

Addressing Disengagement with School

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It is difficult when we see our middle and high school children disengaging with school. They could be struggling academically, socially with their friends, or in their relationships with their teachers. Possibly, something going on at home may be weighing on their mind and causing them to lose focus. This disengagement sometimes reveals itself as problematic behavior. When the behavior is addressed in a punitive way without looking deeper for the reason behind it, behavior will get worse.

Rules vs. Student Needs

Teachers and principals work with large numbers of students each day. They create rules in order to manage that large number of students in an orderly and efficient way. The bureaucracy created by those rules may sometimes clash with the personal needs of students. This clash manifests itself through rule breaking.

Sometimes teacher and administrators have difficulty identifying the reason behind the rule-breaking behavior. This difficulty happens more often with children of color because teachers may not be familiar with their cultures and norms. They may also have difficulty communicating in a way that builds enough trust so that students will reveal the true reason for their behavior.

Parent Advocacy Can Be an Issue

Parents know their children better than anyone else. In a problem-solving situation, parents can bring that cultural knowledge to the table. When students are disengaged with school, parents bring the knowledge of who the child is, what the child feels, and how the actions of the school may be impacting him or her. Additionally, parents can shed light on what may be happening at home that may be impacting the child's focus. This perspective can help develop solutions that are more likely to address the student's needs.

At the middle school and especially at the high school level, however, parents may not engage or be invited to engage with problems at school until the situation is at a critical level. When parents are finally called in to speak to the school, the lack of cultural understanding, lack of acceptance, and the possible language barrier may create an ineffective situation. This atmosphere may cause parents of color to withhold information or become defensive in meetings with teachers and school

administrators. Effective solutions will not emerge when people do not openly communicate.

What Can Be Done?

Here are some thoughts on steps all parents can take to try to close these gaps in understanding and communication.

Know your children. Know what is happening with them at school. Speak with your children whenever possible about how they are doing, what is working and not working in their lives, with their friends, and with their teachers.

Make your presence known at your children's middle and high school. Know your children's teachers and school administrators. Attend meetings; serve on committees; be as active as time will allow.

Encourage and support parents of color to be active in the school community. Be welcoming to other parents, especially parents of color at meetings or whenever you encounter each other.

Encourage the school to provide translation and interpretation whenever they are communicating with families.

In meetings or on school committees, express the need for the school to be welcoming to all parents, and express the value of parent input and understanding.

Teachers and administrators are in this work because they want to educate and support students. Parents are

critical partners in the education of their children.
One must reach out to the other for the benefit of the
precious ones in their care.

With love and affection,

Rosemarie

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