

13

Three Opportunities to Shine

Building positive, enduring relationships between our schools and our communities is complex and demanding. As we've seen throughout this book, the growing list of demands on educational leaders often causes many time-consuming tasks to be temporarily placed on the back burner. Many school administrators find themselves dealing with situations that have quick fixes so they can experience some sense of accomplishment.

The concern raised by such behavior is that it causes relationship building to suffer. The cornerstone of a successful school-community relations plan may well be the capacity that the school administration has for fostering and sustaining positive relationships. If you reflect on many of the concepts and ideas presented in the previous ten chapters, there is a consistent theme of relationship building throughout. The school leaders who influence and shape the culture of their schools through a focus on human relationships find it almost impossible to place these time-consuming tasks on the back burner. They recognize that these relationships are the foundation of their schools' success. Though taking time to build, these relationships form the basis for everything these leaders do.

Principals, in particular, need to gain the support and confluence of values of other members of their school community. In striving to do so, they interact with others and have their values and norms shaped as a result of those interactions. Over time, the norms and values of the leader and the followers move closer together. This means, in essence, that principals who concern themselves with developing strong school-community relations must take the time to understand and appreciate the norms and values of their constituents. Only then will they truly be able to develop relationships with them.

Although strong school-community relations is, therefore, a time-consuming and demanding task, there are a few isolated incidents that, if handled correctly, can be of great assistance in a relatively short time. While these opportunities will not, in and of themselves, create strong school-community relations in any school, they will assist school leaders in establishing the kinds of relationships that are important to them. As all three of these situations are opportunities that occur in virtually all schools anyway, it stands to reason that we ought to do all we can to make the most of them.

Open House

The school open house is an opportunity, usually held in the fall, for members of the community to visit the school en masse. While the majority of attendees are ordinarily parents whose children attend the school, in many cases open houses are held for all members of the community, regardless of their status as parents. There are great variances in the format of a school open house, but they most commonly include an opportunity for attendees to experience a tour of the facility. The next section of this text contains descriptions of some of the more common elements of open house tours.

Open House Tours

Often during an open house, parents and community members are given a tour of the school facility. This tour, ordinarily conducted by members of the school's internal publics (i.e., teachers, staff, or students), is a tremendous opportunity to point out to visitors the objects and artifacts that define what is important in the school. As one example, there are schools that display an array of student artwork for an open house. This display serves to inform the public both of the quality of the artwork students are completing and the importance that the school places on the art program.

Academic awards and athletic trophy displays are another part of the tour that visitors to an open house often receive. As is the case with student artwork, there is a tremendous opportunity here for the school to demonstrate the value placed on student achievement in these areas. The display of such awards is often far more important than is the actual feat the awards represent. From a school-community relations perspective, whether or not the football team won their division is often not nearly as important as the fact that the school takes pride in the team's accomplishments, whatever they happen to be.

Tours of the educational facility conducted during an open house generally also include visits to classrooms or labs that house curricular programs of which the school is particularly proud. Examples include technology labs, band rooms, language labs, and reading rooms. The purpose of including brief visits to these locations as a part of the tour is to ensure that all those in attendance are aware of the curricular offerings that the school provides. For many visitors to an open house, this is the only time in which they are shown these areas.

As many schools in America are in need of renovations and/or expansions, the issues surrounding the use of tax dollars for such ventures often raise great concern and debate among community members. Tours of the school during an open house also play a significant role in these discussions. If the school has recently undergone some improvements, then the open house tour is an opportunity to show off these improvements to stakeholders. This is particularly effective if students are conducting, or assisting in conducting, the tours. The enthusiasm students can display for improvements

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to their school can be infectious to community members who are otherwise concerned that their tax dollars are not being spent wisely.

The same logic applies to situations in which the school is in need of improvements for which the local community has failed to approve funds. In these cases, including these areas that are either outdated, built to specifications not currently warranted, or inappropriately sized, can be a very effective method for convincing community members to reconsider their previous dispositions toward funding the school improvement.

The overall cleanliness of the school facility is another consideration in designing an open house tour. This idea is discussed in greater depth further on in this chapter. Although the school facility and grounds ought to always be meticulously cleaned and maintained, a heightened sense of awareness is necessary at open house time. As the open house will attract visitors who otherwise are never present in the school, a piece of chalk on a classroom floor may have more impact than it would on an everyday visitor. For the attendee who is a first time visitor to the school, that single piece of chalk may represent messiness that they feel could exist in the building regularly. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

In planning to provide tours during an open house, another point to consider and to prepare tour guides for is the way in which individuals greet and respond to one another during the tour. If, for example, two separate tour groups pass one another in the hallways, it is important that the tour guides have a friendly, honest greeting for the leader and members of the other group. If staff members are seen during the tour, they must be aware of the importance of being enthused and greeting the touring group of visitors. These seemingly obvious points are essential. In addition to showcasing the facility, the open house tour provides a rich opportunity to demonstrate relationships and the sense of community that the school professes to enjoy.

