

7 things teachers want you to know

By: Eric Sheniger

Don't you wish you had a crystal ball that told you what your child's teacher felt was important for you to know? I sure do. In more than 13 years as a teacher, administrator, parent and coach working with thousands of students in New Jersey, I have dealt with almost every teacher/parent/student issue imaginable — and even I am still learning about what parents need and want from teachers. As the new school year starts, I'd like to share what I have discovered and share wisdom from some of the most innovative educators across the country.

Coaches, advisers play valuable roles, too.

I am sure you know by now how important it is to attend the school's Open House and parent-teacher conferences. These meetings are used to review course expectations, explain grading policies, distribute important documents, share contact information and discuss your child's progress.

But did you know this is also a good time to address potential problems at home that may interfere with your child's success at school, such as family illness, divorce or economic struggles? Though it may feel like oversharing, these details can help a teacher better communicate with your child. And don't just rely on teachers — get to know coaches and extracurricular advisers. These adults are role models and confidants to your child, and they are in a unique position to fill parents and guardians in on academic, social and emotional problems that arise. They could be your most valuable link to your child's personal life.

Stay in the know with social media.

How often did you tweet, post an update on Facebook, or upload an image to Instagram today? Social media and the Internet are changing the way society communicates, and many teachers are embracing new technologies as a way to engage parents. They want you to interact with them on their websites, social media spaces and blogs.

Becoming familiar with these tools will put you in a better position to monitor your child's online activity and ensure that he or she is being digitally safe. E-mail is still the preferred mode of communication for most teachers, but please be patient when waiting for messages or phone calls to be returned. In the business world, instant replies to an e-mail are common; for a teacher, it may be hours before we can check the computer. Rest assured, we will get back to you.

Change is hard but essential.

Josh Stumpfenhorst, a sixth-grade English and history teacher in Naperville CUSD 203 in Naperville, Ill., wishes parents knew how hard it is to change traditional thinking about learning. Too often teachers are held back from doing what they know is best for kids because of a district, state, or federal mandate.

At his school, Stumpfenhorst has made significant changes. He has helped redesign the grading scale, banned homework and even challenged the traditional roles of school administrators. "Most teachers are not willing to change because they are under so much pressure to uphold tradition and frankly they fear for their jobs," he says. The lesson: Don't be quick to judge a teacher if he/she is not teaching the way you were taught; new techniques will better prepare students for success in today's society.

We are all on the same team.

The key to student success is the ability and willingness of parents to be partners in education with teachers. When problems arise, parents should not be so quick to defend students before hearing both sides. Following

the chain of command by not going over a teacher's head to an administrator goes a long way in establishing this partnership. Remember: Decisions are often made for the good of all of the students in a class, not just a particular child.

Teachers also need parents to support learning through a regular review of assigned work, due dates and grades. No, we don't need you to teach your children yourself, but we do need you to stay on top of their progress and remind them to study. This is especially important when it comes to online grades. Access to grades in real time is valuable only if parents check it frequently. (And we can see if you have logged on to the site.)

At-Home Projects are important. Really.

What is one thing that parents routinely complain about? For Amanda Dykes, a middle-school science teacher at Mc-Adory Middle School in McCalla, Ala., it is at-home projects. Contrary to popular belief, teachers such as Dykes do not assign these to torture parents. "I assign projects a few weeks ahead of time, but students often forget about them until the weekend before," Dykes says. To make the process easier (on everyone), she advises this: When you see the project assigned, set up a timetable for your child's completion. First, if there is a choice of projects, let your child decide, even if it is not the choice you'd make. Email the teacher with any questions. The next week, gather materials; if it is an online project, play around with the website. Use the remainder of the time for your child to complete the project. As the due date approaches, resist the urge to step in and finish the project yourself. Though it may seem like "helping," it cheats the child out of the learning experience.

Respect goes both ways.

Principal Judith Wilson, of PS 3 in Staten Island, N.Y., knows the pressures of a new school year very well. "The expectations of a new school year are high for the students but even higher for the teacher. The teacher gets it from both ends -- from the administration and from the parents," she says.

Getting some parents to support the teacher is often an arduous task. PS 3 fifth grade teacher James Laieta speaks with candor and sincerity when he says: "I would like to tell my parents that trust and respect go hand in hand. If they trust and respect their child's teacher, their child will reflect on this like a mirrored image!" The teacher is another caretaker in a child's life. "We provide emotional support and positive relationships that give children resilience to face new challenges," says Wilson. When students see that their parents trust us and respect us, the student will follow. "We are not the enemy, notes Laieta. "We are very often the super heroes in their child's life!"

Your words can foster a love for learning.

Research suggests that one of the best things parents can do to support a child is to help him/her develop a motivation to learn. Larry Ferlazzo, a teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, has identified three key ways to do this, supported by studies from the National Research Council and the Center on Education Policy:

- Praise effort and specific work instead of native intelligence. Try saying: "Boy, those two hours you spent working on the essay last night really paid off. I loved how you described the characters in the novel" instead of "Wow, you are a natural-born writer."
- Connect what children are studying to what is happening in their life and in the world. If he is learning about the Middle East, discuss a newspaper article about issues in that region.
- Avoid using rewards and punishments for academic work. If you give your child a dollar for every book he reads, it's less likely he will want to read books for pleasure after you stop paying him.