

Parents as Partners in Education

Parents are an essential partner in the work school counsellors do on a daily basis. According to the interpretation of the school act found in the BCCPAC resource *Speaking Up!*, the parent has the right and the responsibility to ensure their child;

- is treated well at school
- receives the best possible education

The parent also has the right to;

- information about what is available at the school and in the district (to make informed decisions)
- consult with the teacher, principal, vice-principal or director of instruction about their child's educational program
- receive three formal and two informal progress reports each year
- be involved in the preparation of and receive a copy of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), if the child is receiving special services

The parent may choose to;

- ask to view their child's school records
- appeal a decision that significantly affects the education, health or safety of the child
- take someone to support them when dealing with the school system

The parent must;

- meet with the teacher, principal, vice-principal or director of instruction when they request a meeting
- be held liable if their child intentionally or negligently loses, damages, destroys or converts property owned by the board

The parent may also choose to;

- volunteer at the school (subject to certain rules)
- belong to the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) at the school

In essence, the formal role of a parent in their child's education is to continually monitor and assess their child in order to help ensure he or she *is* being treated well and *is* receiving the best possible education.

Continuing down the list, the interpretation of the interpretation could be if the parent wants or needs to monitor and assess beyond the ordinary, upon request, the school can provide certain additional information.

If a parent feels a decision has been made which is not in the best interest of the child or their child has not been treated well, the parent should feel it is safe to address these concerns. They should have access to information and the tools to appeal a decision and understand the role and the importance of having a friend or support person share the experience.

One way to avoid getting to this place is to include the parent in the process before a decision is made. Not only does this provide an opportunity for the parent to put forth some possible solutions and options but this can also assist with the understanding of school staff with regards to other factors (e.g. home life) which might be having an impact on behavior and performance of the child.

“The parental work of motivating, tutoring, counseling, and on occasion advocating for students, has been shown in study after study, in country after country, to be the single most powerful factor in making some schools more ‘effective’ (i.e., successful) than others.” Charles Ungerleider, Professor and author

In a perfect world, each child would have a successful K-12 educational experience and a parent would never be put into a position of questioning a decision. As a matter of course, every child would be treated fairly at school and receive the best possible education. In this perfect world, as the first and only continuing teacher, the parent would remain the natural advocate leader, supported by networks all building and nurturing good relationships with each other.

One model that has worked well in building the school community is for information opportunities to be provided for families to attend and hear about what supports and services the school can provide, as well as being provided an opportunity to meet the professionals connected to the building. These evening events are a great opportunity for interaction and to create a culture and environment of caring, inclusion and connectedness.

Partnering in order to achieve a successful outcome, the family, PAC, school staff, board of education, community members and local organizations would all collaborate, always keeping the child as the center of every decision made.

Realistically, however, although most parents want their children to do well in school, many remain unsure of their right and responsibility to ensure their child is being treated well and is receiving the **best** possible education. Perhaps too shy, reluctant or pressed for time to ask for additional information, volunteer, or join the PAC, they remain at arm’s length, not developing the relationships other parents can and do.

Reasons for not fully engaging with these supporting networks can include time constraints, distrust, feelings of powerless, cultural differences and differing socio-economic backgrounds. In essence, the parent may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar engaging with not just the administration and staff, but with other parents.

Disconnected from most of the natural advocating opportunities other parents without so many barriers may enjoy, how is the voice of the more disengaged parent being heard? How is the natural advocate, the voice who knows the child's strengths and weaknesses the best, able to promote their child remotely?

Research results show that **“When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more.”** *A New Wave of Evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement.* A.T. Henderson/K.L. Mapp.

An engaged parent is a parent who feels they belong. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the most connected, when asked to rate how much she feels she is connected to her daughter's school, Kelly, a thirty-year old single parent to eight-year old Marie, feels she is at two. She is reluctant to attend events and never attends PAC meetings. “I don't want to answer questions,” she says. “It's too hard. If there's a problem, I'll speak to the principal and if I have to, I'll speak to the teacher. Apart from this, no, I stay away as much as possible.”

