



Parents are the answer – but what is the question?

Dennis Sleigh

There are always plenty of excuses to justify a school's failure to thrive. Just take a few minutes to think of three of your own. Jot them down and see whether your views have anything in common with mine. If they don't, don't be perturbed – the topic is so big that I couldn't hope to cover it in one brief list.

If you give the matter a bit of thought, you might come up with at least some of the following reasons:

- 1 Inadequate resources for the students
- 2 Poor teaching morale
- 3 Weak leadership
- 4 Uncommitted staff
- 5 Conflict between stakeholders
- 6 Diverse ambitions shared by those involved

- 7 Failure to agree about essential priorities
- 8 Unwillingness to perform the difficult tasks
- 9 Inflexibility of staff
- 10 Unwholesome neighbourhood

In my various roles in education, I have seen each of these trotted out to explain why a school was now losing numbers or at least losing direction. However, while I have seen evidence to support each of the claims, I think that the reason given was usually too shallow. To use these reasons strikes me as akin to saying "My car stopped because of inadequate attention by the driver" when the actual reason was that the car stopped because it ran out of petrol. Certainly, driver inattention was a factor, but it was not the direct cause of the stoppage.

The reasons I have listed above will all have a bearing on a school's fortunes – and indeed, some of those listed will have a very significant bearing – but the most important reason, the fundamental reason if you like, for a school closing down is lack of support by the parents. Once the parents stop believing in your school, your school is dead – just like the engine of your car once the petrol runs out.

That *could* sound like an attack on parents, but it is actually the opposite. It is an open acknowledgment that parents constitute the fundamental factor in the success of any school. If parents are not on side, their children will likewise be non-supportive.

In a community where there is only one

school on offer, the compulsory attendance laws will seemingly overcome this parental opposition, but that appearance is illusory. While the children might indeed be physically present, their hearts and minds will be elsewhere. In communities where there is genuine choice, the position will be even more obvious; parents will vote with their feet and they will send their children to the school of their choice.

Gone are the days when Catholics would all send their children to the local convent school. Such tribal loyalties died years ago. Parents might indeed want a special type of education for their children, but they are not going to enrol their child in a school just because it has a crucifix above the entrance. They want much more.

From a teacher's perspective, if we want to work in a well-functioning school, we must make sure that we gain the active support of our parents. We must recognise that they are the ones who will determine the future of our school.

From the reasons given earlier, some are clearly dependant on active parental support. Resources are an obvious example; even though the public education system authorities claim to provide what is needed to run a public school, there is still a shortfall that has to be met by the local community, and it is often suggested that this shortfall is growing each year.

Other factors, such as conflict between stakeholders, different ambitions about the school, and failure to agree on priorities are also obvious contributors to a school's collapse. I suppose that the make-up of a neighbourhood is another aspect directly attributable to the parents, as they make up this neighbourhood.

Surely, though, you could argue that teacher morale, educational leadership, staff commitment, and inflexibility or reluctance to contribute are attributable only to the staff members. Not so. Each of them has a direct link to the support level shown by parents, as is clear when you hear statements like these:

"I don't enjoy teaching here because I don't feel I have the parents' backing."

"Running this school is like swimming upstream – the parents all seem to be heading the other way."

"Why should I care about setting homework – the parents don't want it."

"Why should I adapt – the locals don't welcome change."

"Why give up my evenings to attend meetings – the parents we need to see never come, anyway?"

What is the point of all this? I suggest it is quite simple: when we are setting up any programs in a school, or indeed when we are setting up a new school, the most basic issue to consider is not how we will staff it, nor how will we get students to support it, but how will we get parents on side. *There is no place for the mentality that sees the parents as the enemy.* This is as counter-productive and as naïve as to see patients as being the enemy of the health system.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether we really listened

Winning over the parents is rarely an easy task, especially if there has been a history of tension or turmoil in the past, but as teachers, we have one thing in our favour: we are promising to help the people whom parents regard most highly, their children. In other words, we have a very powerful shared interest. Indeed, when it comes to gaining parental support, it is this shared interest that will underpin our efforts.

I would say that this mutual interest is the *foundation* of educational progress. It allows us to work diligently on our educational aspirations, aware that if we do the right thing, we will quickly engage the active support of a significant number of parents. Sadly, we will never gain total support, for reasons rehearsed in an earlier article in this series (ET Vol. 10 (1)), where I examined reasons why some parents do not become involved in schools.) However, while the initial support can be confidently expected, sustained support depends on taking some other steps too. I would like to suggest four of these.

Give respect to get respect

If we want parental support in our work, we must show we are willing to support them too. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I must say that some of the comments that I have heard in various staff rooms over the years did not suggest to me that all present had the highest regard for parents. I'm sure you know as well as I do that there are some parents with weird views, or some parents who seem to undermine whatever it is we do, but these few misfits shouldn't blind us to the incredible level of support most parents offer. After all, they have committed their most precious possession to our care – and they do so day after day after day. Let us respect them for this courageous act, and let us return the compliment by honouring them in our conversations, even when (and especially when) they annoy us.

Listen with both ears

Parents often complain that they didn't get a fair hearing when they raise a concern at school. Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether we really listened. Not all parents are comfortable about approaching the school with a complaint – perhaps they fear that their children are hostages to our moods – and not all of them know just how a school works. Their solution to the problem might not be realistic – we cannot, for example, throw out of the second storey window the young villain who bullied their daughter yesterday – but we can make this point without upsetting them. If we actively listen to their concerns, we are more likely to reach a joint decision.

Don't break promises

Sometimes, when confronted by a belligerent parent – and they can be belligerent, I know – we can be tempted to make promises to overcome the problem. If a child has not been reading well, we might offer to give some extra coaching; if a child is having problems with maths, we might say we'll get them a simpler text book; if a child is being bullied, we might assure parents we will keep a close eye on them in class. These promises may well defuse the issue and assure the parents that all will be well. In so far as they offer an olive branch to the distressed parent, such promises are a useful device. However, if we make promises and then do nothing about them, we have simply aggravated an already serious issue.

It is highly regrettable that modern politicians are mistrusted, but the cause of their current status is surely their litany of broken promises. They probably meant well when they made the promises but then reality intervened – and the promises were broken. The moral: avoid promises you might not be able to keep. It takes only one or two broken promises to give you a damaged reputation, and the damage can indeed be irreparable.

Be ready to say sorry

If we really want to develop a rapport with parents (or with their children), we must be willing to admit that at times we will get it wrong – and therefore we need to learn to say "I am sorry". These words, which are actually easy to say if we have a reasonable self-image, can repair countless damaged relationships. If we are too proud or too silly to say sorry, we will miss many opportunities for healing. I know there was a commercial mentality that saying sorry admits liability, but I like to think we have moved forward from that defensive position.

I am sure that there are many other tips that people can offer regarding the important matter of developing positive links with our principal stakeholder, but as a final word, I would simply say this: in our privileged work as teachers, we need the support of many people, but the primary support we need comes from parents. Let's work hard to earn it.

If you would like to contribute to a dialogue on this topic of parents and school, please email me at dennis_sleigh@stannestemora.nsw.edu.au.



Dennis Sleigh is a writer and school principal. He is co-author of *Australian Teachers and the Law*