

HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS AND BOARD MEMBERS

By Erma J. Lee

It was a lovely autumn day, perfect for the school picnic. Mrs. Leach stepped to the door to welcome the early arrivals. Looking down the long gravel drive leading to the school she could see dust boiling up behind a car moving rapidly toward her. "Uh oh, trouble ahead," she groaned. It was the school board chairman, who appeared at school only for board meetings or when he had received a complaint. "Wonder what the problem is this time?" she thought, feeling sure that the pleasure of the picnic would be ruined by the chairman's accusations.

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How can teachers prepare themselves to deal with "people problems"?

Mr. Lopez had just sat down to supper when the telephone rang. Mr. Steadman's voice was polite, but the questions he asked made Mr. Lopez feel defensive and uncomfortable. Mr. Steadman demanded to know why homework had been assigned on this night, of all nights. This was the one night when the family had planned to renew acquaintances with fellow missionaries. Having to worry about Julie's getting her homework done would not fit into their eve-

ning schedule. Mr. Steadman wanted to know what Mr. Lopez planned to do about this problem he had created.

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As Mr. and Mrs. O'Malley drove away from the school board meeting where they had been interviewed as a prospective teaching team, they couldn't resist comparing their feelings. "Do you think that we met their qualifications?" asked Mr. O'Malley.

"I think so, but I don't really know," his wife answered. "The board seemed so vague. Perhaps we should have described our teaching philosophy and classroom management policies more thoroughly." After a long pause, she asked, "Why do you think the school board chairman told us he

sends his children to public school?"

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The incidents cited above are only a few of the situations that might face any teacher in any school. Do such problems have common elements? How can teachers prepare themselves to deal with "people problems"?

It would be unrealistic to suggest that any set of guidelines would solve every problem, everywhere. Even if similar elements are involved, every situation will be unique, for each participant holds different views and may come from various backgrounds in which conflict is handled in quite different ways.

However, many situations have common elements, and a few broad guidelines can help teachers avoid unpleasant situations.

Learn the Rules

First of all, teachers need to realize that every school has a set of written or unwritten rules under which it operates. These rules may change from school to school. However, these policies must be clearly understood by everyone concerned with the operation of the school, including the school board, teacher, parents, pastor, and students.

Just as schools have different rules, likewise teachers develop a personal style of operation, which they modify and adapt to meet their own needs and the needs of the people with whom they work. The most important component in making sure that these two areas, personal style and policy, fit together is *communication*.

Tips for Enhancing Communication

Initially, whether beginning the first or 15th year at a school, the teacher needs to communicate with the school board.

At a board meeting before the school begins, the teacher should discuss common concerns such as discipline and attendance, homework policies and protocol for problem solving.

Next, the teacher should review with the board the planned curriculum for the coming school year,

focusing on any units of study to be developed, skills to receive special focus, or classes that will be of particular interest to the board. In some cases the teacher will need to obtain special permission from the school board. The board should be aware if, for example, someone will come in to instruct the students in a foreign language, music, or needlecraft.

Clear lines of communication should be established early and maintained throughout the year to keep the board updated on what is happening.

Simply opening the lines of communication is not enough, however. Both teacher and board need

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to maintain a free flow of information. This helps set the tone for sharing of events and ideas throughout the school year, and fosters mutual respect. An ongoing, comfortable, two-way communication can help prevent problems or solve them before they become unmanageable.

In the case of Mrs. Leach, whose school board chairman never shows up unless he receives a complaint, she could request an opportunity to address the school board. At that time she could politely but firmly express her concern about the board's "crisis management" style of operation, and ask if they could establish a subcommittee to study the problem. She could volunteer to meet with the group to share her concerns and seek their advice in establishing broad guidelines to cover most school operations, as well as a policy for dealing with unanticipated crises.

Curriculum Crises

Every school community has

conflicting opinions regarding the materials that teachers require their children to read. The teacher must recognize these differences and be prepared to defend the use of any controversial materials or the omission of certain topics.

Opposing views can be assured a fair hearing through the lines of communication set up within the board. Ideas and concerns may be expressed in the board setting, thereby offering the teacher an opportunity to respond appropriately. If a parent's concern is not addressed in the existing study materials, the teacher may, by following previously established guidelines, submit these concerns to the conference office of education or curriculum committee. These groups have been established to deal with such problems.

