

## A Message from Ken Bonamo, SHS Principal

Communication is the key to forming strong relationships in the school setting. Not only do good communication skills help students navigate their way through four years of high school, but they also are indispensable to success in the world beyond it. In short, they are life skills in themselves. Guided by this philosophy, we encourage students to advocate for themselves when faced with a challenge: to talk to their teachers and deans when they don't understand something, when they want to learn more about something, when they're in a difficult situation with someone, or when they receive feedback on their academic progress.

Sometimes students may need some help in preparing for these conversations so that they are productive. Parents can help by talking the issues through with their children and encouraging them to talk with their deans and ultimately with their teachers. Parents can also contact the teachers in the meantime to provide context and background with the goal of allowing students to remain their own chief advocates.

There may be times when more direct parental intervention is required, both to help the student and to provide the school staff with information and feedback that will help us to refine our practice. In all these interactions, we ask all parties to come to the conversation with an open mind, a respectful tone, and a focus on student outcomes. This guide to communication will help parents and faculty members identify the types of issues that may arise and the approach recommended in different situations. Jointly developed by parents and teachers, it covers a variety of pathways of communication and reflects the complexity of the work we do. I encourage you to refer to it often, and I thank the many people who developed it so thoughtfully.

This document is endorsed by the Scarsdale Teachers Association (STA), the Parent Teacher Council (PTC) and your PTA. Teaching professionals want to hear from you as the need arises. If Teaching Professionals (Teachers, Deans and Department Chairs) know what their students' concerns are, then they will have a chance to address those concerns. What we have found through the many meetings of the STA and PTC is a renewed respect for the mutual desire to improve the experience of our students. By working on this document together, the collaborating teachers and parents gained insight and new perspectives. Instructed by feedback from over 1300 surveys, we have formulated this communication guideline to help facilitate appropriate norms and constructive problem solving.

*This document is not intended to cover every possible scenario, but is a first step in an ongoing process – we would like your feedback to assist us making this document as useful to parents and teachers as possible. Below is a link to a feedback survey. We hope you will let us know what you found helpful and also how we can improve this document.*

[Feedback Link](#)

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## General Approach & Tips Before Initiating a Conversation

Effective inquiries begin with an open approach among students, parents and teachers, one that acknowledges that all parties are working in the **best interest of the student**. For conversations between parents and teachers to be most productive, both parents and teachers should be guided by the following principles:

- ✓ Tone is central. Approach and listen to teachers as they are, interested and rational professionals who want the best for their students; approach and listen to parents as they are, concerned and fair-minded adults who want the best for their children.
- ✓ Both parents and teachers should consult the [student handbook](#) to see if the current concern is addressed by protocols already in place.
- ✓ Both parents and teachers should be specific about the source of their concern. Consider framing the issue in a question or solicit advice as a way to diffuse tension. Avoid speaking in generalizations and communicate the concern in a way that allows the other side to be reflective and not defensive.
- ✓ Both parents and teachers should be open to understanding each other's perceptions. Listen carefully to understand all the facts. Be respectful and open-minded.
- ✓ Both parents and teachers should articulate what they believe to be a desired and reasonable outcome.
- ✓ Both parents and teachers should discuss a workable plan of action that shares a responsibility toward a desired outcome, a responsibility that involves the student appropriately.

- ✓ Both parents and teachers should define later moments for follow-up.

