



School Culture: Full Lesson Tour in Community, Virtue, & Education with Lori Jill Keeler

Lesson 16: Partnering with Parents

Outline:

Partnering with Parents

Introduction

- Partnering with parents can be challenging and unnerving.
- Even if this is not true of most parents, they can be bossy, judgmental, volatile, argumentative, aggressive or even apathetic.
- This can make inexperienced educators question their abilities.
- It is important for educators to learn how to partner with parents to be excellent educators.
- Delivering bad news parents is tough no matter how you slice it (e.g., discipline, placement for academic support, social struggles).
- Most interactions are easy and encouraging but there are some difficult ones too.
- Trust is important. If we don't trust someone we don't often believe what they say.
- If we can **establish trust with parents**, they will give us great discretion with the decisions we make. "If they don't trust us, they will have a tendency to inspect everything we do, often with a high-powered microscope."
- How can we **nurture the relationship with parents** to build a wide band of trust and confidence? It is something we need to work at.

Presuppositions

- **Believe the best** of every parent—that they are doing the best they know how to do.
- We need to **deal with ourselves** before dealing with a parent, so that we will be confident but not defensive. Be willing to consider that you may have done something wrong or unwise.

What is our goal as educators?

- We are acting in loco parentis. Student achievement increases as parents become more involved with their children. We need to have relationships with our students' parents, regardless of our personalities or personal preferences.



- Why are we different as classical Christian educators? Often there is a covenantal component to our schools. We can become **instruments of seeing for one another**. Educators with experience learn what is typical and not typical for students of various ages and grades. Parents can be instruments of seeing for educators because parents know their children better than teachers do.
- **Teachers have better general knowledge of students; parents have better specific knowledge of their own children.**
- **Factors that contribute to difficulty in partnership:** a) Family wealth and entitlement mentality; b) Lack of wealth—lack of background knowledge and resources; c) Different family configurations (divorce, grandparent guardians, etc.) that result in complexities in the relationships; d) Stress at home—sickness, aging parents, etc.; e) Priorities of families—some families give sports a higher priority than we would prefer; f) Child-centered home versus parent-centered home; g) Family maturity level—first-time parents are more high maintenance. Emotional and spiritual maturity will make a difference in how you can discuss matters; h) Family educational experience—bad experience will bring a perspective to discussion. Parents without a college degree may feel “less than.”

Purposes of Communicating with Parents

- Let parents know that we are on a team working together with them for the betterment of their children.
- Avoid mere **reactive communication** - only communicating when there is bad news. Sometimes **reactive communication** is necessary.
- We need to also do proactive communication that builds communication and confidence. “We are on “Team Emily.” We will do all we can do to help Emily to be academically successful, help her develop friendships, etc. Parents need to know that you will see, know, and love their child and help her grow in several ways.
- **Macro Level Communication:** Communication to the whole class on a regular basis. This is a big win for grammar school teachers—giving parents a good, general ideas of what is happening in the classroom. This communication can take the form of email communications, newsletter, photos, etc.
- **Micro Level Communication:** Personal communication about one child in particular. Should be an encouragement (ways the child is doing good things) and calling the child to growth and improvement.

Types of Partnering Communication

- **Summer Welcome Letter:** As soon as the class list is published, send a summer “Welcome Letter” to students and copy their parents. This makes for an important first impression to students and parents.



- **Open House:** Host an open house during the first week of school in which the head of school and principal gives a greeting and then parents can visit each child's classroom and hear from the heart of the teacher. Every parent should be made to feel special.
- **Beginning of the Year Conferences:** Every parent should have a conference with the teacher within the first four weeks of school. Parents can give information about the child to the teacher. What is the child like academically? Strengths and weaknesses? What excites him? What are the social issues the child faces? Who are his good friends? What students has he struggled with? Is he a leader or follower? Are there any physical issues the teacher should know about? Any medications? Any diagnoses? Talk to parents about the child's spiritual life. Fear? Anxiety? How can the teacher pray for the student? Give parents information about yourself and tell the parents what you have observed in the child's life so far during the first weeks of school.
- **Communicate encouragement as well as exhortation.** Consider what students doing right, not just what they are doing wrong. Whenever you communicate with a parent, mention the good that you observe in the student, not merely the problems. Otherwise, parents will be tempted to think you only see the negative in their child. Have specific, good things in mind when you communicate.

How to Communicate with Parents

- It is helpful to document your communications, noting the gist of what was said and the tone of the conversation.
- **Phone calls:** It is wise and good to call parents when you see something good in the child—especially after a previous negative or challenging communication.
- **Email:** You can copy and paste emails into an archive folder. Have someone read your email before you send a response to a parent email, especially if the situation is tricky or challenging.
- **In-person conference:** These are helpful not only at the beginning of the year. Face to face is the best form of communication. The purpose of communication is not just the sharing of information—this is why it is important to meet with people personally to build relationships.
- The value of initiating a positive contact cannot be overestimated. The return on investment will make such initiated contacts very much worthwhile. We should make time for initiated, positive contact.

Dealing with Difficult Parents and Situations

- Parents will not become our allies because we want them to be.
- We must **listen, learn, and cultivate the relationship.**
- Be proactive rather than reactive.
- Make parents feel you are glad to be in partnership with them.



- **Cultivate a personal relationship over an impersonal one:** We need to take away the “cloak of invisibility” that email and texting sometimes provides; the more personal interaction we have parents, the less likely parents are to engage in more impersonal emailing and texting.
- **Make the first contact** in a difficult situation, before the child gets home.
- When you appear gracious, self-assured and humble, even the most difficult parent’s anger can be somewhat diffused.
- If difficult parents are able to intimidate you, not only do you risk losing their respect, you also increase the odds that you will cave in to requests you would normally not cave in to.
- **What if a parent is right?** Never feel the need to always be right! In discussion with parents, it should not be about winning or losing, but coming to an understanding. Best to say: “Thank you for pointing this out so that I could correct it.” If you admit your mistake, you demonstrate that you are approachable, human, and humble. When you say that you are sorry—you will be amazed at how most parents are willing to forgive you. “But when you dig in your heels in, you will be amazed at how some parents will get on a mission to let you and others know just how wrong you are.” Just saying “I am sorry that happened” will help parents, without rudeness, sarcasm, or impatience in our voices. **Often parents need an ear, not an answer.**

Delivering Bad News

- The worse the news, the more thought and effort you should put into delivering it.
- **Seldom if ever, should you deliver really bad news in writing.** In-person conference best, or at least a phone call.
- In terms of behavior, one of the great ways to end the conversation is, “What do you think we can do to avoid this type situation in the future?” **Shift focus from the present to the future.**
- Be aware of what you know. We always have blind spots.
- **Accept responsibility for the situation.** Even if your year is challenging, etc., that doesn’t really matter to the parent at some level. You are responsible to partner with parents well and teach well regardless of the situation.

Increasing the Right Kind of Parent Involvement

- Sometimes parents are too involved in the wrong kinds of things - like doing homework for their children, or scrutinizing tests that come home.
- How can you cultivate the right kind of partnership?
- **Give parents ideas about what they can do.**
- If you have not been a proactive communicator, **this week, take the five students** that have been the most difficult for you and begin looking for the things that are positive; make a proactive communication with their parents; begin building a rapport of trust with those parents.