Professional Growth

Teachers should continue to grow professionally. They should study the changes in curriculum and ways our rapidly changing society may affect students. Reading current literature, attending in-service programs, and following the latest research in learning are just a few of the ways that teachers may remain current and in touch with developments in the educational field. They should learn to distinguish between educational fads and discoveries that are based on sound educational principles.

Teachers should be knowledgeable about the curriculum guidelines and the process through which children progress in an instructional program. They should also understand the developmental needs of children and their various stages of growth and maturation.

Keep Parents Informed

Teachers need to keep parents informed about the goals they have set for their children's education, the times when assignments are due, and other practical matters relating to homework, tests, and grading policies.

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher could send home a paper outlining the general goals for the year, along with discipline

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and attendance policies (this should be compiled in a student handbook). A telephone number and convenient time for calling should be included, along with a statement welcoming parents' comments and questions.

Periodically, perhaps each month or quarter, the teacher should describe in a newsletter or information sheet what the students are doing ("This nine-week period we will be learning about parts of speech") and list the assignments for each day, week, and month ("250-page book report due on January 3"). This will help involve parents in their children's learning and enable them to determine whether their children are keeping up to date. When combined with the student handbook, this will also help prevent misunderstandings about school policies ("No late homework will be accepted unless the child is sick or arrangements have been made in advance").

Establishing clear policies and enforcing them consistently might have prevented the irate telephone call Mr. Lopez received complaining that homework interfered with a special family event.

Rules

In working with students, the classroom rules should be as few as possible, and should be mutually decided upon by teacher and students. Discussing rules dealing with classroom management and applying them consistently will greatly reduce stress and tension for both teacher and student.

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher should discuss the rules in the student handbook and ask whether other rules are needed. As soon as rules are mutually agreed upon and established in the classroom, the parents and board should receive a written copy of them, along with times when

parents or other interested persons may call or visit the school to discuss problems.

But what about parents or board members who seem to think that the rules weren't made for them? Once a schedule has been established, the teacher needs to consistently adhere to it. He or she should express appreciation to those who cooperate. When people arrive or call at inappropriate times, the teacher should politely but firmly advise them to call back later.

It may be necessary to remonstrate with certain individuals several times to help them understand

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that instructional time is sacred and must not be interrupted by visits or telephone calls. Especially in one-room schools, teachers cannot provide proper supervision for their students and confer with other people at the same time.

Mutual Respect

The teacher should show parents and board members the same courtesy he or she desires. When conflicts or disagreements arise teachers need to keep in mind their high calling. They must not treat parents in a patronizing or flippant manner. In order to demonstrate sensitivity to others' concerns and to maintain open lines of communication, the teacher should return telephone calls promptly, and show respect for the callers' schedules and concerns, even if the subject seems trivial.

It is important that the teacher see parents and board members as *partners* in the education of children. Mutual respect will foster an unbeatable educational team.

Be Flexible, Ask for Time

When teachers confront situations for which they feel unprepared, they can ask for time to study their options. The time can be used to determine why and how the situation occurred and the best way to approach it. Ideally, the teacher should work cooperatively with the board to find a way to resolve problems. If this fails, the conference superintendent of education is only a phone call away.

Teachers need to be flexible in dealing with people problems. Each teacher is different, just as each child and each board member is different. However, open communication and a Christian spirit of cooperation and willingness to compromise can help to solve most problems.

In Summary

Here are some guidelines to help any school run more smoothly:

- Understand the guidelines for the operation of a school.
- Keep open channels of communication between teacher and home and between teacher and school board.
- Make clear and concise classroom rules, and apply them consistently.
- Be a professional in every sense of the word.
- When unsure of an answer, request help from those who are knowledgeable in the area of concern.
- Avoid intimidating others or being intimidated by them. If you treat parents and board members as intelligent, caring Christians, they will usually respond in kind.
- Accept responsibility for the quality education of students in your classroom. □

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riculum materials if they clearly understand their function and perceive them to be helpful in their work.³ How aware are teachers of

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