

T&L/ETWD/Educator Development

Principles for Principals October

For questions or comments, please contact LouisianaLeaders@la.gov.

October's Topic: School & Community Environment - Responsiveness to Stakeholders

"When people are upset, they need our empathy, not our expertise." Fay & Fay (2016, p. 212)

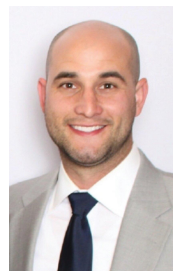
Every teacher carries both the burden and the privilege of impacting students, not only in the classroom but also outside of it. This is particularly true through the relationships teachers form with their students' parents and the ripple effects that relationship has on students' achievement and behavior. Additionally, every teacher has encountered one of those parents who can make forming a meaningful relationship quite complicated; the one who hovers, and/or demands everyone's full attention, and perceives every behavior or decision as a direct and purposeful slight against their child, and worse yet, wants to have a meeting about it.

Becoming a school leader only increases the likelihood that you will have to engage and support those parents as much as all the others. However, as the school leader, you are privileged to set the tone for parent engagement for all teachers, and how you carry that burden will speak directly to the environment and atmosphere you expect of your school. Fortunately, this month's review discusses a chapter from Fay & Fay's seminal work, ***Teaching with Love & Logic*** (2016), to address this very issue.

Lead with Empathy

Fay & Fay (2016) build their model of response to difficult parents on the premise that when parents come to educators upset about classroom happenings, it is because they are, in many ways, grieving the loss of what they had dreamed for their child. One of the examples of this "grieving" process they provide is the mother of a difficult son whose teachers and leaders are constantly calling in regards to their child's behavior. No parent dreams of being that parent or dreams for their child to be that child. When those phone calls start coming, and sometimes feel like they will never stop coming, parents then

Justin Wax
Principal
Denham Springs Jr. High



My Three Things

1. **One thing I wish I would have done differently my first year:** Serving stakeholders effectively takes time, and I should have made more time to slow down and serve people. Also, time block for long range planning.
2. **One thing I was glad I did my first year:** Focus on school culture, never losing sight of your love for students. Being my authentic self attracts a candidates who want to build your culture.
3. **One thing every principal should know/do:** Always do what's best for kids. Taking care of students, and loving them is why we're here. Everything else comes after that.

must confront the truth that what they had dreamed of as a parent and for their child has died, and as with any death, the loss of these dreams brings grief.

“When we view people as hurting, rather than difficult, we are far more likely to remain empathetic and calm.” Seeing that difficult parent as grieving the loss and responding out of that grief helps us take the first step in Fay & Fay’s (2016) approach to these situations (and this month’s principle: **Lead with Empathy**).

Steps to developing a “Win-Win” process with difficult parents:

1. Lead with Empathy and Collect Information.

- a. Empathy absorbs emotions and offers a window into the parent's thought process.
- b. *“The more the parent talks and expresses their emotions, the quicker they will become calm enough to consider solutions.”*
- c. Phrases you can say to help elicit more information through their emotions:
 - i. “Tell me more?”
 - ii. “Help me understand.”
 - iii. “What would you like to see [or happen] here?”
 - iv. “How long have you felt that way?”

2. Slow Things Down.

- a. Write verbatim what the parent is saying and take your time. The longer it takes to express anger, the less angry it becomes.
- b. However, before you start writing, it's essential to prepare the parent so that the process feels like support and not a delay. To achieve this, start by informing them that you plan to write down all their concerns to record them and support your follow-up. “I can see that you are very upset, and I want to make sure I get everything down before we try to figure out what happens next. May I take notes to help keep it all together?”

3. Prove You Listened.

- a. Since you have taken the time to write everything down, you want to make sure the parent knows you have been paying attention. You can do this by reciting everything they said, verbatim, back to them.
- b. You must do this without any emotion, sarcasm, or defensiveness. You must simply state the facts as they were presented to you within the conversation.
- c. This often provides an opportunity for parents to reconsider their criticism and language, and offers a chance for you to explore the next step.

4. Check for Entry into the Thinking State.

- a. By this point, many parents will have moved from their own flight or fight stage and may be prepared to tackle step 5, “Problem Solving.”
- b. Asking the question “Would you like to hear what I am thinking?” provides a window into whether there is more for them to work through or if they are truly ready. Any hesitation or emotional response is an indication that further action may be necessary, and repeating steps 1-3 may be required.

- c. If repeating steps 1-3 is necessary, simply follow up “Would you like to hear what I am thinking?” with “It seems like there may be something else you would like to discuss or share first, is that the case?” or “Please tell me more.”

5. Begin Problem Solving

- a. *“The most common reason most problem-solving fails is that the actual problem was never accurately identified.”* Helping the parent work through the emotions stemming from the problem may reveal the real problem all along.
- b. Ultimately, remember that success, particularly in these situations, is not determined by how the other person reacts, **but more by how maturely we do.**

Prevention: Better than Resolution

Fay & Fay (2016) also offer a few suggestions to help prevent opportunities for difficult parents from overwhelming your day. These include, but are not limited to: “Build relationships before problems develop,” “Avoid notifying parents about problems via text or email,” “Communicate how you operate before your students do,” and “Do not expect parents to solve school problems at home.” Each of those is more deeply explored within *Teaching with Love & Logic*, and you are encouraged to review the full text for a more nuanced understanding and discussion of each topic.

Closing Note:

There will undoubtedly be moments when members of your staff are present when you engage in this process with a parent. Therefore, to model “Communicate how you operate before your students do,” it may be imperative to remind/explain to your staff these steps/methods in this approach before difficult meetings. Some staff members may feel you are giving too much leeway or may perceive your lack of direct rebuttal to alleged offenses as, at a minimum, believing them or worse, affirming them. Additionally, it will be necessary for them to emulate your approach for this effort to be genuinely effective.

Questions for Reflection:

Based on this month’s topic.

1. Fay & Fay (2016) suggest viewing “difficult” parents as grieving the loss of their dreams for their child. How might adopting this perspective change your initial reactions to a confrontational parent?
2. Apply that thinking to a past interaction with a challenging parent — how could this reframing have altered your approach or the outcome?
3. How confident do you feel in maintaining neutrality, especially when a parent’s accusations feel personal? What self-regulation techniques could help you stay calm and professional in these moments?
4. How can the empathetic listening and information-gathering steps help you uncover the root cause of a parent’s concerns?
5. Reflect on a time when communication with a parent went poorly — could these prevention strategies have made a difference?

6. If a parent is resistant to note-taking, how else might you slow the conversation down and provide yourself an opportunity to “prove you were listening”?