain or gossip, especially to a parent. I once worked with a teacher who complained to a parent about the difficulty of being a teacher. This careless admission ruined a good working relationship.
- Don't bring up problems when you happen to run into a parent outside of school. If something needs to be said, call the parents or arrange a meeting. Don't discuss it in an email, but use email to set up a call or meeting if you need to. The same goes for colleagues who have children in your class.
- For every negative, come up with three positives (or five or ten).
- Have a plan. Never call or visit without a suggestion of what can be done. Hope empowers and encourages people to solve problems. Give them hope.
- Pray, especially at conferences and before tense meetings. Ask the parents to pray; it will move you from an adversarial relationship to seeking the Lord together.

Provide Paths

One time my daughter decided to not try out for a play at school. She realized later that day that she had goofed. I suggested that she leave a message for the teacher, asking if she might still participate in some way. My daughter called and even wrote a note to the teacher. Maybe the teacher didn't get the message, but we never heard back (notice how quickly it become "we").

A simple phone call would have helped us know how to guide our daughter. We needed communication. All parents want communication; they want to know how they can reach us so they can do their job better.

When can a parent call you? Can a student call? What about in an emergency? Do you prefer phone calls, emails notes, or something else? When is a good time? How quickly will you respond to email? Don't be afraid to request that you not be called at home at certain times. And,

for parents to not expect emails to be answered in the evening. But be clear: how can moms and dads reach you and receive a response? Provide parents with a path.

Parents also need direction on how to handle problems. Problems will come up. What will you do then? Begin with the pattern in Matthew 18—keep it private and involve as few people as possible. Keep the bridge open. You will need to go back and forth in the future. Let love guide you to do what is best for the parent, not to win an argument or vindicate yourself.

Under pressure it is easy to say things we regret. When our family ordered the department store \$9.95 special for our family portrait, my wife would go alone to pick it up. When the clerk tried to convince her that we should purchase the \$129 package, she could say honestly, "I need to talk with my husband." In case you feel pressure, have an arrangement with your principal so you can say, "I need to run this by my principal."

Finally, love parents. They want the best for their child. We may not agree, and they may even be wrong, but love covers a lot of issues. Remember that parents are only about as perfect as we are as teachers.

These suggestions will help you be a teacher parents like to see. You will be blessed with a partnership that will benefit your students and you. Parents will not see you as an adversary, but as a trusted advocate for their child.

This article first appeared in Christian School Teacher, Spring, 2001. Reprint the article freely. Joe served in school leadership for 32 years at Cedar Valley Christian School, Wheaton Academy, and Little Rock Christian Academy. For updates on the Rooted Schools ministry for Christian schools, please go to www.rootedschools.org, write Joe@RootedSchools.org, or find Joe on Twitter@ljoeneff, LinkedIn, or Facebook (facebook.com/joe.neff.75).