Open House Programs

There are also variations in the types of programs schools offer to attendees of an open house. In fact, there are instances in which there is no program at all. At times such as these, the open house may consist of a simple opportunity for visitors to come to the school and visit locations that are of interest to them. However, as the majority of open house experiences involve adherence to some sort of program planned by school employees, some typical elements are described below.

Oftentimes, an open house begins with a program in the school auditorium, gymnasium, or cafeteria. This program will usually involve an address by the school principal, which will highlight curricular goals and/or accomplishments. If there are issues on the horizon that may benefit from as much public involvement as possible, the principal may choose to introduce or discuss those during this session. This section run by the principal may include a

question/answer session, or it may serve as an opportunity for the principal merely to address the public before moving on to the next part of the program.

The open house program, in many cases, also includes a performance(s) by students. This performance may be a song that the children have been rehearsing, it may be a short skit consistent with the open house's theme, or it may be an address by a class president or student council official. Again, the actual content of the performance is often not nearly as important in terms of school-community relations as is the fact that students are included as deliverers of the program. The emphasis is less on showcasing the talents of the children and more on demonstrating the important role they play as stakeholders in the educational process. Additionally, if the student performance incorporates a theme or mission that the school has embraced for the given year, then it becomes even more likely that stakeholders will remember the theme and understand its relevance.

During an open house program, the principal may also choose to introduce staff members to the assembled audience. In a smaller school, it is fairly common for all faculty and staff who are present to be introduced and acknowledged by the crowd. This is of great assistance to families who are new to the community and may be familiar with a very limited number of staff members. In larger schools, the principal often introduces only those faculty and staff members who are new to the school.

In some cases, open house programs are opportunities for guests chosen by the principal to address the audience about relevant topics. The guest may be the district superintendent or his/her designee addressing capital improvements, testing, or curricular advances. Sometimes the guest is a community member, such as a local child psychologist, invited to address such issues as homework completion or parent involvement. Still in other cases, the guest speaker may be somebody from outside of the community hired because of expertise in an area that parents and community members could benefit from.

Finally, many open house programs also provide an opportunity for an officer of the parent-teacher group (i.e., PTO, PTA) to address those assembled. This address usually includes budgetary information and may include a call for all parents to become involved in the association's activities. This address has added value, in many instances, because it illustrates for attendees that parents are leaders in some important school issues. Again, the issues discussed are often not nearly as important as the mere fact that the individual has been chosen to speak about them. The act of including parent association officials in the program, for example, is often more significant than the content of their speech.

Classroom Visits

Although open house programs are held for a variety of reasons (i.e., back-to-school night, science fair, student author conference), visits to classrooms

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are ordinarily a part of the scheduled activities. Sometimes, the classroom visits are designed to give visitors a visual image of the integral parts of the school. There may be student projects displayed for visitors to enjoy, or the classroom may look like it ordinarily does.

Other times, the classroom visit is more formal and includes an address by the classroom teacher. This is particularly common on back-to-school night. The purpose of this address is to inform parents of rules, expectations, and events that will make up the school year for their child. Additionally, there is time allotted for visitors to ask questions of the teacher. The interchange occurring during these times is of paramount importance in setting the tone that the teacher hopes to enjoy throughout the school year. For this reason, teachers should take great care in their personal appearance, their nonverbal and verbal communication, and the appearance of their classroom. The school administration must emphasize these points to assist teachers in understanding their importance. Because many teacher-preparation institutions do not adequately prepare teachers for dealing with parents, it is the responsibility of the principal and other school officials to do so.

It is vitally important to the success of classroom visits that teachers receive some training in how to make a positive impression on the public. Particularly, new teachers must be trained in how to convey positive, welcoming feelings to open house attendees. Although it is important that teachers understand policies and procedures they may be asked about during the event, it is perhaps more important that they understand the importance of the image they portray. This image will be remembered by parents in attendance for much longer than whether or not the teacher knew the answer to a policy question. Conveying a caring disposition toward students and a desire to work cooperatively with parents are two of the most important messages teachers can convey during these events.

The back-to-school event is a tremendous opportunity for each classroom teacher to illustrate a positive disposition and for the school, as a whole, to put its best foot forward with members of the community.

