

Enrolment interviews

Dennis Sleigh

At this time of the year most schools display banners advising that enrolments are now under way for next year's classes. Regardless of the type of school, it seems that the pursuit of new students is an essential feature of the mid-year program for Principals. Part of that program usually involves holding interviews, presumably to determine whether an applicant is suitable in the eyes of the school authorities. That, anyway, is how a significant number of parents view the process – even in catchment areas where a Principal would very rarely reject whatever applicants were available, simply because there are not enough children to fill those schools. It is a bit like the process, during difficult financial times, where we go to the bank manager, cap in hand, to seek a loan – completely forgetting that the managers' futures are closely linked to their success in lending money, not in being tight with loans.

Of the five schools that I served as a Principal, only one – in a rapidly developing and under-resourced growth area – had waiting lists. In general, I knew I was very unlikely to refuse any applicant, both because I needed the enrolments to retain my staff and because I had a confident belief that 'our school' could work wonders with any child, even those that other schools might have rejected. Realising that parents could easily be daunted by the thought of going through an interview, I preferred to call the meetings 'discussions' rather than interviews. Besides, the word *interview* tends to imply that someone in a position of authority has power over some supplicant, and as I noted, the real power relationship quite often goes the other way.

I clearly remember an interview I attended when I moved interstate to work in a Catholic school. The Principal had already interviewed me but later that day, the Parish Priest also wanted to do so. He questioned me for about 30 minutes and then professed his satisfaction, saying "Well, you'll do us. I will happily support your appointment." I suspect he then thought the process was over but I had other ideas.

"That's fine, Father," I said, "but now I would like to ask you a few questions too, if you don't mind." When he realised I was serious, he sat down again and I proceeded to ask him to explain how moving to his parish would meet my family's needs both spiritually and socially. My questions were specific and he answered each question fully, so that after 10 minutes I was more than comfortable to accept the posting. I thought very little about this process until two years later when he told me in passing



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that I was the first person who had ever turned the tables on him in this way – and today, I still wonder why more applicants don't do the same.

Perhaps that has influenced my attitude towards these enrolment interviews. As I have already noted, I shied away from telling parents that they needed to undergo an interview, preferring to say that I would like to have a conversation or a discussion with them about the pending enrolment of their offspring. I have never really asked people whether they notice any difference in style here, but a number have confessed, over the years, that they were a bit

nervous when they entered my office and very relaxed when they left. (The same, sadly, cannot be said of those parents who have visited my office for other reasons, but that is another story.)

Many Principals have the whole process well under control, but I would like to offer others, perhaps less experienced, a few thoughts on the issue. My top seven suggestions would be these.

1 Know your purpose

Some Principals use the interview time to talk about the features of the school, while others are intent on learning as much as possible about the

prospective student. For others, their emphasis is to show the parents around the school, letting them see a sample of classrooms filled with pleasant and happy students. Each approach – and there are others too – elicits different responses and therefore different information is shared. What really matters is that whatever you intend to do, be clear in your own mind and explain your aim to the parents so that they are aware of it too. If they expect an inquisition and you offer a guided tour, they might leave your office confused.

2 Respect the time taken

For parents to attend interviews, it often means they have to get leave from their work. Acknowledge that effort, and honour it by being very punctual. Begin at the promised time and even more importantly don't waste time – it might be costing your visitors part of their daily wage. At the same time, don't rush; this is an interpersonal experience, not a sheep dip. No-one wants to consider they are being rushed through a procedure simply because it has to be done; they would probably prefer to see the exercise as mutually important.

3 You are on display

It is essential to remember that the interview should be a win-win situation, and happy parents should leave your office, convinced that their decision to enrol their child in your school is the best one they have ever made. I assume all modern principals know that many, even most, parents are no longer satisfied with looking at just one school. Gone are the days when the Catholics went to the convent school, the wealthy went to the grammar school and the rest went to the public school. Today's parents are discerning, empowered and dedicated to seeking the best options for their children. If a Principal is blasé about interviews,

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there should be no surprises if the parents are reluctant to choose that school. Always remember that you, not the parents, are the ones on show, and if you don't give the occasion its true dignity, don't expect them to do so either.

4 The child must be at the centre

You might think that the parents are the main concern at the meeting because they are the ones who make the final decision. However, the real topic of the discussion is the child whose parents are seeking the enrolment. As far as possible, let the centre of attention be the child.

