



My Child Wouldn't Lie to Me

16 Tips to Help Navigate the Sometimes Slippery Slopes of Parent Communication



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA
Creating a Culture, Engaging the Community

After reading the column from Ken Schutz on difficult parent conversations in the winter/spring edition of “Washington Principal,” memories of conversations and communications

past came rushing back to me. There’s so much to love and be thankful for in the principalship, but one of the most meaningful leadership actions we can provide is tackling tough communication and conversations head on. Here are some of my favorite tips I picked up along my career.

Continued on page 14

1. REFRAME

In your mind, reframe the situation as dealing with a difficult conversation, rather than a difficult parent. It's sometimes healthy to acknowledge that this is indeed emotionally hard work. There are a number of books every principal should read, and among my favorite is "Difficult Conversations," from the people at the Harvard Negotiations Project. For me, the three-hour read was the best PD-per-minute of my career.

2. MIND THE A-B-Cs OF DIRECT COMMUNICATION

The first rule of communication is actually asking yourself, "Am I the right person to be having this conversation?" Is it actually a teacher or other staff member who can best address the parent concerns?

As an elementary principal, I had this conversation countless times: "Thank you for your email/call/visit, and your support for your child. Is this a concern that you've already addressed with the teacher?"

"Well, I would have, but I was concerned they wouldn't like it, and might take it out on my child."

In my 28 years in administration, I never saw that happen. Politely guide the parent to contact the staff member directly, and offer to join them in that conversation if they feel your support would be helpful. Reiterate the strong message you stated in the school handbook that parents first address concerns to staff at the lowest level possible. While triangulation is counterproductive, it is wired into our genes. Person A will always be more comfortable talking about Person B with Person C.

Consistently encourage all stakeholders to address concerns at the lowest point of contact, then be ready to support that, even when you know it's much more work for you up front.



3. DEALING WITH THE DREADED ANONYMOUS CALL

Occasionally, you'll get the anonymous parent-concern phone call about a teacher or something a teacher did. From the parent perspective, this totally makes sense, and it can be tempting to let them say their piece. In reality, enabling such toxic triangulation is a trap. Politely let them know that you can't take anonymous communications, and let them know you are otherwise always ready to support them. And nowadays, when it shows up on Facebook, you always have the option of giving them a call to finish the conversation.

4. MY CHILD WOULD NEVER LIE TO ME

This is perhaps not the moment to enlighten the parent to the social science research that everybody lies. If you think you don't, you're just lying to yourself.

The point here is we want to avoid putting ourselves in this position by communicating first. My next

summer book recommendation is Chapter 3, "Consistency and Commitment," from Robert Cialdini's book, "Influence." We are wired for consistency and commitment. That means the story we get in our heads first wins; a strong confirmation bias is woven into our DNA. We tend to cling to that as the default truth, despite all odds and objective counter-evidence.

So, we can either depend on our students to provide their parents with a balanced, objective and complete picture of a situation, or we can be proactive with either an email (good) or phone call (much more effective). Anytime we see an issue at school we think might concern a parent, job number one as professionals is to get the facts to the parents right away.

That confirmation bias, by the way, works both ways. If we really want to believe something, we can succeed. Parents desperately want to believe their child. Our own desire and need to believe our story — and/or our teachers' story — can move us further away from objectivity.



5. SOMETIMES, WE HAVE TO OWN PART OF THE PROBLEM

I have taken no aspect of my work more seriously than supporting teachers. That isn't, however, done blindly. It turns out some of our teachers are human, and as principals, we may be positioned to speak a truth to a teacher that perhaps no one else can. These are often our most uncomfortable conversations, but done in a caring way, can build trust and help move people forward professionally.

6. MORE PROACTIVITY: THE PRINCIPLE OF NO SURPRISES

One of my annual reminders to staff is to get to me first, before I get the irate parent phone call. I once had one of my most respected, professional teachers practically run into my office with a horrified look on her face and quickly close the door behind her. After the eighth time she'd asked her second-grader with ADHD to stay at his seat, she'd turned around to see him lying across a child's desk



immediately behind her. Instinctively, she'd smacked his bottom!

"Now what will happen?"

"Well, if I'd found out about it from the parent first, you'd probably have had a little unplanned vacation coming while I did a full-on investigation of what exactly has been going on in your room. Now, you can either call the parent, or wait and see if the parent calls me - I can describe this conversation, you can apologize, and we can move on with our lives."

The Principle of No Surprises reminder helps your teachers support you in supporting them. As Ken noted in his article, the same holds true for us in relation to the folks at central office - prompt communication to them better positions them to support us when the parent takes it to the next level.