Timing Is Everything

It has become common practice in many school communities to host open house events during the evening hours. This, in many ways, is a throw-back to the days of Ward and June Cleaver of television fame. Ward, being the family breadwinner would arrive home from work, the family would enjoy a nice meal together, and then Ward and June Cleaver would venture off to school to hear of faculty plans for Wally and the Beaver's educations. School administrators must realize that the Cleavers do not live in many communities these days. Single-parent families and other unconventionally configured families have replaced them. The changing of the American workforce has further necessitated that schools reconsider the time of day in

which they offer activities such as an open house. A vast number of people work hours quite different from those worked by Ward Cleaver. Many of these workers are the mothers of our schoolchildren, another fact that makes the workforce differ. Consider that in 1940 fewer than 9% of all women with children worked outside the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1987). In 2007 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 79.5% of women with children between the ages of 6 and 13 were in the labor force. As the workforce has changed and alternative family configurations have become more commonplace, one would think that schools also would have changed the times in which they offer programs for these parents to enjoy. Although this is true in the best schools, it sadly has not yet become the practice in a vast majority of them.

What are needed are school administrators who structure open house programs to meet the needs of their targeted audience. Knowing the community is again an obvious first step that must be taken. Once the school administrator has some information about the work schedules of most families, then he or she can make more informed decisions regarding the scheduling of activities targeted to these individuals. This does not imply that the principal must memorize every parent's work schedule. However, it does imply that the principal at least ought to know something about the industries that employ many of the school's parents. For example, if the school is located in the vicinity of large manufacturing facilities, knowledge of the number of parents who are employed at these facilities will yield some information about the different shifts that these parents make work during.

Scheduling important events such as open houses should be done with these work shifts in mind. This will mean, in many instances, that events are held shortly after student dismissal instead of during the evening hours. It may mean that there are two separate events held, one after school and one during the evening. What is important is that the decision regarding the event's scheduling is done with the parents' work schedules in mind.

It can be argued that such an emphasis on parents' schedules shows a lack of understanding for the schedules of faculty and staff members. This is not necessarily so. While it is true that altering an open house schedule to meet the needs of parents and community members may inadvertently make the event less convenient for faculty and staff, the reverse may also be true. Besides, open house events are designed for the visitors and not for the staff. The relative infrequency of such events, at worst, means that faculty and staff will be inconvenienced a few times each year. If the event produces satisfied visitors, cognizant that every effort has been made to make their attendance plausible, then the inconveniences will be a small price to pay. Remember, the open house is an opportunity for your school to shine. Schedule it at a time when the most people can attend.

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Advertising the Open House—Calling All Parents

A common complaint heard from school principals is that they make efforts to make their open house event convenient for parents to attend, and a very small percentage of parents actually show up. Although there is no way to guarantee the attendance of every parent, there are certainly ways in which school personnel can dramatically increase the number of people in attendance. The simplest one is through advertising.

As an open house is an important event, it should be advertised in newsletters from the principal's office at the earliest possible date. If you know the date of the fall open house on the first day of school, then begin including it in newsletters and other communications from the office on that very day. People need time to plan, and many people need several reminders before they actually pay close attention to something. The same can be said of classroom communications. All of the teachers who send notices or newsletters home to parents should be encouraged to advertise the open house date and time as soon as they become aware of such things.

In some schools, the students create advertisements for open house events. This can be done in a way that integrates the activity in with the curriculum. For example, an art class can utilize techniques that the teacher has introduced in designing special open house invitations for students' parents. At almost any grade level, students can utilize technology to create advertisements of the event. There is an added benefit to parents receiving invitations from their children. If invitations are to be delivered to business or community members, creations by children are almost always more appealing and likely to illicit positive responses.

Although written invitations and notifications of open house events are important, personal telephone calls are one of the best ways to increase attendance. Again, utilizing students for this task is one way to make it more manageable. Student councils can have an evening in which they attempt to call each and every family inviting them to the open house. In conjunction with faculty assistance, the students can develop a short script that they read to every family they reach. If the students reach an answering machine, they can simply read their prepared speech as the message they leave. The goal of such an evening is that each family receives one personal contact (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001).

The same goal can be accomplished with teacher assistance. If each teacher is given the responsibility of contacting the parents of every student they teach, they will be amazed at the positive response parents are likely to give. In large departments with a vast number of students, parent volunteers or students can be utilized for assistance. This may seem like a lot of work, but the benefits will far outweigh the cost. If care has been taken to create an open house event in which the school will really shine, then the goal ought to be to get as many people to attend as humanly possible.

The Cleanliness of the School

A further consideration in creating a winning open house event involves the cleanliness and maintenance of the school and its grounds. While keeping a well-groomed and properly maintained facility is always important to school-community relations, it becomes even more important when planning an event that is likely to draw large numbers of people to the school. Although the school facility may be old, there is no reason why it cannot be cleaned and properly maintained. Leaky or rusted plumbing, for example, can be fixed or updated at a relatively small cost. A fresh coat of paint in a high traffic area need not be expensive. Clean floors ought to be the expectation of the custodial staff, regardless of the school facility's age. Finally, the exterior of the school ought to be neat, vibrant, and aesthetically pleasing to the community. In maintaining the exterior of the school, the custodial and maintenance staff should be encouraged to use flowers and shrubs that are often seen in the community. The school ought not to appear as something alien from the community, but should instead be an example of the best-groomed facility within the community. Make it look beautiful, but make it look like it belongs in the community also.