I want to look at this in two separate ways depending on whether the child is present at the interview. If the parents bring their child to the interview (which I would strongly recommend) you should show that, in your school, children really do come first. If we leave the child in a corner and speak only to the parents, there is a message here: children don't really count. This is less likely to happen in secondary schools but it shouldn't happen even if the enrollee is a five-year-old. Let the parents see clearly that their much-loved offspring will receive full attention from the Principal and staff when they enrol here. This doesn't mean that they have to be the centre of the conversation throughout the entire conversation, but make sure, if part of the interview means a direct engagement with the parents, that the youngster is not ignored. During the 'non-engaged' segment (when you are answering questions about your NAPLAN results or explaining the policy about school

canteens) provide youngsters with some items to occupy them and make sure they know their needs are truly being attended to.

If the child *does not* attend the interview, there is a risk that he or she might be overlooked as the adults engage in down-to-earth discussions about adult matters. Avoid this risk by emphasising in your questions the viewpoint of the child. Make it clear to the parents that children are the reasons for the school's existence and let them go away knowing their child will receive a true child-centred education.

5 Be understanding of nervousness

When some people come to a school to speak with the Principal, they will be nervous. There is nothing unusual about this. Perhaps they might have had some negative experiences when they were at school, or perhaps they might be worried about the possibility of rejection. There are many other possible reasons too, so don't be deterred by their apparent uneasiness; it does not necessarily reflect on you.

There are many ways to put people at ease, ranging from a light-hearted banter to offering them a cup of tea. What is important is that you make it clear that you are there to work with them, not to judge them. The acid test of your success in assuring them will be their attitude when they leave – are they still nervous or have you calmed their fears? Some hints here would be to make the process a dialogue, be culturally sensitive and have a child-friendly office.

6 Remember: today's children often decide

One of the biggest changes that I have noticed during my career has been the identity of the decision-maker in this exercise. While I would certainly expect that decisions about the final

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years of schooling (Years 11 and 12) would be largely made by the young person, and that decisions on which high school to enter would be seriously influenced by the student too, I find it hard to agree that this situation should apply to youngsters entering school for the first time. As for having the child decide which pre-school to attend, I wonder how fair that is for the child concerned.

Having said that, I certainly believe the views of the enrollee must be taken seriously, in keeping with their age. After all, they are the ones who will be going to the selected school day after day for years to come. I remember a young teenager telling me that he had opted to enrol in one school rather than another for Year 7 because he wanted to be at the same school as his girl friend; the same week, his mother was telling me how proud she was of her son because he had made his selection because the standard of mathematics and science at the school was so high. Mum actually had the grace to admit she was surprised that her son would even know such a detail. I didn't enlighten her on her son's true motives.

7 First-time parents

When we go to our local supermarket, we know we want to get, and we usually know our way around well enough to be able to find them. While there might be a few surprises on the shelf, the experience of shopping is fairly

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predictable. The same is not true when seeking a suitable school.

Today's schools are so diverse in so many exciting ways that even teachers are often amazed when they visit different schools. For parents who rarely step inside the school gate, the surprises would necessarily be greater. A frequent comment by parents (especially dads) as they look over a school is "School was never like this in my day." This, of course, is highly appropriate, given that today's schools have a greatly advanced awareness of how people learn, and the operation of the school reflects this increased knowledge. On the other hand, it also explains why many parents might be quite unprepared when they first visit a modern school, just as many of us would be amazed if we were to visit many businesses or factories about which we knew nothing more than our own childhood experiences. (I remember visiting an electricity power station when I was a young teen, and then seeing another one a few years ago – the two complexes were very, very different.)

Some people can be daunted by this dramatic change, so be ready for this reaction. Capitalise on it by making it clear to parents that their children are part of a privileged generation where schools will offer them new and exciting options. If parents are shown the positive side of schooling, it makes them far more comfortable about committing their most precious gift, their children, to our care.

As you would realise, no list is ever complete, but hopefully some of these points will resonate with you. If I was to sum up the total package, it would be like this: if our school is as good as we hope it is, and if we value the parents as genuine partners in the education process, our discussions with them will be informative, accurate and child-centred. They cannot ask for much more, can they?

ET



Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.

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