

# Responding to the



# HELICOPTER PARENT

**SCHOOL COUNCILS, ADVISORY COMMITTEES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS** are examples of the trend towards increased parental involvement in the education system. Funding cutbacks have resulted in more and more parents participating as volunteers in the day-to-day operation of schools. Parental involvement in the education of children is of paramount importance. Proper values are instilled early in life and need to be supported and nurtured by schools and parents working as a team. Generally, parents are encouraged to attend meetings, co-operate with school personnel and do their part to assist their children.

A helicopter parent may hover during the school year. When an incident or issue arises involving their child, the helicopter parent may land and attempt to navigate through relevant teachers and school administration with respect to the needs and interests of his or her child.

Many of these parents can be vocal and involved, all of which can be positive qualities. However, from time to time, some parents consistently refuse to follow the rules. The question then arises as to what the response of a teacher or principal should be when a parent makes excessive demands. What steps should a school official take when a parent stirs up discontent or behaves in an inappropriate manner? What actions can an educator take when a parent attempts to threaten or intimidate? In preparing an appropriate response, the school should consider the following:

### *Communicate early in the process*

Whether or not the complaint comes to the teacher or the principal, they should speak to each other early in the process. A teacher who anticipates a problem should consult with his or her principal and, where appropriate, the relevant superintendent of education. The teacher should not wait until the situation gets out of control before contacting school officials.

### *Provide backup and support to the teacher and principal*

A complaint heard from time to time is that the school board considers these issues to be the responsibility of the principal alone and does not provide sufficient backup. Senior administration should remember that principals are acting on behalf of the board. A strategy for responding to the concerns raised should be developed consensually between the principal and appropriate

superintendent. Senior administration should attempt to ensure consistency responding to situations across the board's jurisdiction. The principal should inform the relevant superintendent of education of the nature of the allegations and keep the superintendent informed as events unfold. Parents will often solicit the support of individual trustees as part of their campaign. It is important for school board administration to be aware of events in order to respond effectively to trustee concerns.

### *Document*

Both teachers and administrators should carefully document all telephone calls and meetings. In preparing notes, educators should be objective, factual and accurate in setting out a description of events. School personnel should avoid language, which appears to make judgments or inferences. Educators should also record the dates and times of events and make note of the names of individuals who attended relevant meetings.

## Contact professional association

The teacher and/or principal may contact his or her professional association for assistance. The association can be of assistance in providing counselling and advice.

## Investigate allegations

Where appropriate, the principal should undertake an investigation into the parent's allegations. Principals should interview the complainant and meet with relevant witnesses. If there is more than one complainant, the principal should meet with each one individually. The principal may ask the parents if they have raised these issues directly with the teacher. In appropriate circumstances, the principal should suggest that the parents speak to the teacher directly to review a particular concern. The principal should also meet with the teacher and obtain his or her response to the allegations. The principal should take notes of these meetings and, where appropriate, consult with the relevant superintendent of education.

## Meet parents at early stage

The school administration should attempt to intervene at an early stage. Where appropriate, the principal or relevant superintendent could attempt to meet with the parents or the ringleader of the parent group in order to mediate a resolution of the dispute. In organizing this meeting, school officials would provide a forum for the legitimate expression of the parents' concerns. Before this meeting is organized, the parties should understand and agree to predetermined ground rules. Such ground rules would include the location and time of the meeting, the purpose of the meeting and the parties who will attend (such as whether a translator, legal counsel or family friend will accompany the parents and whether the superintendent or relevant teacher will attend with the principal).

## Three "V"s

In the meeting with parents, the educator should consider practising the three "V"s: ventilate, validate and verify. The administrator should permit the parents to ventilate their concerns and fully outline their position. The educator should validate that the school board recognizes that the parents have certain concerns, listen carefully and acknowledge that he or she understands the parents' position. The administrator should also verify the importance of the parent-teacher relationship, acknowledge that both parties are working in the best interests of the student and outline possible steps, which can be taken to resolve the issue.

## A timely letter

In some cases, a letter to the parent or parents from the principal, superintendent of education or director of education explaining the circumstances can resolve certain issues. In circumstances where the parent requests an apology, but the principal and/or teacher have done nothing wrong and do not believe an apology is warranted, in the spirit of reconciliation, the principal may consider preparing a "letter of regret." In this letter, the principal would indicate her or his regret regarding the circumstances, which gave rise to the complaint.

## Maintain confidentiality

A letter of complaint directed at a particular teacher should be kept in confidence, subject to the school's ability to conduct a full investigation.

It is important not to widely disclose the letter's contents. In general, the contents of the letter should be shared on a need-to-know basis; the fewer people who know, the better. The principal or superintendent should determine early on who will be included when sharing information. Where there has been wide distribution of an anonymous letter with derogatory or personal comments, it may be prudent to advise the school staff as to what is being done.

## Summarize outcome of meetings and course of action

The school administration should confirm the outcome of the meetings or its course of action in a letter to the relevant parents. This letter should provide a summary of the events, confirm the school's position and set out the results of what the parties have agreed to. Such letter must be carefully drafted with respect to tone and content to ensure that it does not create additional hostility and further provoke the parents. In addition, school administration should inform the teacher, who was the target of the complaint, of the outcome or terms of resolution of the incident.

In addition to the remedies of negotiation and mediation, depending on the individual circumstances, there are ranges of other, more severe remedies a school board may consider in dealing with a problem parent. These remedies include exercising one's rights under the *Ontario Education Act* or *Trespass to Property Act*, the commencement of a civil action and/or proceedings under the *Criminal Code*.

Overall, it is important to confirm to parents that they play an important role in the education of their children. In particular, parents should recognize that in accordance with the *Provincial Code of Conduct*, released by the Ministry of Education on October 4, 2007, they are recognized as members of the school community. The Code outlines specific roles and responsibilities for parents. For example, it provides that parents fulfil their role when they:

- ensure their child be neat, appropriately dressed and prepared for school;
- ensure that their child attends school regularly and on time;
- promptly report to the school their child's absence or late arrival; and
- assist school staff in dealing with disciplinary issues involving their child.

In navigating the helicopter parent through an issue, it is important to be open, consultative and inclusive. School administrators should confirm that proper values are instilled early in life and need to be supported and nurtured by the school and parents working as a team. In being pro-active in responding to and mediating a parent's concerns, the goal, where possible, is to bring these issues to a soft landing.

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