Newer facilities should be designed with some of these ideas in mind. Although a new building will obviously stand out as different in many communities, the landscaping affords one opportunity to blend the building in with the community. Newer facilities require the same maintenance as older buildings in terms of keeping floors and hallways clean and attractive, also. Again, open house events provide opportunities for the custodial and maintenance staffs to really make a positive impression. The school administrator must assume the responsibility of ensuring that custodial and maintenance staff members are aware of this.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Events involving large groups of people, such as those mentioned in the preceding section are important opportunities for schools to shine. The fact that so many people may attend these events adds credence to their value as a chance to make a positive impression on a significant percentage of constituents all at the very same time. It must be noted, however, that there are other very important opportunities to shine, which do not involve presentations to large groups of people. The most common of these is the face-to-face parent-teacher conference.

The parent-teacher conference provides an unparalleled opportunity for concerned teachers to engage in meaningful, two-way communication with concerned parents. As such, the conference ought to be something that both parties look forward to. It ought to be seen as a chance for the parent to

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inform the teacher of pertinent information about the child that may assist the teacher's educational planning. Further, it ought to provide the opportunity for the teacher to inform the parent of the child's educational progress and/or potential deficiencies while utilizing teamwork to design a plan to maximize the child's learning potential. Opportunities for such dialogue cannot be found in large-group open house meetings. This is why the parent-teacher conference is such a valuable time for both the parent and the teacher.

Sadly, many teachers have grown to dread the rich opportunities that parent-teacher conferences can provide. In informal conversations with hundreds of teachers, difficult parents is one of the most commonly cited reason why this is so. The solution to these negative feelings so many teachers have toward parent-teacher conferences rests with the principal's ability to see to it that teachers receive the proper training and support for leading conferences. Effectively handled parent-teacher conferences require skills in communication and organization that too many school principals assume their teachers already possess. Although staff development dollars are being used for other types of training, an opportunity is being lost to prepare teachers for this highly important interchange.

The first type of training that all teachers need is how to deal with difficult parents. While most parents in any given school community are supportive and cooperative, one difficult parent can lead to a career of dread and fear at the mere mention of parent-teacher conferences. Principals often

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Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences continue to provide some of the best opportunities for teachers to build meaningful partnerships with parents/guardians. One obstacle that exists, however, is that some educators still do not recognize the value of conferences and the need to improve relationships with parents. Instead, many speak of a bygone day in which parents were always supportive of teachers and administrators. It's important for educators to realize that contemporary parents have access to information that appears to have a message contrary to supporting schools. Consider some of these book titles as examples. All three of the following are real books, and parents may be reading them: 1) *Bad Teachers: The Essential Guide for Concerned Parents*, 2) *Public Schools, Public Menace: How Public Schools Lie to Parents and Betray Our Children*, and 3) *Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School With Confidence, the Elementary Years, K-6*.

Exhibit 13-1 Mindsets About Dealing With Parents

- Ninety percent of parents do an excellent job with their children.
- Virtually 100% of parents do the best job they know how to do.
- Part of our job, as educators is to assist the—10% of parents who really need to improve.
- NEVER argue, yell, use sarcasm, or behave unprofessionally with parents.
- Difficult parents are much better at arguing than you are. The reason is that they have more experience. (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001)

have more experience in dealing with difficult parents and can provide some of the necessary training themselves. The problem is exacerbated, however, when the principals do not possess skills to effectively work with difficult parents themselves. In these cases, the principal needs to look outside of the school and find other resources for providing such training.

There are several important considerations in dealing with difficult parents that teachers must become aware of. Some of these are mindsets and may represent a paradigm shift of sorts for the teacher. Others are actual skills and techniques that have been proved time and time again to be successful in dealing with the most difficult parents. Among the mindsets are the following:

School administrators must ensure that teachers understand the things listed above. It is up to the principal to model the belief that the vast majority of parents are good ones. The principal must set the tone for recognizing everybody's responsibility to assist those who are not doing such a good job. Finally, the principal must ensure that all teachers understand that it is never wise to argue with or yell at a difficult parent. These mindsets are not, as some think, automatically understood. They must be taught to teachers in much the same way as good classroom management is taught. I know of very few principals who teach teachers that they ought to yell at students to keep the learning environment well managed. The management of students is seen as important to principals and so they make sure that teachers understand their values and expectations in this area. The same importance must be assigned to dealings with parents and the management of conferences with them. This is the only way that parent-teacher conferences will begin to become real opportunities for the school to shine.

