



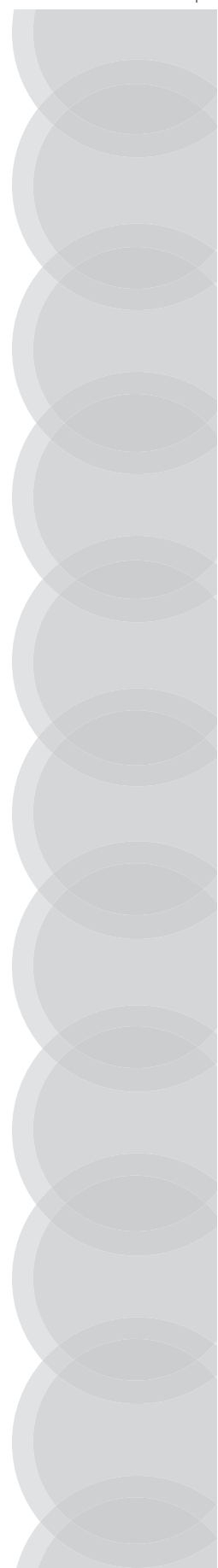
Chapter 7

Supporting Advocacy

How Can “Problem Parents” Become Partners You Can Work With?

Parents who shout, “I’m gonna come up there and kick your butt,” physically intimidate teachers, curse out loud in front of children, and threaten lawsuits over seating assignments create a climate of fear at a school. Then there are parents who demand that their child be put in the gifted program, barge into a classroom without notice to “observe,” and bad-mouth teachers after spending a day in the school “helping out.” These parents are every school’s nightmare.

Let’s be realistic: this is tough territory. How do you defuse angry parents who are probably carrying a load of emotional baggage that dates back to their own days in school? How can you handle high-powered professional parents who insist on having their way? While these seem like two different questions, their root is the same. These parents want to protect, help, or get a better deal for their children. They are trying to be advocates, but they don’t know how to act constructively. This chapter



is about how school leaders (including the parent organization) can help parents be better advocates for their children.

Parents like these take up a lot of staff time and energy. They color perceptions of all parents and pose a major challenge to already overburdened educators. We don't pretend to have easy answers to this problem. The approach we recommend has two parts.

First, recognize that parents have the right to influence what happens to their children in school. Be very clear that their requests will be treated with respect, as long as they are made in a civil manner.

Second, set up a proactive process for collaborating with families to monitor students' progress, address their difficulties, and plan for their future. Explain the process clearly and apply it fairly. The goal is to avoid a situation in which some families have (or seem to have) a lot of inside influence, while others have (or feel they have) little or none.

Parents have told us that they are more likely to be angry and lose control when they feel no one cares about their situation or will listen to them. Many—but not all—problems can be prevented by developing trusting relationships that welcome and honor families. Some ways that your action team can approach this are described in Chapter 4, "Developing Relationships." Addressing differences of culture, race, and class, and discussing those differences openly, may also head off problems, as discussed in Chapter 6.

This problem is one that confronts every teacher, but that needs to be resolved with school-wide strategies. In this chapter, we discuss four practices that your action team can promote to encourage and support parents to be constructive advocates for their children:

1. Work with families, teachers, and other staff so they can understand what it means to be an advocate, develop and use their advocacy skills, and learn how to resolve a problem.
2. Collaborate with families to monitor their children's progress, give them a voice in their children's placement or program, and figure out how to assist their children when they're struggling.
3. Give families and students the information and support they need to make smooth transitions to kindergarten, middle school, and high school, and from there to postsecondary education and a career.

4. Help families be actively involved in setting goals for their children's future, steering them toward higher-level programs, and planning for postsecondary education.

What do we mean by an advocate? Not everyone understands the term. An advocate is a person who speaks out for another. Children are vulnerable—very few know how to stand up for themselves, or even ask for help if they're in trouble. Although a teacher, counselor, or other staff member can step in (and we've all heard stories about how a person's life was turned around by a caring teacher), the students they help will soon be passing on to the next level.

An advocate must be in the child's life over the long haul—a person who knows the child well, talks to her/him often, and sees him/her every day; a person who believes in the child, wants him or her to soar, and can step in if he or she is falling behind. Who is this person, if not the child's parents, a guardian, or a close friend or family member?

What do parents (or people standing in as parents) do when they advocate for a student?

- ◆ Set high expectations and follow their children's progress—monitoring attendance, homework, grades, and test scores
- ◆ Help the student set goals and plan for the future
- ◆ Steer the student through the system, selecting courses and programs that match his or her goals
- ◆ Intervene if the student is under pressure, has a problem, or is being treated unfairly
- ◆ Get assistance when needed, such as tutoring, medical attention, or counseling
- ◆ Monitor the student's out-of-school time and make sure it is spent in constructive activities
- ◆ Line up other educational activities, such as sports, recreation, drama, and music lessons

It's in the school's interest to work with families in this way. Think how much easier it would be for educators if every child had an effective advocate. Our country has the most complex educational system in the world. Navigating it without consistent, caring guidance would be almost impossible for many students.