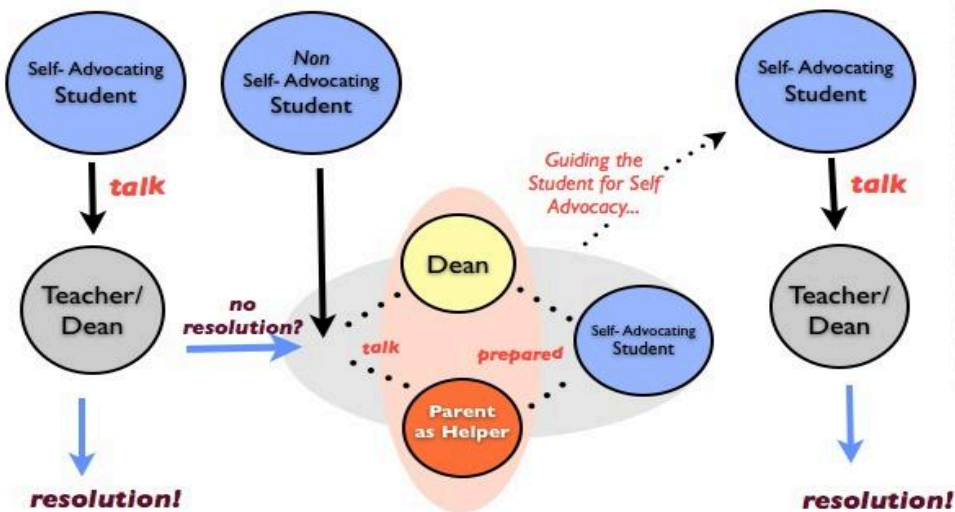
## Flow Charts: Suggestions for Effective Communication and Issue Resolution

### I. Classroom Specific Questions (most frequently occurring scenario)

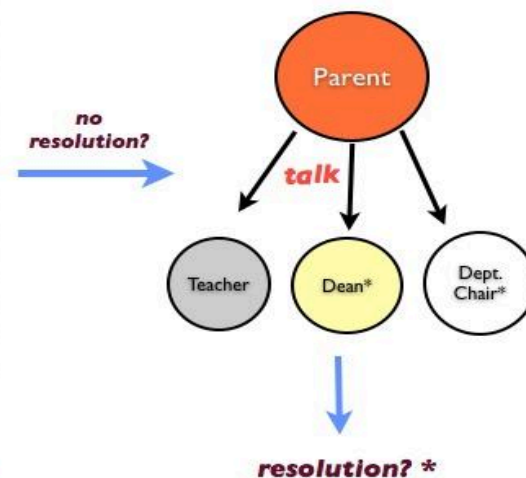
Concerns or questions specific to your child in a class

Examples: student-teacher interaction, homework, grading, additional teacher support, learning environment, class projects, course placement, group projects, class participation, etc.