There are many skills that educators can put into their proverbial bags of tricks that will assist them in dealing with difficult parents. They are outlined

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in the book *Dealing With Difficult Parents and With Parents in Difficult Situations* (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001) and include such ideas as the following:

- Making positive contacts with parents before problems occur
- Acknowledging when you have made a mistake
- Showing parents that you are on their side and have the same goals as they have
- Illustrating for difficult parents that the situation could be worse and that you've really given them a good deal
- Focusing on the future to prevent further occurrences of whatever has caused them to be upset

By taking the time to train teachers in these areas, principals will notice a marked decrease in the number of teachers who dread conferences with parents. The focus will cease being on the difficult ones once teachers feel that they have some skills for dealing with these difficult situations. Such training represents time that is well spent so that schools do not lose out on this tremendous opportunity to make parent-teacher conferences the meaningful activities they were designed to be.

In addition to staff development for these human relations issues, principals need to be aware that many teachers need assistance in understanding best how to conduct an effective parent-teacher conference. Here again, the assumption that all teachers possess this understanding is misguided at best. Principals must help teachers focus on the reasons for parent-teacher conferences. They must help teachers get their thoughts focused on such topics as the following:

- What do you hope to accomplish?
- What steps can you follow during the conference to ensure that you meet your major objectives?
- Will you allow time for parents to ask questions and make comments?
- What materials should be shared with parents?
- How can you wind up the conference with a plan for action? Will you recommend any specific steps? (NAESP & NSPRA, 2000)

It is, therefore, good practice for principals to provide a training or workshop activity early in the year to prepare teachers for conferences. In addition to informing teachers of the goals of parent-teacher conferences, which essentially are to get information and to give information, the workshop ought to focus on such things as room arrangements and time-structuring techniques to ensure that teachers make the most of the opportunities they

have for conferring with parents. Part of this training should be devoted to helping teachers understand what the goals of parent-teacher conferences ought to be. Specifically addressed should be the contributions that both parties make to a successful conference.

Exhibits 13-2 and 13-3 outline specific contributions both parents and teachers make to successful conferences.

Acknowledging the achievements possible when these goals are accomplished is helpful to teachers as they prepare to meet with parents. When teachers understand conferences to be give and take opportunities replete with the abilities to strengthen an understanding of the child and his or her home life, and the potential for building home and school partnerships, then they are more likely to prepare for them with eager anticipation.

Exhibit 13-2 Parents' Contributions to Successful Conferences

- Their feelings about school from their own childhood
- Their perceptions of their child's reaction to school
- A description and understanding of their child's responsibilities at home
- Information regarding their child's adherence to rules at home
- An outline of their child's interests or hobbies
- Health information about their child
- Sudden changes at home (divorce or death of a pet or relative, for example)

Exhibit 13-3 Teachers' Contributions to Successful Conferences

- An update on the child's academic and social progress at school
- Perceptions of the child's work habits
- Opinions about the child's preferred learning style
- Information about the child's relationships with other children
- Observations about the child's ability to listen and concentrate
- An overview of the assessments the child will face during the school year
- Areas of needed improvement

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Helping Teachers Prepare for Conferences

If parent-teacher conferences are going to be opportunities to shine, then the entire school community must be part of the effort in preparing for them and carrying them out. While teachers are on the front line and therefore, must be the most prepared for conferences, there are steps that school administrators can take to assist teachers in coordinating smooth, productive conferences.

The first task of the school administrator involves the scheduling and timing of parent-teacher conferences. Just as he or she must do in scheduling open house events, the administrator must try to schedule conferences at a convenient time for parents, least likely to be in conflict with other community events. Care in scheduling will produce two desirable results. First, attendance is likely to be increased if there are no known scheduling conflicts, and secondly, parents are more likely to arrive at conferences in a cooperative mood if they believe that the school has already made efforts to be cooperative with them.

Another way that the school administrator can provide assistance to teachers is in the advertising of the conferences. Although it is always good practice for individual teachers to include conference reminders in any publications they send home to parents, timely information and reminders from the principal's office can be equally effective and can take some of the burden off of the teachers.

In many schools, the scheduling and informing of conferences occurs simultaneously. This is very effective as it not only informs parents that conference days are coming, but it gives them advance notice of scheduling opportunities in case they need to make adjustments to their schedules. Exhibit 13-4 is an example of a letter sent home from a school principal. Note how the letter initially informs parents that conference days are coming, and then gives them an opportunity to indicate their preferred time for scheduling. While there is no guarantee that parents' preferences can be honored, this letter does serve the purpose of attempting to schedule the conference at a convenient time for both parties. It is thought that parents appreciate this thoughtfulness.

