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Tips for a Better Parent-School Relationship

A Few Suggestions From Both Sides Of the Discussion

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In many ways, parents are the most important teachers children will ever have. But drawing them into schools is often difficult. So is forging a constructive parent-school relationship. Teachers complain about parents who meddle too much and those who can't be found. Parents say that educators claim to want more involvement but that they belittle their suggestions.

Here are 10 recommendations for better relations from educators and school-savvy parents.

1. Stop Using Jargon

Speeches by principals at back-to-school nights and fliers schools send home often require translation -- not from English to Spanish but from educational gobbledegook to everyday language. Fairfax County parent Karen Budd said such terms as "small learning communities," "meta-cognition," "cooperative learning," "discovery learning," "constructivism" and "multiple intelligences" are unintelligible to people who did not attend education school. "The 'eduwocky' used by school administrators . . . leaves parents speechless and unable to question as they should," Budd said. Some jargon, she said, cloaks methods that don't work well.

2. Visit Parents on Their Turf

Often, the best place to meet parents is at home or in a house of worship or community center. While working in New York, veteran educator Daniel A. Domenech once threw a party with food at a school. The party drew three parents. "I held my next meeting in the basement of the local church after services that Sunday. It was a packed house," said Domenech, who later served as Fairfax County superintendent. In Frederick County, Walkersville High enlists activists to drum up attendance at school functions. "We have found that intervention by someone they know and trust, another parent, has a far greater effect than home visits or calls from the school," said Principal Becky Koontz. In Loudoun County, Dominion High parent liaisons Taryn Simms and Duke Butkovich go door-to-door with guidance director Kevin Terry to invite parents to school events.

3. Ask Parents to Teach What They Know

In Howard County, a community action team sponsors an annual Multicultural Day at Laurel Woods Elementary School. Parents give presentations in several classrooms on the cultures and customs of their

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home countries, and children travel from room to room with special blue "passports."

4. Welcome Complainers

At Arlington's Key Elementary School, Principal Marjorie Myers has a policy that spurs immigrant parents to get involved: She celebrates anything that gets them inside her school. "I am even happy when non-English-speaking parents come to complain to me or my assistant principal, because this is counter to their culture," said Myers, who learned Spanish when her military father moved the family to Spain. "Their coming in tells me that we have established a comfort level in the main office that has given them the power to feel safe talking to me. I always tell my parents it is their job to speak out for their child."

5. Hire Parent-Friendly Principals

It's hard to overstate the importance of a school leader who listens to parents and knows how to speak to them. Domenech recently attended a meeting of Hispanic parents at Fairfax High School and watched Principal Scott Brabrand, who is not Hispanic, give his presentation in Spanish. "I could see the smiles and the appreciation that they felt for this administrator who went out of his way to communicate to them in their native language," Domenech said.

6. Seek Parent Volunteers

Many schools encourage parents to serve as hallway or playground monitors or help with small classroom tasks. That gives teachers more time to prepare lessons and work with students.

7. Offer Educational Activities For Parents and Kids

The U.S. Education Department praised Brunswick Elementary School in Frederick County for such efforts as an annual book collection drive. The campaign fills classroom libraries and helps supply family literacy events. In Prince George's County, Steve Barish extolled an overnight trip he and 24 other parents from Rockledge Elementary School took with their children to Camp Schmidt, an outdoor education center. "What attracted a lot of us was the offer to take a whole day off to be with our kids," he said.

8. Get Parents to Observe Classes

Margaret Brent Middle School in St. Mary's County has Take a Parent to School Week. Each day covers a different subject, with parents able to visit classes and meet with curriculum specialists. Timothy Dawson, principal of Baltimore City College, a public high school, suggests an alternative to the common practice of sending suspended students home: Parents should be required to spend an entire school day with their child and attend each class.

9. Provide Courses for Parents

The Prince George's County Community Services Coalition sponsored a five-hour parents' summit Saturday at Surrattsville High School in Clinton. The day included workshops on asking the right questions about drugs and dealing with new state high school graduation requirements. Key Elementary in Arlington holds a *Padres Unidos* (Parents United) meeting two Wednesdays each month. Experts teach about the school's math curriculum, personal financial accounting and other topics, and parents get to use school computers.

10.

Create a Great School

Educators at such inner-city schools as Garfield High School in East Los Angeles and Christopher Columbus Middle School in Union City, N.J., reversed a common formula. Instead of building parent support to improve schools, they found that improving the schools built support. Garfield's strong Advanced Placement program and Columbus's computer education program led more parents to attend school meetings. Word of the educational successes spread in the neighborhoods. The lesson, educators said: Parents will recognize and buy into a good product when they see it.

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