

Building a community by tearing down assumptions

Students and their families will become more willing partners when they truly believe that educators have unconditional hope for the children in their care.

By Julie C. Perron

As a new (or even veteran) principal, one is certain to stumble into conversations and communications that are eye-opening. Our children of every color, creed, background and circumstance deserve to have adults in their lives who will go the distance for their success, and who will create and sustain connections with families that instill hope and a sense of inspiration. This is a challenge in itself, as often our leaders have backgrounds that contrast with the lives of their student populations.

To meet the challenge, it is critical that principals learn to suspend assumptions about families and communities on a deep level. Consider the following ways to model leadership that is service oriented for all children.

- Do not assume one's definition of family is the same for each child. For many students, the notion of a mommy and a daddy at home is not familiar. I have learned to ask students, "Who takes care of you?" rather than "Is your mom home today?" Or I ask, "Who has a working phone number and can come and meet with us?" instead of "Do any of these phone numbers work?"

- Do not assume that a child's life has consistency and stability on a daily basis. While we might enjoy a little R & R on our weekends, a weekend for a child might mean less to eat, little time to sleep or a variety of parenting and custodial issues. On any given day or night, a child might experience an evening colored by neighborhood situations, a job loss of a parent or relative, or a sudden sense of transience or homelessness.

- Interact constantly with students and families in a variety of settings (not only your office). Indeed, each interaction with families is critical in making school a place where all children experience a healthy measure of success and acceptance. Nurturing, care-driven words and actions are essential, even in times of exasperation and incredulosity on your part. Being visible in the lunch room, on the playground and at the bus line are small ways to make a difference.

- Be prepared to meet and greet students who have less than perfect lives, or at least lives that do not match one's perception as "normal." As you look through your lens as a building administrator,

remember that your perspective is only one way of experiencing life. Suspending assumptions of how it "should" be is critical for building and sustaining trust with our families. Consider greeting students with questions about what they had for breakfast, how did they sleep last night, and is there anything you can do for them to ensure they have a great day.

- Use multiple forms of communication. The traditional hard copy newsletter might never make it home, and access to computers for perusing the school website might not be an option. A phone call home may end with a disconnected number, a full voicemail or no answer at all. Sometimes letters mailed home come back with "not at this address." While this can be disheartening, it is not reason enough to assume all hope is gone. Instead, brainstorm other ways of reaching families, for the sake of cherishing each child. Make a home visit, walk a child home, or connect through an emergency number on the contact list.

- Encourage staff to develop and sustain trusting relationships with students and families, but be prepared to model what you expect. This demands a tremendous amount of dedication to discover each student: what works, what doesn't work, what brings joy, what brings sorrow, what matters and what makes the difference. It must be clear to the families that the children in your care deserve the very best and that you, the principal, are there to exemplify this conviction.

Making the commitment

Parents, guardians, aunties, grandma, grandpa, cousins and neighbors will be more willing partners when they truly believe that the folks working at the school have unconditional hope in their children. Clearly, hope requires such significant commitment on the part of the principal – and the courage to suspend assumptions in order to ensure a truly caring climate for each student. ■

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