Conducting the Conference

Methods for actually conducting parent-teacher conferences ought to be explained and periodically reviewed with teachers. Although it is likely not a good idea to develop a single systematic way for conferences to proceed, as such steps run the risk of de-humanizing the entire process, teachers do benefit from some guidance as to how they should best structure and conduct parent-teacher conferences.

The first steps to prepare for conferences involve the arrangement of the conference areas. To begin with, teachers should develop positively worded signs to post outside their classroom doors informing people that conferences

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Exhibit 13-4 Parent-Teacher Conference Notification Letter

Woodview School

123 Woodview Lane
Anytown, USA

Ima Goodfellow, Principal
Susie Sunshine, Administrative Assistant

May 28, 2010

Dear Parents,

It is with excitement that I inform you of our upcoming parent-teacher conferences. These conferences signify a school year that is solidly underway. Allow me to say that I believe we are off to an excellent start here at Woodview. This is due, in large part, to the cooperative relationship between our staff and you, the parents. Parent-teacher conferences will be an outstanding opportunity to enhance these already positive, cooperative relationships we all enjoy.

For your convenience, we are offering both afternoon and evening conferences once again this year. To facilitate this schedule, please be reminded that school will dismiss early on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, October 13, 14, and 15. We will follow our early dismissal policy as set forth in our parent handbook. Transportation will be provided as always.

To assist us in scheduling your conference with your child's teacher, please indicate your availability below. So that every effort can be made to ensure that conferences of multiple children in the same family can be accommodated reasonably, please list all of your children's names and grades in the appropriate place below as well. It is important that this form is returned to your child's teacher by September 20. Final confirmation of conference schedules will be sent home on Friday, September 24.

I thank you again for your cooperation, and I assure you that we look forward to the opportunity for strengthening our relationships with you via parent-teacher conferences.

Yours truly,
Ima Goodfellow
Principal

Please place a "1" by your first choice and a "2" by your second choice. If only one option is plausible, then a "2" is not necessary.

- Wednesday, October 13 (5:30 p.m.–8:30 p.m.)
- Thursday, October 14 (1:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.)
- Thursday, October 14 (5:30 p.m.–8:30 p.m.)
- Friday, October 15 (1:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.)

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are in progress. Posting such signs will lead to a decrease in the number of interruptions and will stress the importance of the conversations taking place inside the classroom. Placed near these signs should be chairs for parents who arrive early to sit in. It is also a good idea to have small puzzles or other toys to occupy the attention of young children who may have needed to accompany the parents to the conference.

Inside the classroom, care should be given to the placement of chairs and tables at which parents and the teacher will confer. These should be placed away from the classroom door to lessen distraction and, above all else, should be comfortable for parents to sit in. It is patently disrespectful for the teacher to sit in his or her desk chair while the parent is squeezed into a student's chair. This is particularly so in early childhood settings. If there are not enough adult-sized chairs available to accommodate all parties, then the teacher must also sit in a student's chair. The comfort of the parents and their feelings of equality should be the primary concerns in creating conference environments.

It is further unwise for teachers to hold conferences with a desk between the parents and themselves. Doing so creates an immediate barrier between parents and teacher that should be avoided. Teachers must be perceived as caring and approachable if conferences are to be successful. This is better accomplished if all parties sit in positions of equality, facing one another.

To maximize the limited time typically allotted for parent-teacher conferences, teachers are well served if they have all relevant data (i.e., test scores, work samples) available before the conference begins. Time is wasted if the teacher is searching for artifacts and examples during the conference, and parents may perceive such searching as disorganization on the part of the teacher.

Once the actual conference has begun, there are other important steps teachers should take to maximize effectiveness. These include:

1. Teachers must recognize that they immediately set the tone and climate for the conference by the way in which they greet parents. A friendly smile and an expression of appreciation that the parents were able to attend the conference go a long way in this regard.
2. Begin the conference with a positive comment about the student. For the best students, positive comments will dominate conversations with their parents. Even the students who are experiencing difficulties have positive points, though. The teacher should acknowledge these before discussing areas in need of improvement.
3. Allow parents ample opportunities to express their points of view. It can be very frustrating for a parent to listen to a teacher for 15 minutes, only to be told that there is no time left for parent reactions. Therefore, teachers must temper the points that they feel are urgent to discuss with the concerns parents have brought to the conference. It is always possible to schedule a follow-up conference if necessary.

4. Sum up any agreements made before the conference ends. The teacher needs to be aware of actions agreed upon and steps to be taken before ending the conference. Just as he or she would do when teaching a lesson to students, the teacher should close the conference by summing these points up for the parents.
5. End on the same positive note you began with. Teachers should express appreciation to the parents and make a positive comment about the future. If the conference resulted in a good deal of negative discussion centered on student problems, it is particularly important for the teacher to end with a positive focus on the future.
6. The teacher should immediately document any follow-up steps he or she agreed to before beginning a new conference with other parents. Commitments made at a conference but not followed through with can be very damaging to a teacher's reputation.