7. EMAIL DISCRETION ADVISED

Speaking of being proactive, another of my week-before-school reminders for staff is a favorite never-ism: *Thou shalt never hit SEND while upset*. It's perfectly fine to write it today, then send it tomorrow when you can do so without a sense of emotional gratification. Of course, usually, by tomorrow, we realize our message was just therapy; there's no need to actually send it (or we can just delete emotion and commentary and focus on the facts). Over the years, this one item on my reminder-to-teachers list has generated more thank yous (actually, thank goodnesses) from teachers than all others combined.

8. KNOW THYSELF

What makes a conversation difficult? That often varies from person to person. If you don't know your Meyers-Briggs profile, there are plenty of online tools to find out. Periodically, I'll Google my ENTP profile, and every time I do, I learn something new — or at my age, something I've forgotten. Model the

self-awareness and better emotional regulation you want to see in your staff and students!

9. LISTEN INTENTLY

While sometimes parents just need to vent, more often, they want and need more. This is where we apply Covey's Habit #5: *Seek first to understand, then be understood*. Typically, parents come focused on a solution, without having fully thought through the underlying problem. Often, in the process of clarifying the problem, the issue seems to resolve itself. Other times, getting to the essence of the problem provides a jumping off point for staff to creatively address a problem in ways parents may not have thought possible. More often than not, the critical skill here is asking the right question, rather than providing the right answer.

10. THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE

Got 99 out of a hundred facts right? Guess what you'll be spending your next half hour discussing. Unless you really need a refresher on what a dog is like with a bone, you might want to go back and ask one more question of a witness, or re-read that IEP. Just sayin'.

11. PARDON ME

Believe it or not, someday, you'll make a mistake. When you do, apologize quickly and sincerely.

12. THINK WIN-WIN

Resist the temptation to "win." When possible, allow the parent to save face. Anytime the parent "loses," it comes back to bite us. Treat each conversation as an opportunity to strengthen relationships, communication lines, and credibility.

13. DON'T TAKE OFFENSE

Occasionally, a parent will say or do something genuinely offensive. Even

Continued on page 16

(or especially?) when it's meant to be personal, don't take it personally. Taking offense is easier and can feel better (e.g., feeling smugly morally superior and victimized, so there's that), but so far, I've never found anger effective in raising my IQ, solving a problem, or building a relationship. As with students, the behaviors we see have a backstory we may not know, and when we err on the side of compassion, we are on the side of professionalism.

14. WONDERING HOW LONG THE NEXT PARENT EMAIL WILL BE?

I was a math teacher, but early in my admin career, I learned an equation I'd somehow missed out on. Using the Parent-Reply Theorem, you can reliably predict the length of your next parent email by multiplying the length of their original treatise (e.g., two pages) by the length of your brilliant, suitable-for-publishing, point-by-point drop-the-mic response (say, three pages), to determine the length of their rebuttal (six!).

On the off chance you don't want to spend your weekend honing your 18-page response, I'd suggest the following alternative. Call the parent (or better yet, meet face-to-face). Then follow up with an email, quickly summarizing the conversation, and any next steps. I never had a lengthy response to that summary email.

15. PHONE A FRIEND

Over the years, I've been blessed with a solid network of colleagues who I've called upon for a reality check. When you have a tough parent conversation coming, sometimes a phone call to a fellow principal or AWSP can do wonders.

More than once, I've been talked off a ledge, only to return the favor later. This is tough work, so support your local colleagues, and call on them when you need it!

16. COMFORT ZONE

Lastly, I'll leave you with one tip I stole long ago from NAESP's "Principal" magazine that has saved me countless hours — more time to read AWSP's "Washington Principal" cover to cover! Occasionally, the problem the parent (or staff member) presents is they're actually *too* comfortable in your office. They come in when they have time on their hands and, hunker down for a good conversation. Meanwhile, you have some kind of pesky day job you're trying to attend to.

Give them some full-on attention, and when you're ready to wrap things up, while staying fully engaged, just stand up. Don't take a step anywhere, just stand and patiently continue to the conversation. Presently, they'll also stand. That typically helps wind up the conversation within a minute, before you even need to start edging for the door to go to your unspoken next destination. Say your

goodbyes, then head off briskly to your destination, even if it's just the drinking fountain around the corner.

Works like a charm.

Yes, But...

Good decisions, it's said, come from wisdom. And wisdom, of course, comes from bad decisions. How many of these did I learn the hard way? How about a perfect 16 for 16. I also tallied how many I could think of exceptions or solid counterarguments for — again, a perfect 16 for 16. That maddening complexity is integral to what makes our role so meaningful; if this was simple, it'd take the sport right out of it! Walking your path with caring, integrity and professionalism is truly a calling, and not for the faint of heart. Blessings to you in your journey! ■

Dave Weston was a principal for five years in Washington, and 18 years overseas (Pakistan, Singapore and Saudi Arabia) before retiring in 2013. Now, Dave does a little bit of principal coaching, a couple hundred hours a year as a Teacher Mentor for Highline Schools, and some admin-fill-in work with Highline.

