

Ingredients to Success: Partnering with Parents and Families

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What is the most important ingredient in an oatmeal cookie? One might immediately argue that it is oatmeal. True enough, a tasty, well-made oatmeal cookie cannot be made without oatmeal; but it would be equally foiled if flour or sugar were missing. Like the ingredients of an oatmeal cookie, a thriving school culture demands that a type of fellowship exists between the teachers, leadership, parents and community. Each of these entities functions like ingredients to a yummy cookie. If teachers are the oatmeal in a child's educational cookie, then parents are certainly the flour or sugar or butter. Take your pick! The point is, schools function best when parents are engaged and working in partnership with teachers and administrators. This is especially true as it relates to improving student discipline.

Formal research aside, it just makes sense that including parents in the education of their children will have a positive impact. When students have behavioral problems at school, oftentimes the root cause can be uncovered by learning more about what is happening outside the classroom. This includes the dynamics of home.

Unity matters. Yosondra Lett, middle school assistant principal confirms this, "Being able to call a parent so that you can do the best for a child is important. An educator is the expert and when parents truly trust us, students respond positively." Parents need to know that teachers have the best interest of their child as a priority. Building a positive relationship is key to creating a sense of unity with parents.

When a child has a discipline issue, parents want to ensure that their child is treated fairly. They are less likely to question this if there is an existing relationship. Along the same lines, when there is a relationship, teachers and administrators are made aware of problems that exist outside of school that may cause friction in the classroom. In this case, teachers can be proactive and work with the student with the appropriate level of care that will prevent behavioral problems from occurring. This is only possible with a trusting relationship with parents.

Lett goes on to explain the value of this trusting relationship. "Parents are more willing to listen and hear other perspectives when they trust us. With a positive relationship, communication is enhanced and even when a parent disagrees, they are willing to work with us because of the trust that exists and this has to go both ways. We have to trust our parents also and know that they know things about their child that we may not."

Partnering with and engaging parents can happen in a variety of way. It is important to differentiate parental engagement just as we do academics within the classroom. For example, Donuts and Dads at the school may work great for some parents but we must be sensitive to the fact that there may not be a dad or father figure in the home. Here are a few ways to differentiate parental engagement:

- Create a Parent Advisory Council. Unlike PTA or PTO there is no fee and the parents can create their own bylaws and mission statement.
- Have meetings in the community where it is convenient and on the parents' home turf.
- Ask parent what they want. Do this early and do it often. A great time to do this is during registration or Open House. Show parents that they matter as early in the school year as possible.
- Make those positive calls and/or send home a positive note. The teacher and administrator should do this. Parents need to know that we are excited about having the privilege of teaching their child.
- When discipline problems occur, be flexible while keeping within policy guidelines. Zero tolerance does not build positive relationships.
- Implement restorative practices to ensure that discipline matters do not completely ostracize students or parents after the incident has occurred.
- Do not forget about children in foster care, group homes or other special circumstances. These may be our most fragile students so it is important to develop a plan that includes these families in every facet possible.

Parental and family engagement can make a difference. Just like we would not dream of making that oatmeal cookie without butter or sugar, we should also know that our school culture is incomplete without parents and families. Engaging parents and families will have a positive impact on the culture of any school. If we are truly creating student-centered environments, then we must recognize that parents and family are an important ingredient to our success!