

Why Taking The High Road Can Make All the Difference in Parent-Teacher Communications

Most of us have been there. We've had the teacher who didn't give our child (or us!) the grade we thought was deserved. Some of us have listened to the counselor say that our child should be in a standard-level class rather than the honors hoped for. And most of us have voiced our opinions or heard opinions expressed about these disappointments. Sometimes, however, these comments can sting or even do lasting damage.

This is a vulnerable time for public education and especially for public school teachers. We are, in fact, at a crucial crossroads as to where public schools are headed in our near future. What parents say and how they say it can greatly impact teacher morale. As critical allies of public schools, parents can do a lot of good by choosing the high road when faced with the choice between a positive, supportive comment and a disparaging one. Consider a few scenarios where you might encounter this dilemma:

At the bus stop with several parents, you hear the kids discussing something that happened during the school day. Some of you disagree with what a teacher has done or said at school and the conversation immediately turns negative. Instead of joining in, here's an alternative: say to the other parents involved, "Let's step away from the kids and discuss this further." When you disparage teachers in front of children, your negative judgment gives them license to disrespect educators in the school setting.

In following up that bus stop conversation, another parent decides to let that teacher know exactly what he thinks. Please suggest that he give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. What a child comes home and purports happened may not be the entire story. Please encourage others to ask what happened rather than accuse.



At a parent-teacher conference, you disagree with a teacher's assessment that your child would perform better in a certain level class over another. Your child is upset with this evaluation and, understandably, you want to support him. Ask the teacher what led her to this conclusion. If a teacher believes your child might have the ability but has not yet shown the work ethic, ask what she has observed in class. Instead of denouncing a teacher's assessment, communicate with her as a professional and ask how you can work with her to develop a plan that will help your child be successful in her class.

As you read comments shared in an email or posted on Facebook on teacher and/or class selection at your child's school, you notice various pessimistic comments. Bashing public school teachers has become en vogue, whether in a social media comment ("Why does my child always get THE WORST teacher in the school??") or a post-article discussion forum ("If they wanted to make more money, they should get a different job and stop complaining."). As a supporter of public education, do not allow yourself to get stuck in the quagmire of this insult.

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Even if you have concerns, voicing them over social media or in front of your child will not make a positive change, if any change at all. Instead wait until you meet the teacher and see how your child does in the class. If you notice problems, schedule a conference right away.

On your lunch break you and a friend compare your children's homework load and grades. She says she has no idea how her child is doing because the teacher is non-communicative. Please suggest to her that she go online and check her child's class website, Dojo, or Edmodo page. Ask her if she attended Open House or Meet the Teacher where teachers often disseminate much of that information. If her child has grades posted on PowerSchools, by all means, she should log on and get a password. Above all parents should find out how grades are assigned and posted and communicate directly with the teacher and/or principal with concerns about process.

Your child comes home and immediately settles in to his science homework. He says he wants to get it done because for the first time, he "gets it." He even goes on to say that his teacher explained it so well that he feels confident he is going to do great on the test the following week. Now is the time to say something! Instead of walking away and saying nothing, tell a teacher when he does something effective or uses a strategy that really works with your child. Let a teacher know when something positive happens if you feel he has been part of that process. Those emotional pay raises make teachers believe they can continue another year, another semester, sometimes just another week.

So as you come upon that ubiquitous intersection of negative vs. affirmative teacher talk, let your GPS (maybe that stands for "Great Public Schools"!) take you the right way. Find the positive in your child's school and teachers so that you and they can collaboratively build a supportive environment, relationship, and expectations for your child to thrive.

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