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THE EDUCATION ISSUE | MAGAZINE

What parents and teachers really want from one another

A back-to-school wish list has both sides looking for better communication.



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By Joanna Weiss | SEPTEMBER 26, 2017

Across the schoolyard and the classroom this time of year, relationships are blooming, filled with big plans, high hopes, and fraught expectations. I'm talking, of course, about parents and teachers.

That partnership, based on the best intentions, can be glorious: I've wanted to nominate some of my kids' teachers for sainthood. Still, scratch the surface of the home-school divide — as I recently did with some teachers, parents, and experts in the field — and you'll find plenty of gripes, large and small. Parents complain about school-supply lists so long they extend across state lines. Teachers complain about overbearing requests to renegotiate grades.

But mostly both sides talk about the perils of communication. Parents fear their kids will struggle quietly, unnoticed, in some dark corner of the classroom. Teachers dread parents who need reassurance on an hourly basis. The information handoff, from home to school and back, can feel like crossing a chasm. Yet there are ways to bridge the gap, and ways that schools can help. Here's a bit of advice from both perspectives — emphasizing the elementary school years, but relevant through high school.

WHAT PARENTS WOULD LIKE FROM TEACHERS

Two-way contact

For all of the wonders of modern technology, many schools still send out information through a system only slightly more advanced than the carrier pigeon: sheets of paper placed into the backpacks of minors. That deluge of forms and notices often demands some sort of gourmet cooking, complex project management, or immediate cash outlay. And they're often unearthed in a breakfast-table frenzy. (Confession: Any paper that reaches my house via backpack on a Friday will not be acknowledged until Monday morning.) Many schools have invested in websites designed to streamline communications, notes Matt Kraft, a professor of education at Brown University. But not all parents have access to technology, or the capacity to remember yet another log-in and password. And even when parents participate, schools don't consistently update the information they post online: Some teachers post homework nightly, some sporadically. But there's a deeper problem with online portals, Kraft says: At a time when there aren't nearly enough two-way conversations, they're designed for one-way communication.

Communication when it matters

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Another One-Way form of contact will come months from now, likely stuffed into a backpack: that dreaded artifact of childhood, the report card. The good thing about the standardized report card, Kraft says, is that everyone gets it: struggling students, high achievers, students chugging along in the middle.



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Still, most report cards, as designed, aren't nearly enlightening enough. Parents say report cards can feel like mass mailings, with boilerplate language that doesn't give much insight into a child's full experience. Worse, the feedback often comes too late to identify budding problems — or areas where a striving student could use an extra challenge.

It's also hard to get much satisfaction out of the 10-minute parent-teacher conference, a ritual that briefly turns schools into speed-dating venues. And communicating outside of these conferences becomes more challenging as kids get into middle school and high school, when teachers typically handle multiple classes. One middle school parent notes that she had been discouraged from scheduling conferences unless there was a problem — which means that if her child wasn't explicitly struggling, he was deemed unworthy of attention.

Kraft thinks schools should step in to help teachers communicate with parents more often. He urges school administrators to establish norms for communication, like having every teacher contact all of the parents in her class at least once a month. Even a small amount of personal interaction can help students succeed, he says. He and a colleague asked teachers at a high school summer program to write a one-sentence message to each family every week, citing specific things students were doing well or poorly. That simple act, he says, reduced the number of students who failed by 41 percent.

Teachers understandably balk at the notion of adding another task to overloaded days or encouraging squeaky wheels. “We can’t e-mail parents about every single emotional concern that we have; it just isn’t realistic,” says one teacher I spoke to, who has both headed a classroom and been a specialist dealing with 1,000 students every year.

But Kraft says routine feedback “doesn’t have to be crazy” — just a quick check-in via e-mail or text. That alone “would be a huge improvement from the status quo,” he says: In 2012, only 59 percent of higher-income families — and 48 percent of families living at or below the poverty line — got an individual e-mail from school. And if a district decides that contacting parents is worth teachers’ time, Kraft says, it might need to — deep breath here — adjust teacher contracts accordingly.

Some paperwork relief

Perhaps you know someone like this woman in my town: a parent with four students in the same elementary school, who starts out the year filling out four separate, identical

emergency contact forms, sometimes in triplicate, always on paper. Many parents complain about starting the year with wrist fatigue, and wonder if there's a way to check in only when something has changed. Schools have to ask parents to update information: In some settings, parents' addresses and phone numbers change frequently. But schools can make it a priority to collect accurate information for each family and make it updatable online. They can also learn whether parents would rather be reached by phone, e-mail, or text.

Paper forms are fraught with another sort of peril: the tyranny of handwriting. One mother I know discovered, on the eve of the first day of school, that her son's teacher didn't know he existed. It turns out he hadn't been registered, because a school district employee had misread the house number on a paper form, causing a key mailing to be returned to the district from what was labeled a false home address. (He was eventually enrolled, after a lengthy process of paperwork, home visits for verification, and curses to the gods.)

WHAT TEACHERS WOULD LIKE FROM PARENTS

Insight into your child

Just as parents want feedback from teachers, teachers want feedback from parents about their children, both at the start of the school year and if real problems arise during it.

Teachers aren't mind readers, of course, and need parental input to understand a student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles. The occasional pointed e-mail question from home can be useful, one teacher told me, particularly if there's a specific worry in mind.

Some teachers find creative ways to gather the facts. This year, one of my daughter's middle school teachers sent, via backpack, a questionnaire for parents to fill out, listing strengths and weaknesses, hopes and challenges. It came with explicit instructions for the

child to look a parent in the eye and say: “I’m sorry I’m giving you something else to fill out.” Not every parent loved another writing assignment. But for me, the process was worthwhile, almost like a BuzzFeed quiz — a little information sharing wrapped in psychological analysis.

Less stress about the tests

Teachers have long complained about helicopter parents who step in to broker disagreements and boost their children’s precious GPAs. And many say trends in public education toward standardized tests have chilled creativity in the classroom. Wheelock’s Diane Levin, a cofounder of the advocacy group Defending the Early Years, tells the story of an early-grade teacher who would pass a ball to kids when it was their turn to speak — using it like a talking stick. A principal told her to stop, because it didn’t seem serious enough.

That pressure to control the classroom comes from parents more now, too, Levin says. “Parents feel like they want their kids to do well on the tests,” she says. “So they want to know: What is the teacher doing to make sure their kid’s going to do well on the test?”

Levin says teachers can help convey a little perspective to parents — explaining their approach to testing, putting the tests in context, and emphasizing that there are other ways to judge a student’s achievements. But parents need to curb their expectations, she says. Kids are human, too, and they’re probably not going to ace every exam. Why make home testy, too?

Involvement at home

Many teachers I spoke to share a common desire: To see success at school, set the stage at home. That can be as simple as getting a child to school on time, creating a quiet place for

homework, and drilling in the importance of treating teachers with respect.

It also means talking about what's happening in the classroom. But any parent who has asked "What did you do in school today?" and gotten a grunt or a mumbled "nothing" in reply understands how challenging that can be.

Diane Levin, a Wheelock College education professor, suggests that teachers send out a little help, in the form of a question of the day or week, tied to something notable that happened in school. It could be a query about a reading or a prompt about a science project that sparks some home experiments. The goal is to foster conversations about school in a casual way, without overburdening teachers or parents.

As the school year goes on, she says, teachers can draw students into the process, asking them to suggest the best questions to send home.

Communicative kids? That would be an educational triumph.

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