

Principal's Message
November 2013

What Happened at School Today? Nothin'....

One of our ongoing goals for the school is to find ways to manage student stress through middle school. I want to use the Principal's message to periodically give parents insight to some of the pitfalls and frustrations that occur at school. I also want to offer suggestions for preventing or responding to these issues.

One of the most frustrating aspects of middle school is finding out information from your student. The title of this article is not just a stereotype, it is a daily interaction. Even with the technology available to help with figuring out what is happening in class, how they are doing at school. For many students and parents there is a gap of information (OK, for some it's a canyon). So how to talk to your student?

First, it is important to continue to ask the question. "How was school today?". Even if the first response is always "Fine.", and even if your student is reluctant to share. Middle school students will be reluctant to share, but they also want to talk at times. And they really want to know that we as parents are really interested. In my house, I changed the question to "What's the best thing that happened at school today?" Most often, I get, "Lunch". Even with this, I can get the follow up questions to lead to more helpful information. For example, finding out what was going on with lunch activities led to discussions about peer interactions during class ("He's my Science partner", "Oh, what did you do in Science?"). Having the routine of these conversations will create not only the expectation, but the comfort of being able to talk about what is happening at school.

It is important also to understand that what a student tells their parents about school is from their perspective. It doesn't mean the student is wrong, or not telling the truth, but it is very often the case that an incident reported at home is not the entire story. One of the most common complaints we will get is that the "teacher picks on me". Almost every time this comes up, a discussion with the teacher will show a different perspective. Sometimes, it is that a teacher tells a student to stop talking. To the student, they might hear and see a number of others talking, so why did he pick on me? To the teacher, the student may have been warned before, or they were the loudest voice at the moment, but they were trying to keep the class from being disrupted, not targeting a student. We encourage students feeling this way to choose an appropriate time, such as at the end of the period, and to talk to the teacher about how they feel. This is tremendously difficult and intimidating for students, but if they can do it, it is an effective skill in problem solving. If this approach is not feasible, it is appropriate for the parent to contact the teacher to help bridge these perceptions. It is always best to approach with "This is how my child is feeling, could you speak to her?"

This connects to the next communication skill; self-advocacy. Middle school students who do not understand a concept or direction feel they cannot ask or get help. Parents will feel frustration because they may not be able to help the student at home. One of the most critical skills a student can have is the ability to ask for specific help from their teacher. A student, and sometimes with parent help, should write down specific questions about what they don't understand. It is frustrating for a teacher to have a student come in and just say, "I don't get it." If they go in with, "I didn't understand question #4, I looked through the textbook but didn't find the information." This lets the teacher know that a) the student attempted to do the work, and tried to find out how to do it and b) that the student is genuinely interested in understanding and doing the assignment correctly. I often tell students they should have index cards or sticky notes to write down their

specific questions, and take those to the teacher. This eliminates a situation of having the student forget to ask something.

There are several ways students and parents can get information about their classes. Having an organizational system of writing down assignments, as well as any notes about the specific assignments is another important skill. We encourage the daily use of the assignment books, as it is a system that is easily accessible to all students and modeled, or even mandated in classes. It is also not easily lost or misplaced as happens with writing things down on a loose paper. Students should regularly check teacher's websites to verify instructions, copies of worksheets, due dates or test dates. Having students check Q StudentConnect is also important on about a weekly basis. Finally, if there is not clarity on what is going on in the class, parents should contact the teacher.

In all of these areas of communication, it is important to not let a problem fester. Parents should let their student know that it is OK have questions, or to struggle (to an extent) with a concept. They are not expected to understand everything the first time they see/hear it. They are after all, learning something new.

Sincerely,
Brad Benioff
Principal