#### 1 Student to Teacher



#### 2 Then, Parent as Advocate



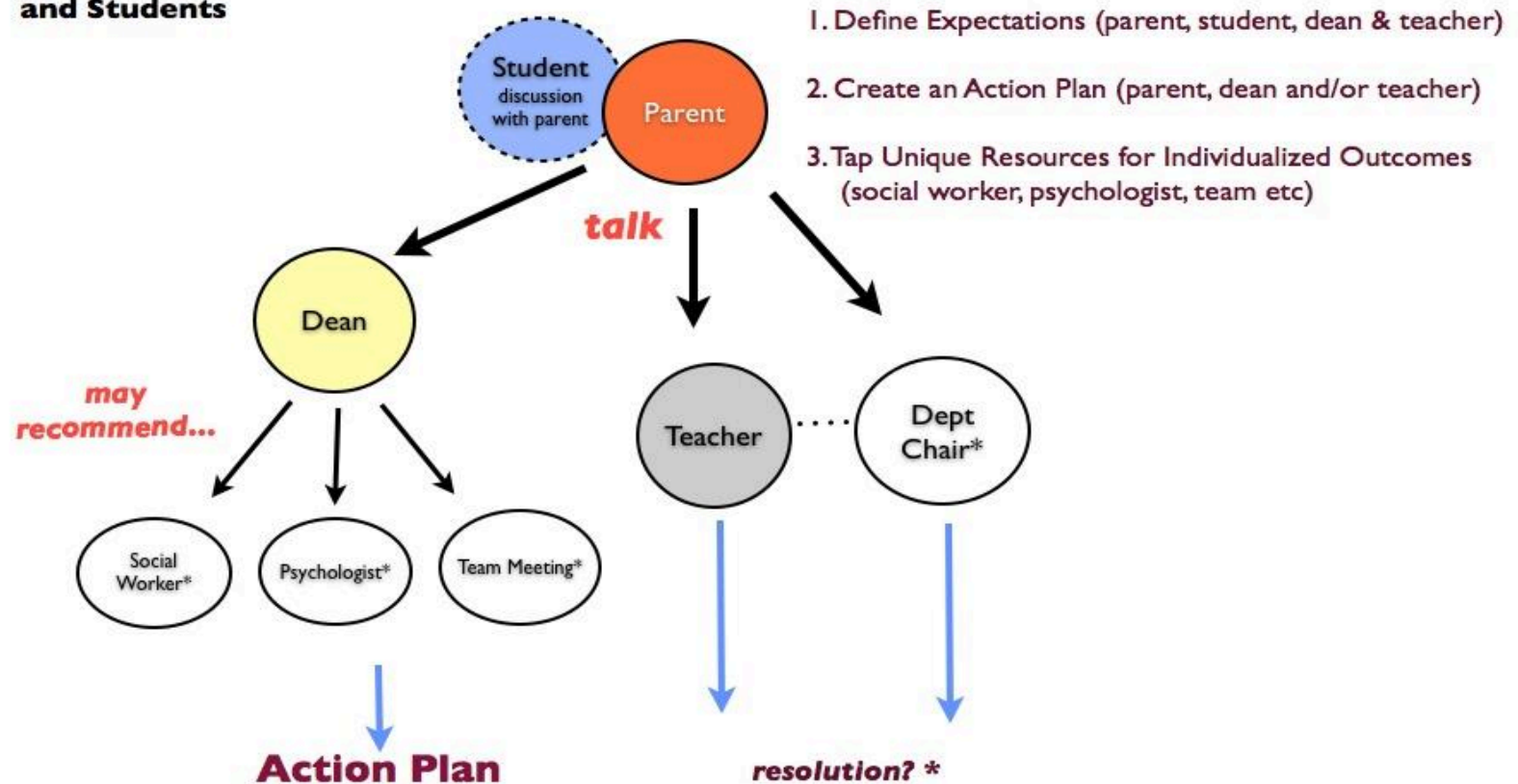
\* If a satisfactory resolution can not be reached, parents may always contact the Office of the Principal. Please refer to the FAQ below for reasoning behind the above approach.

## 2. Global School Questions and Issues (less frequently occurring scenario)

Concerns or questions about your child in school or beyond one classroom

Examples: school anxiety, social issues, student to student conflict, bullying, cyber-bullying, learning style challenges, grading equity across sections, study skills, etc.

### Options for Parents and Students



\* If a satisfactory resolution can not be reached, parents may always contact the Office of the Principal. Please refer to the FAQ below for reasoning behind the above approach.



### **3. Addressing a Serious Breach of Professional Behavior**

If there are concerns that a teacher or dean is not upholding his or her responsibilities as a professional, then these concerns should be dealt with on a case by case basis. Please contact the department chair or office of the principal. The main office secretary can direct a parent towards the appropriate administrator with regard to the particular issue. Please refer to [FAQ 19](#) for a greater explanation.

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

*Click on link to access : [teachers](#), [deans](#) and [chairpersons](#) .*

### 1. Why is it better for students and teachers to work out concerns without parental intervention?

The Scarsdale High School experience focuses on student-teacher interactions, both inside and outside of the classroom. Learning how to navigate these interactions is one of the most important skills Scarsdale students learn. Ideally, a student and teacher should be able to work out whatever issues occur in the classroom. Parents or deans can help the student define the issue and craft language to open a productive conversation with the teacher. However, there may be times when a student needs further assistance. In these cases, parents should speak directly to the teacher. If this approach is not working, parents should consider speaking to the student's dean or a department chair.

### 2. How can a student's dean play a constructive role in problem solving?

A student's dean knows the teacher and the student and can therefore serve as a more neutral party. A dean can help the student craft language that will encourage the most productive interactions or can work with the student or teacher to help solve the problem independently. With issues that extend beyond a single classroom, such as learning style challenges, social issues, anxiety or class placements, a student's dean can be a great resource.

### 3. What if a student is self-conscious about approaching a teacher or dean?

Parents are welcome to speak to a teacher or dean confidentially in order to share information that may help the teacher or dean better understand an issue or assist the student. Teachers and deans have their contact information and contact preferences on their teacher pages. A parent can also contact a teacher or dean with the student's full knowledge of the conversation. Please let the teacher or dean know if you wish the contact to be confidential.

