



SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL/PARENT MEETINGS

This article is for educators who are looking to get better results from school/parent meetings.

Think back on a meeting that you had with school parents that didn't go so well. If you are like most of us, you will have a memory of a meeting where you or they lost their temper, where no one came out on top or where it just dragged on and on without resolution or outcome.

When this happens, we feel that precious time has been wasted and frustrated that there was no positive outcome for the child at the centre of the discussion.

What I learned during my time managing parent complaints in a mid-size system of schools over a decade was that mediating school parent issues is not the same as a business negotiation. In some ways it is much harder and other ways much simpler. Harder because the stakes are so high – parents can lose all perspective and rationale when it is the wellbeing of their child that is the issue but easier because it is already a 'fait accompli' that both parties desire the same outcome: i.e. the 'best for the child'. The rest is easy, just keep focussed and stay positive.

If you would like to face Terms 3 and 4 (the crazy terms) better equipped to handle difficult conversations and achieve better outcomes for students, then here are a few tips I'd like to share with you that I found effective.

1. Be clear about the purpose of the meeting

Whether the request for the meeting comes from you or the student's parent, ensure that both parties are clear about the purpose of the meeting. The real reason may not always present itself at first so it may require some skilled questioning by you or the front-line staff who screen the calls. If you have requested the meeting, be up-front about the reason so that the parents do not feel blindsided when they turn up.

2. *Invite parents to bring along a support person*

Often when parents come to the school for a meeting, they feel nervous, frightened, or uncomfortable. These feelings can be soothed by inviting them to bring along another person whose role it is to be a support. Similarly, it is wise to include a support staff member for the teacher or staff member who is the subject of the complaint. In this case, it is not necessary, in fact it is preferable if the support staff member is not embroiled in the issue but is merely there to be a witness and moral support.

3. *Find an impartial third-party to mediate the discussion if necessary*

If it is an emotionally-charged issue, then it is a good idea to appoint an impartial third party to mediate the discussion. This can be a staff member, diocesan officer, or department executive whose role it is to play traffic cop, directing the flow of the conversation, bringing them back to the purpose of the conversation when it veers and managing emotions as needed. The principal is not always the best person for this role unless they can be open to hearing both sides of the story.

4. *Leave your 'precious' at the door*

Managing high emotions during a mediation is one of the most difficult things there is and requires real skill. Like the notorious gambler in the old song, you have to 'know when to hold them, know when to fold them, know when to walk away and know when to run'. There is some benefit in allowing the aggrieved party to 'vent' while we keep a 'poker face' resisting the temptation to react with emotion. If managed properly they will blow off steam and the mediation can quickly get underway. But it's time to run if it becomes a personal attack on a teacher or staff member; if the person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs; or if they exhibit any mental disorder. This is when the impartial third-party (the card dealer) comes in handy as they can a) absorb the 'heat' and proceed; b) decide to call time-out or c) stop the meeting if the game is out of hand.

5. *Make sure the meeting is solution-focussed*

With the emotions out of the way, shift the discussion to be future-focussed. The quickest way to do this is by acknowledging if there has been a wrongdoing and apologise and/or pledge to put it right by making amends to the aggrieved person or putting in place system measures to avoid a similar infraction in the future. Now is the time to ask questions that go straight to solution. Questions like:

1. ***What is the action that you would like to see for your child?***
(the answer may surprise you in its simplicity).
2. ***Would you feel better if***?
(these can be small or large concessions).
3. ***We are unable to do that but what we can do is, will that make you and your child feel better?***
(parents can't always get what they want but if they feel they have been heard and that the school is willing to cooperate it makes it easier to get to solution).

If the fault has been the behaviour or actions of the student, then resist the urge to dwell on the details and present the options for moving forward. We can't always give parents what they want but if they feel like they have been heard and that the treatment is fair then they are more likely to work with the school to find a solution.

6. ***Write a summary*** of the meeting with agreed outcomes and keep a record of it. You may wish to send them a copy or not, it is up to you.

Above all, have faith in yourself, your staff and the process. If you can follow these steps you can get to a favourable outcome for the child which is what every parent and school personnel desire.

Each of these steps can be explained in greater detail in my NESA endorsed workshop on 'Difficult Conversations'. It could be some of the most valuable training your staff undertakes this year. Call me now on 0410 512 070 to book a staff meeting, principal's meeting or parent talk. I would love to work with you and your staff to make their interactions with parents easier and more fruitful.