

CHAPTER 1: BUILDING A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

We can all work together to create open, caring school environments. These are the kind of places where issues can be resolved long before they become disputes. If disputes do come up, they can be resolved quickly and fairly. In positive school environments, people feel welcomed, valued, and safe. They treat each other with respect and they recognize their role in contributing toward solutions.

No school is run by a single person or idea. Schools are run by a system of teachers, administrators, principals, superintendents, school boards, government bodies, and certain principles and rules. Students, parents, family, and community members also affect the way schools are run. All of these people have their own opinions and points of view, but they share one common interest and goal: to provide the best education possible for students.

Parents, families, and community members play a very important role in the education system. It is important for them to realize how much influence they can have over students and schools, especially when they become involved in school matters. It is important for educators and school administrators to recognize and respect the benefits of this involvement by encouraging communication between families and schools.

George J. Michel, who has researched and written extensively on education reform, believes that parents are very influential in the school community. In his book *Building Schools*, he states, “One of the central ideas of parent involvement is that student behaviour, achievement and discipline in a school can be improved and changed if parents are involved and become committed to school decisions.” He concludes, “Basic research shows that student achievement can be increased by including and working with parents.”

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When families and schools work together, relationships are formed. These relationships can be positive or negative, depending on how people choose to treat each other. The first step for building strong relationships in schools is the first step for building any strong relationship: talk to each other. The more we

communicate our hopes, desires, and needs within the school system, the more ideas and solutions we will have to discuss, the more plans we will have to put into action, and the more support and enthusiasm we will have for seeing those plans through.

There are many ways for families, community members, and schools to communicate with one another. For example, there are scheduled school events, like informal “meet the teacher” orientations or opening day conferences at the beginning of the school year. Events like these are designed to encourage communication between families and schools. But there may be times outside these events when a parent may wish to offer a compliment, ask a question, or voice a concern. If this is the case, the parent or community member should feel free to contact the school. Likewise, if a teacher has a compliment, question, or concern, that teacher should not hesitate to speak with the student and/or the parent(s). Misunderstandings or disagreements can often be cleared up with simple phone calls or brief meetings.

It is important to communicate often, but it is also important to communicate well. Good communication is about speaking and listening actively and respectfully. It is about not making assumptions and not having your mind made up before entering a conversation. It is about more than just listening; it is about *hearing*. It is about looking, sounding, and acting like you are hearing.

Sometimes when people feel like they have not been heard, they say the same thing over and over, louder and louder, until they feel they have been heard—or, worse yet, they may stop trying all together.

Respectful communication builds trust, and trust is a cornerstone of all good relationships. In a positive school environment where there is trust and where good communication happens often, conversations between families and schools happen naturally. When people are used to speaking with one another, asking questions, and offering opinions, issues can be discussed in a co-operative and solution-oriented way. Problems do not have to be stumbling blocks. Problems can be opportunities to work together to find positive and creative solutions.

In a positive school environment, situations will rarely escalate into disputes—but sometimes they will. Disputes take place when two or more people are in disagreement over interests, principles, or goals. This is bound to happen once in a while. When and if people do become involved in a dispute, a caring, positive environment is the best place for resolving it in a friendly and informal way.

How can we contribute to creating a positive school environment?

By understanding the important role that we as parents, educators, and community members play in the education and development of students, we are all able to contribute positively to each student’s experience within the education system.

- Epstein, Joyce. *Involving parents in education* [videocassette]. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992.
- Epstein, Joyce. *Parents our partners: a look at parent involvement in Langley schools* [videocassette]. Langley, BC: Rogers Community 4 Langley NTV, 1995.
- Epstein, Joyce. *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

Parents, educators, and community members contribute to a positive school environment by encouraging students to practise positive school habits. The kind of peaceful and productive environment that is so important for resolving disputes is also the kind of environment where students tend to thrive.

Educators contribute to a positive school environment by keeping the best interests of the student in mind at all times, being mindful of the learning needs of each student, and encouraging positive communication between families and schools. Educators have a responsibility to speak respectfully about school and education when communicating with students, parents, and community members.

Parents are strongly encouraged to show support for their children's school. By participating in, volunteering at, or going to school functions and activities, parents help build strong relationships between home and school. By showing an interest in school matters, parents send positive messages about school, which sets positive examples for students.

Every parent, educator, administrator, and student has unique insight into school matters. Each person's contribution is valuable and should be valued. Educators are professionals with training and experience and their conduct is guided by professional codes of practice. Parents, on the other hand, know their own child better than anyone. When shared, this knowledge can be an invaluable resource in student-related school issues.