### 4. How can parents and teachers/deans have productive conversations?

The most productive conversations between parents and teachers happen when parents have specific information to share and/or have specific requests and/or share specific concerns about a student, classroom environment or global issue. If all parties keep an open mind, maintain a respectful tone and agree on follow up and next steps, constructive progress can be made.

### 5. Can parents contact teachers/deans with positive feedback?

Yes! Parents should be specific about what the teacher did that was so effective. Teachers are constantly refining and improving their practice so it is especially gratifying to receive feedback about successful lessons and interactions.

### **6. When should parents expect a response from an initial contact with a teacher/dean?**

Responses usually happen by the end of the next school day after the initial email or phone contact. The school day for educators is designed for interacting with students, so responding to messages is often done before or after school hours. Extenuating factors that could make response time longer include teacher illness, field trips, weekend or vacation plans, etc. Most of the time, however, if a parent were to contact a teacher or dean on a Monday at 10am, the parent should receive a response by the next afternoon (Tuesday). A parent who does not hear back within a similar time frame can either try again (oversights do happen) or contact the student's dean or department chair depending on the issue and urgency of concern.

### **7. Should "difficult topics" or criticisms be broached with teachers/deans?**

Survey results indicate that parents usually feel comfortable contacting a teaching or dean directly if their child is struggling or if an issue is specific to their child. Parents express much more discomfort about contacting a teacher if the issue is with the teacher and involves a "difficult topic," such as class organization, style, tone, availability or follow-up on issues brought by the student.

Candid communications among students, parents and teachers/deans is the key to resolving many issues. If parents share their concerns with other parents but never with the teacher/dean directly, then the parent never gets the teacher's or dean's take on what has occurred and does not give the professional the opportunity to improve. Not broaching an issue allows that perceived issue to continue without meaningful discussion internally or externally.

### **8. How can "difficult topics" be broached with teachers?**

Good teachers are reflective and understand they can become better teachers. If parents share their concerns in a neutral, objective manner, a teacher may be able to reply constructively or may change his/her practices based on that new information. While parents may prefer to speak to a dean or department chair if their concern is about a teacher, the most effective and constructive way to express one's concerns is to go directly to the teacher.

### **9. What should be done if a student's issue is with his/her dean?**

The same guidelines that apply to discussions with teachers apply to discussions with deans.

### **10. What if a parent is hesitant to contact a teacher for fear of negative consequences?**

A teacher's level of commitment to the student is the same regardless of parental involvement. Parents who contact teachers should not expect preferred treatment nor should they fear negative consequences. Scarsdale teachers are professionals; retribution is unprofessional behavior. Parents may speak in confidence to a dean or a chairperson, but that may make it harder to optimally address the issue.

### **11. What if parents are unsatisfied with the response they receive from a teacher/dean?**

Parents and teachers should work together in the best interest of the student. Teachers should have adequate time and support to address concerns. In many cases, a student's dean may be helpful in the process. If no resolution is reached, the parent may contact a teacher's direct supervisor – the department chairperson or ultimately, the office of the principal. In the case of a global school issue (diagram #2), a dean or department chairperson may be the initial point of contact.

### **12. May a parent speak in confidence with a chairperson, dean or principal?**

Yes, but in many situations a teacher cannot improve or provide context unless the specific situation and student is named. More open communication builds more trust. Teaching professionals, as well as parent leadership, are committed to fostering more positive, constructive conversations about teaching, student growth and learning.

### **13. What can a parent expect from a chairperson?**

A chairperson is a hybrid position. In the high school, the chairperson still teaches but also receives release time to administer to the department's curricular and teaching needs. As the direct supervisor of the teachers in a specific department, the chairperson is responsible for the instruction, curriculum, assessment and placement in that department.

There may be occasions when a student, parent, or teacher may need the support of a chairperson to resolve an issue. In these cases, the chairperson will listen to all concerns and take careful notes. Once the chairperson has an objective sense of the issue, he/she will get back to those involved with possible resolutions. Before leaving a conversation with a chairperson, parent, teacher, and chairperson should be sure to have a mutual understanding of next steps and expectations.

