

Published: August 27, 2008

Teaching Secrets: The Parent Meet and Greet

By Marsha Ratzel

Back-to-school night sends chills up the spine of many teachers. Somehow standing in front of parents and explaining yourself can reduce even the most seasoned veteran to rubble.

The big key to a successful parent meet-and-greet experience is preparation. Think about the questions that most parents are going to want answered and make a list. If you're a rookie, you can ask other teachers for ideas about what typically comes up. Armed with your list, you'll be able to think about your responses. And if you're not sure how to respond to parent questions, ask a colleague to help you prepare.

You can bet that parents will ask you questions that would be better handled in a one-on-one phone call or meeting. Know these questions are coming and prepare a diplomatic way of suggesting a more appropriate time to discuss them. When the timing is right, you'll be ready.

Most back-to-school events have a limited period when you're facing a group of parents and all eyes are on you. Often it's ten minutes or less. You have to convince yourself for those ten minutes that you are the expert, even if you feel like you don't know a thing. Many teachers also find it helpful to prepare a short handout that covers administrative details. It may relieve future confusion or questions because parents can refer to it.

Remember that this is what most parents want to know: (1) You're going to treat their child fairly; and (2) You are committed to teaching both the curriculum and other skills well, including how to stay organized, study for a test, take notes, make a mistake and recover from it, and become a lifelong learner. Parents want reassurance that you'll listen to them as a valued partner in their child's school year. You don't want to give them the impression that you'll do anything they want, but you do want them to know you are available to hear their concerns.

This time with parents early in the school year is a teacher's opportunity to shine and it is hard for many teachers to step up and do this. But for this one evening, you really have to show 'em what you've got!

What is most important to remember:

- Let parents know you're thrilled to be there and excited to meet everyone, even if you aren't. Actually, most teachers *are* happy to meet and greet, but their nervousness may overshadow their excitement, leaving them with that frightened-deer look.
- You're the expert. You know more about your curriculum, the way your classroom works, and how you interact with students than any other person in the room. Even if you're a brand new first-year teacher, you're still the authority when it comes to your teaching plans.
- Parents want reassurance. Be sure to tell them how they can help their child with the type of homework and projects you plan to assign.
- Be very specific about *where* and *how* parents can find out about homework and grades. If you maintain a Web site, print out stickers with the Web address on it. I've known teachers who put the stickers on refrigerator magnets for handy reference. If you let parents know what to expect from you, especially in terms of how you communicate homework and grades, the year will go smoothly.
- This is your opportunity to sell parents on your classroom. Don't paint a false reality. Provide an honest view.
- Don't focus on the operational aspects of class. Rules, grading policies, syllabi, and classroom expectations can be covered in a handout which parents can read and refer to long after the evening is over. I can't stress it enough: Reassuring parents is what matters most.
- Lay out in plain view sets of the textbooks, reference materials, and special equipment that students will use.
- Clearly explain how parents can reach you. If you prefer e-mail, be sure to provide them with your e-mail address. If you prefer to be contacted by phone, let parents know when they can reach you. Give them a sense of your turnaround time for an e-mail or a phone call.
- Switch your viewpoint. Instead of feeling like you're under the microscope, realize that this is your chance to research your parents and get an impression of them. Don't be reactive. Ask them questions about their kids. Probe and learn.
- Have a notepad handy so you can jot down what you promise to do. This might be coordinating something for parents through the office, scheduling a conference, or sending home extra copies of something. In the hub-bub of the evening, without notes you may forget what you promise. This would make a terrible first impression.

- This is a great time to recruit parent volunteers for field trips and special days where an extra pair of adult hands is needed. One teacher I know recruits parents to help her change the displays of student work in her room and the hallway. Another teacher asks parents to share their professional or vocational expertise for science labs or to talk about their interests. Some even serve as consultants for classroom projects.
- Most of all, smile, relax, and enjoy the evening.

Learning the ropes of back-to-school events is tough work. The good news is that once you have, you'll have a powerful tool at your disposal for any event where parents are gathered. By offering guidance and setting clear expectations for parents at the start of the year, you can help their children achieve success in the classroom.

*Marsha Ratzel is a National Board-certified teacher in the Blue Valley, Kansas public schools. After serving as a district-wide technology and curriculum coach, she now teaches middle school math and science. She is the author of the blog, "**Reflections of a Techie.**"*

WEB ONLY