

Educating the District

Best Practices for Engaging with Your Child's Teachers and Principal

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It's been clearly established that children perform better academically when their families are directly involved in their education, but for a variety of reasons, many parents or other caregivers feel uncomfortable or unable to support their children or advocate on their behalf. Some struggle because of language or cultural differences, but others are just plain intimidated or end up completely frustrated when they do try to get their children what they need at school. But it doesn't have to be so difficult.

The key word to remember is "partnership." Families and educators generally have the same goal for students: They want them to be successful in school and in life. Effective teachers and principals know that they need to engage families

to help meet this goal, so it's generally safe to assume that they are on your team. The challenge is that they have 20 – or 200 – other kids to worry about.

I know a single mom, who would never be described as shy, who said that it took her nearly three years to get her daughter the proper testing and evaluation to diagnose her learning disabilities. And my husband, whose job requires him to share his opinion all day long, just freezes when it comes to discussing issues about our children with their teachers. He once sat through an entire parent-teacher conference with little more than some head nodding.

So, how can you speak up for your child without alienating the very people that you need to engage in this process? Here are a few basic

tips to get started:

Begin with the perspective that your school wants to support your child. This will help you frame your concerns or requests for help in a way that is positive, instead of accusatory, and is more likely to result in a partnership between you and the school moving forward.

Generally try to resolve issues with your child's teacher first. While it may be tempting to bypass the teacher and go straight to the principal, it is usually best to start with the person who has the most daily interaction with your child, sets the expectations in the classroom and understands how his/her students function as a group. But if you've tried unsuccessfully to resolve an issue with the teacher, then the principal can be a good resource – or mediator – if necessary.

Explain how requests will benefit your child's education. Good educators are receptive to suggestions that will benefit your child's learning and development – within reason. Frame requests in a way that demonstrates this, instead of just stating what you want, i.e. "My child would do well with a teacher who has experience dealing with active, hands-on learners" vs. "I want my son to be in Ms. So-and-so's class."

Do your homework. Before you show up for a meeting, review any information that you can find that's relevant – for example: your child's recent school work, report card or test results; school or district policies; or school newsletters or handbooks describing particular programs. If you're well informed, then you and your child's teacher can focus on problem-solving instead of debating policy, program or testing issues.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Many teachers provide specific, useful information about your child's progress and the work that he or she is doing in the classroom, but you should be prepared to ask questions if they don't – or redirect the conver-

sation where you need it to go. Ask specific questions: Is my child reading on grade level? Is she meeting the learning standards? Is he participating in classroom activities?

Agree upon the best way to communicate. Some teachers are great with e-mail, while others prefer the phone. But generally, the morning drop-off-tell-the-teacher-everything-that's-gone-wrong-in-two-minutes probably isn't the most effective way to deal with issues. Schedule an appointment for serious conversations, but to clear up small issues or logistics, agree with the teacher on a way to communicate that works for everyone.

Engage other support staff or specialists to help. Most schools have social workers, guidance counselors and specialists like music, art, and physical education teachers. Use them as a resource to support your child; they know him or her, and they likely have ideas to help. I know that the social worker in my son's school was a lifesaver when we were struggling with his behavior: she spent time with him individually, gave my husband and me useful tips for supporting him and checked up on him in the classroom, even sharing ideas with his teachers about how to build a learning environment in which he could be successful – and that would help his classmates as well.

Know that you are your child's best advocate. Let's face it, no matter how wonderful your child's teachers and principal are, there's probably no one who cares more about his or her progress than you. And even with the best intentions, educators get overwhelmed with the responsibility for so many children. So be the manager of your child's progress: Take notes during meetings, keep track of communication and follow up if you don't see forward movement.

Some resources: The National PTA (www.pta.org or 202-289-6790) has "Tips on Getting Involved in School" and Scholastic has numerous online resources for parents at www2.scholastic.com. Latin America Youth Center (www.layc-dc.org or 202-319-2225) and DC Voice (www.dcvoice.org or 202-986-8535) provide education advocacy information to DC families. ★