The [chairperson](#) for each department is indicated on the top page for each department, the contact page and parenthetically on the teacher page. The chairperson's contact information is also displayed on his or her teacher page, which can be accessed by clicking on the chairperson's name.

### **14. What can parents expect from the [office of the principal](#)?**

If parents have concerns that seem best addressed by an administrator, then the parents can contact this office directly. The main office secretary will be able to direct the call to the appropriate person.

### **15. How can a student get extra academic help from a teacher?**

Teachers at the high school pride themselves on their attention to Scarsdale students inside and outside of the classroom. Students are encouraged (and in some cases mandated) to see teachers in their offices for personal or small group instruction. Throughout the school, these meetings happen during mutual free periods, before school, after school, and/or during lunch. Students should be aware of each teacher's process. Teachers are committed to spending time with students; however, individual schedules may not align. If a parent is concerned that a student is unable to schedule time with a teacher, after following that teacher's process, then the parent is welcome to contact the teacher or dean to find a workable solution.

### **16. What is an appropriate amount of time for student work to be returned?**

A student's assignment should be given back before the student is asked to do the next similar assignment, so the student can use the feedback from the first iteration to improve. Keep in mind that quizzes, multiple choice exams and short homework assignments are easier to turn around than long-term projects, labs, written exams, essays, or group presentations. The type of teacher feedback provided also plays a role in determining the amount of time that is appropriate for a student to receive his or her work back. If a teacher is providing minimal feedback, then the turnaround time is usually shorter. If a teacher is spending 15-20 minutes providing feedback on each assignment and the teacher has a hundred students, then the turnaround time will be longer. If a parent has concerns that papers or exams are not being returned in a manner that allows a student to benefit from that work, the parent should speak to the teacher. If the practice continues, the parent should contact the dean or department chair.

### **17. What if there is concern about late postings of assignments and tests?**

There is a 4:00pm deadline for posting new assignments for the following day. Tests should be scheduled in advance with appropriate notice. If this is not the case, students should bring this issue up with the teacher. If the practice continues, the student or parent should discuss it with the department chair.

### **18. What if a parent's concern relates to the health and well-being of their child?**

Parental concerns may include the social well-being of their child outside of the classroom, the process through which their child may become classified for special education or a health issue. Scarsdale High School has a wealth of professionals who can address these kinds of concerns. A nurse, an ESL teacher, two psychologists, two social workers, and three assistant principals routinely work with deans, chairpersons, academic support providers, learning-resource room teachers and classroom teachers to provide specific help to students. To begin any of these kinds of interventions, parents should contact their child's dean. The **dean is the point person** for a child's education and will be able to bring in the appropriate professionals in a timely manner to help him or her.

### 19. Is there a process to address serious breaches of professionalism?

Yes. If a teacher or dean has acted inappropriately or is unable to teach effectively, the chairperson can help the professional understand how he or she can better serve the student. If the inappropriate behavior persists, the chairperson can work with the teacher, coaching him or her toward greater professionalism.

If the teacher or dean is assessed as unable to change, and if the inappropriate behavior rises to the level of a serious breach of professionalism, then the chairperson/principal can institute a contractually driven process that would lead to the teacher's improvement or eventual dismissal. If a parent sees a consistent pattern of unprofessional behavior, the office of the principal or department chair would be the appropriate point of contact.

*\*We would like to state, however, that such breaches of professionalism are rare, and that most student-teacher/parent-teacher interactions result in greater understanding and improvement of specific student needs and concerns. As members of the STA, PTC, and PTA we offer these guidelines in the spirit of mutual respect and collaboration toward the education of our children and students. We look forward to more open and honest dialogue and we encourage your feedback.*

Quick Link to: [SHS Home Page](#), [School Contact Page](#) (Office of the Principal, Deans and Department Chairs) & [Teacher Page](#), [PTA Home Page](#), [PTC Page](#).

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We hope that you will share your [feedback](#) with us. Thank you.