The principal's role in parent-teacher conferences extends beyond providing training in the areas previously discussed. Although it is important that the principal first take steps to ensure that teachers are prepared for leading parent-teacher conferences, that is only the beginning of the principal's work.

Principals must be highly visible during conference time. Research has shown (Fiore, 1999) that teachers and parents feel a sense of comfort knowing that the principal is around. As often as possible, the principal should circulate through the school building. In doing this, the principal will discover opportunities to confer with parents who are waiting for their conference to begin, assist teachers who may have been asked questions that they were unprepared for by parents, and even coordinate conferences that have the expectation of being particularly difficult.

In addition to being visible throughout the building, the principal should be prepared to remain available until the last parent-teacher conference has ended. It is of great comfort to teachers knowing that the principal is still in the building, even if all other teachers have left. Remaining in the building until it is otherwise empty also shows all stakeholders that the principal is willing to work whatever hours are necessary to ensure that parent-teacher conferences are run properly. If they are run properly, then parent-teacher conferences become one more golden opportunity for a school to really shine.

Finally, an evaluation form such as the one depicted in Exhibit 13-5 should be sent to all parents who attended conferences. The form depicted, which was developed by NAESP and NSPRA (2000), can be adapted to include questions specific to a particular school environment.

Exhibit 13-5

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Exhibit 13-5 Parent Survey

1. All things considered, how would you rate your parent-teacher conference?
 Excellent Average
 Good Poor
2. What part of the conference was most helpful to you?
3. How could we have improved the conference?
4. What kinds of information about our school would you like to see in our newsletter?
5. Are there any general comments you'd like to make about our schools?
6. Did the conference help you better understand your child's progress?
 Yes
 No Please explain:
7. Do you feel you had adequate opportunity to contribute to the school's understanding of your child?
 Yes
 No Please explain:
8. What grade is your child (or children) in?
 Kindergarten, first, second
 Third, fourth
 Fifth, sixth

Convocations and Celebrations

Throughout the typical academic year many situations occur that warrant a convocation or celebration of some sort. The degree to which the school is perceived as preparing for and assigning importance to these assembly programs and events says a great deal to the public about the pride taken in students and their accomplishments. Therefore, these situations present the third big opportunity that schools have to really shine.

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Graduation

The most common convocation in all schools is student graduation. Although this is an occurrence in virtually every high school, many elementary and middle schools also honor students who have matriculated through them. The way in which this honor is bestowed on students communicates the importance of students in a school's overall mission to more people than do many of its other methods.

The elements of a high school graduation are essentially similar in most communities. Typically, students are garbed in caps and gowns, there is a processional march, a student leader and an administrator address the graduates, and diplomas are awarded atop a stage. The ceremony oftentimes is one of the most formal convocations students have yet experienced. The fact that its sole purpose is to honor them makes many students very appreciative of having experienced their high school graduation many years after it has occurred.

At other school levels, speaking mainly of middle and elementary schools, student graduations can be opportunities for school leaders to provide acknowledgment of student achievements while also giving closure to the experiences students have enjoyed while at the school. This sense of closure is important to students, and it helps ease the trauma that some students and their families experience during transitional periods. Many parents, for example, feel a sense of unease when their children move from the nurturing environment of elementary school to the often perceived less nurturing environment of middle school. Even though both student and parent typically find the middle school's environment to be wonderful and appropriately nurturing once they get there, if the school can acknowledge trepidations and assist in the transition by implementing a graduation or similar convocation, then the fear of the unknown can be allayed somewhat.

Further, it is a good idea to recognize student achievements at intervals occurring more frequently than every 12 years. A graduation ceremony at each significant transitional period in a child's schooling provides such recognition at appropriately placed intervals.

The particular features of a graduation oftentimes are not as important as the symbolism for which the event stands. Students appreciate being acknowledged and celebrated for their accomplishments. Knowing that school officials have put effort into creating this special occasion just for students delivers a powerful message that otherwise can be taken for granted. Students who feel respected and appreciated can be very good stewards of a school-community relations plan.

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Awards Programs

Awards programs are also opportunities for school administrators, teachers, and staff members to honor students and celebrate their accomplishments. Although these typically involve only family members of the honored students, this arrangement need not be the only way to conduct such convocations. Community members should also be invited, if space allows, so that they can share in the accomplishments of their community's young people. In this way, awards programs become other opportunities for the school to shine. Remember a premise from the first chapter of this book. If we do not tell the public about the great things we are accomplishing in our schools, then nobody will. It is up to educational leaders in all positions to celebrate the successes of their own students.