By staying away, Kelly feels protected. Her own early school experiences were not positive. Life was spent on the move from school to school, district to district, and province to province. Different systems and rules played havoc and as her home life continued to disintegrate, she withdrew even further.

Providing a stable home is extremely important to Kelly. She understands how damaging a chaotic childhood is and how this can result in dropping out of school. She is proud of her daughter and eager to show the journal Marie keeps, the stars she has earned on her calendar and the drawing Kelly has had framed. Kelly is proud of her own accomplishments as well. As a survivor, Kelly chose to return to school as an adult learner, graduate, and with grit and determination, she feels she has self-developed into being the “best role model” for her daughter she can be.

The challenge for Kelly is that she does not want to be scrutinized by strangers and assumed to be a “stereotypical loser single parent.”

Formal meetings are stressful and at the few events she does attend, although she realizes this is probably not true, she feels she is different from the parents she assumes to be married, better off financially, and without a dysfunctional extended family.

Working full-time, Kelly is unable to volunteer for things such as field trip supervision and this makes her feel guilty. She is also under the impression that the only things PACs do is gossip and fundraise, which irritates her. Parents who are able to volunteer and go to meetings “need to learn to be better parents” before trying to advise her “what I should, or should not, be doing.”

Surprisingly, when asked what could be done to better engage her at Marie's school, she was quick to positively share. To engage Kelly, it would take more asking, more communication, more school functions and more invitations. Family nights every couple of months would be great because “doing this once a year is too chaotic, there's no time to feel engaged with the teacher.”

The sense was that Kelly was more than willing to better engage at the school if she felt she might belong, and she could belong if network partners would send her the right invitation. In the meantime, maintaining her positive approach and strong parenting skills at home were more important than forcing herself into situations where she might feel inferior.

Jim Diers, a leader in community organization and passionate about participatory democracy, could not agree more. "Why have a meeting when you can have a party?"

How do higher performing schools engage families and community? 1. Focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members. 2. Recognize, respect and address family's needs, as well as class and cultural differences. 3. Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared. *A New Wave of Evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement.* A.T. Henderson/K.L. Mapp.

Recognizing, respecting and celebrating differences is key to engaging. It cannot be stressed enough that while most parents want their children to do well in school, if parents do not participate or 'buy into' the opportunities presented by partner networks, they may be placing their child at greater risk of failing. There could be a very simple reason for this.

"The engaged parent knows the classroom, the teacher(s) and the principal. The most involved parents realize that they have an important quality role to play in the school. At their best, parents can hold schools accountable for the quality of service they provide to students, applying continual pressure for school improvement. "

Charles Ungerleider, Professor and author

The engaged parent has a physical presence and their connection to the child is firmly established. Without feeling a sense of belonging, there is limited opportunity for a parent to learn how to be an effective advocate within the system. Parents send their children to school ready to learn and expect they will be taught. The engaged parent is recognized as the person who will ask questions and promote their child, exercising their right and responsibility, essentially helping to provide the motivation and information teachers, counselors, and administration may need to better understand and support the student.

A student with an engaged parent rarely gets 'lost' in the system. These parents learn to navigate and are able to identify what is required to get their child back on track, and quickly. Through network connections and peer groups, parents can source out what best practices, services and supports are offered at the school or in the district.

Is Kelly so different from the 'engaged' parent? She loves her child, wants her to have a good education, and knows what she has done in school that day. She knows when Marie has had a substitute teacher and that a quiz is on Wednesday. Eyes and ears open, she knows when a classmate has chicken pox, the classroom roof is leaking, and that drugs were found in the bush. She knows her daughter will probably not be the next Emily Carr but she firmly believes Marie has a gift for writing.

Is she really 'disengaged' or just not as engaged as the parent with a physical presence at the school? Perhaps the difference is just one 'right' invitation away from belonging.

Numerous great resources including *Speaking Up! : A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*, *Supporting Student Success*, and *Individual Education Plans: a guide for parents* can be found on the BCCPAC website: www.bccpac.bc.ca

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