Another terrific aspect presented by the staging of awards programs and convocations is that the school officials are at liberty to decide which accomplishments to honor. As such, awards programs need not only celebrate those students with sterling academic accomplishments. All students, whether academically gifted or not, have the opportunity to be recognized. Many schools also honor those students who have achieved athletically. Some schools honor students whose achievements are in artistic endeavors.

Other schools, although honoring students for academic achievements, give equal honor to students who have shown academic improvement, even if such improvements do not put students on any honor roll. BUG, an acronym for Bringing Up Grades, is a program at Parkview Elementary School in Valparaiso, Indiana. The goal of BUG is to honor students who have done precisely what the name implies; they have brought up their grades from where they were at the conclusion of the previous grading period. Students who earn a BUG award are honored at the same ceremony as those students who have achieved honor roll status.

By publicly recognizing and honoring students for their accomplishments, schools deliver the message that students are the purpose of their existence. Furthermore, these convocations show the community that students accomplish a great deal at school. Finally, convocations demonstrate that the school wishes to celebrate successes with the community. The message is that schools do not choose to isolate themselves from the community and allows the community to learn about what happens inside the school only from media outlets. Instead, through convocations, schools clearly illustrate that they are vibrant, integral parts of the community. Although much of what happens inside may be veiled somewhat from the community, the community has ample opportunity to remove the veil and join in celebrations.

SHOWCASE

Beginning of the Year Convocation

A former superintendent of two very large school districts reminded me that there is always a need to create identity in organizations where sheer size and geography can be enemies of developing a sense of family. An annual event that focused on fulfilling this need was the beginning of the year convocation. The goals were simple: 1) bring everyone together in one place where there is a sense of common purpose, 2) give colleagues a chance to visualize the size of the organization, 3) foster an understanding that there are "no secondary citizens" in our family, 4) recognize teachers and administrators for outstanding achievement and contributions, and 5) celebrate student achievement in the classroom, on stage, on the field, and in the community. The emphasis was always on qualities that led to an outstanding organization—not on policies, politics, or platform presentations. The desired result was to have colleagues (teachers, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, mechanics, and administrators) saying, "I may not agree with every decision the administration makes, but this is a great and special place to work."

Chapter Summary

- An open house creates a rich opportunity to invite members of the community into our schools.
- It is essential that great care go into the design and implementation of an open house so that the school may put its best foot forward.
- Parent-teacher conferences present teachers with an opportunity to give and receive pertinent information that can make a school year more productive.
- Most parents do an excellent job supporting education, so educators should be excited about opportunities to confer with them.
- There are specific skills and techniques that greatly assist educators in dealing with difficult parents.
- The school principal must ensure that teachers are properly trained and prepared for productive parent-teacher conferences.

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- Graduations and convocations present opportunities for school officials to demonstrate the pride they have in student accomplishments.
- There are a wide variety of ways in which schools can recognize and honor their students.
- Convocations and open houses should include and involve as many members of the community as is feasible.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

But They Scare Me

The calendar showed it and the falling leaves confirmed it; the autumn season had arrived. Although that meant many good things to other people, for Jeff Bowman it spelled doom. Early October signified that parent-teacher conferences were on the horizon. Even though he had not experienced them before, as this was his first year teaching, Jeff had heard horror stories about angry, uncooperative parents with very unrealistic expectations. Jeff hated conflict. In fact, he entered the teaching profession because he felt there would be far less conflict to deal with than he would have experienced if he entered his family's automobile sales business.

Sitting at home and staring into space one evening, Jeff was startled back into consciousness by his new bride, Gretchen. "Honey," she began. "What's been bothering you so much lately. You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Jeff tried to explain his fear at the prospect of meeting all of the parents he'd have to face in a few weeks. He told his wife that he was really concerned about all of the horrific tales he'd heard about parents in this community. After all, he reasoned, he had one of the lowest achieving literature classes in the school. His ability to motivate people and his excitement for literature prompted the principal to schedule many students who needed a boost of some sort in Jeff's class. He was positive, he explained, that these students' parents would expect great things from Jeff. The fact was that eight students were barely passing.

"Well honey," Gretchen retorted, "can't you just talk to the principal about this? Surely he's planning to help you prepare for these conferences anyway. After all," Gretchen concluded, "if you had joined the family business, your father would have trained you before putting you in front of a customer, wouldn't he have?"

Jeff could only smile slightly. "You know, honey, I never thought of it that way before."

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Questions for Analysis

1. What are the real bases for Jeff's fear of parent-teacher conferences? Why do you believe as you do?
2. Besides Jeff himself, is anybody else responsible for his feelings that he is not adequately prepared for parent-teacher conferences?
3. If you were Jeff, would you speak with the principal about your trepidation? If so, what would you say?
4. Explain the principal's role in parent-teacher conferences. Which aspects do you think are the most important? Has Jeff's principal been remiss in any of his duties?

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