

Effective Advocacy –resources:

1. Center for Teacher Quality resource with Advocacy ideas
 2. Katy Ridnouer’s book introduction
 3. Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession cstp-wa.org
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1. Center for Teacher Quality: Use this link to read about ideas for advocacy by teachers in schools

<https://www.teachingquality.org/the-future-leadership-of-teachers/>

2. Everyday Engagement

by Katy Ridnouer

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Introduction: The Teacher as Everyday Advocate

When I taught my first class of students at Dore Academy in Charlotte, North Carolina, I looked into 15 sets of eyes and thought, "These are my students. I can't wait to see how far I can take them!" Running through my head were all the ways I hoped to connect with them, engage them in meaningful learning activities, and help them develop into thoughtful, capable, educated adults. I wanted to succeed as a teacher so that my students could succeed as learners, and I vowed that together we would take on learning as partners in a great adventure.

The funny thing is, I didn't spare the slightest thought for the people who, next to the students themselves, could have been my closest allies in achieving these objectives: *my students' parents*. Why would I? Nothing in my teacher-certification process had even mentioned parents. I was taught pedagogical strategies, educational philosophy, and lesson planning; I never considered that I could use these same tools to engage parents in their children's academic life. And the truth was, my actual contact with parents was limited. The students attending our K–12 school were dropped off in the morning and picked up in the afternoon, plucked off the steps like ripened tomatoes from a vine. I would call parents occasionally, when there was a problem or a particular success to report, yet I was always uncomfortable during these exchanges. Perhaps it was because the only advice I had received about working with parents came from an administrator colleague, who once whispered to me in the hallway, "Never meet with them alone, Katy. You'll lose your job." This colleague's philosophy when it came to parents? "Give 'em what they want, and you'll get 'em off your back." It was a perspective that cast parents as adversaries instead of partners. When it came my turn to be "the parent," I was determined *not* to be an adversary at school. I volunteered. I chaperoned. And I realized that parents' roles in school were not limited to victim, complainer, or boss. Parents could make suggestions. We could apply our skills. We could make a difference.

As I worked toward being a partner in my son's academic progress, I began thinking about how each student's academic experience could be enhanced by parent involvement. I also started researching the connections between good teaching practice and the kind of parent involvement that improves student achievement. There was plenty of information available. Since the 1970s, researchers have been documenting the power of home-school connections to enhance student success. School and parent partnerships are associated with higher levels of achievement measured through standardized test scores and with gains in factual, conceptual, critical, and attitudinal aspects of learning (Eccles & Harold, 1993). When parents are involved in their children's education, children may acquire skills and knowledge beyond those they would achieve through school experiences alone (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Even as I continued my reading, I delved into some firsthand research by joining the Parent Leadership Network, which meant committing to three weekend training sessions over the course of three months. My fellow trainees and I met with our children's principals and discussed their concerns about parent involvement at the school and particular issues within the school—academic and otherwise. We went on to create project plans that addressed these concerns and made use of both the schools' [resources](#) and our personal skill sets.

Guided by the Parent Leadership Network staff, I began to get a clearer sense of the overlap between the elements of successful parent partnership and successful teaching practice. I also realized what parent involvement in schooling could mean for children. Henderson and Berla (1994) tell us that parent partnership benefits students in the following ways:

- A more positive attitude toward school
- Improved academic achievement
- Better behavior in the classroom
- Higher rates of work completion
- Increased participation in classroom activities
- Better attendance

Any educator reading this list is sure to notice that the picture it paints is of a positive, functional, harmonious classroom—the kind of environment we strive to set up for our students and maintain through their collective participation. Once I made that connection, it seemed foolish to continue working alone. Simply put, using engagement practices to partner collaboratively with parents and students alike made much more sense.

Finding a New Solution to a Familiar Challenge

Of course, if facilitating effective parental partnership were simple, all schools would already be doing it. Numerous obstacles stand in the way, from parents' lack of time and know-how, and their perception that schools don't want them around, to teachers' perception that parents don't get involved because they don't care about their own children's academic success. According to the 2006 MetLife [Survey](#) of the

American Teacher, new teachers consider engaging and working with parents their greatest challenge, more so than classroom [management](#), organizing a new classroom, or obtaining supplies. In fact, parent involvement in learning is the area they feel the *least* prepared to respond to during their first year of teaching. Not surprisingly, fewer than half of the new teachers surveyed were satisfied with their relationship with parents.

It is time for a change. It is time to look at parent partnership in a different way, using the lens of engagement. Encouraging parent partnership doesn't mean tallying the number of hours parents are in the school building each week or teaching parents how to teach reading. What it means is cultivating a welcoming atmosphere for parents, just as we create a welcoming atmosphere for our students. It means giving parents comfortable and significant ways to participate in the schooling process in the same way we aim to give our students meaningful and appropriate work to help them master academic goals and other classroom challenges.

Meaningful Engagement

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned as a teacher is that all students need to feel seen and known. Before they will fully engage their minds in the classroom, they need to believe that their teacher has an understanding of who they are. Involving parents in and out of the classroom provides a way for teachers to complete the full picture of who students are by capturing the personal details that can fall through the sieve of students' school records, anecdotes from previous teachers, and the face students present in the classroom.

For me, the real breakthrough came when I realized that parents, too, need to be seen and known. The same five elements that are essential to engaging students in the educational process are critical to engaging their parents:

1. *Laying the groundwork for engagement*: Recognizing that each student and each parent is a unique individual and finding a way for every person to contribute to a positive learning environment.
2. *Communicate invitations*: Maintaining a welcoming attitude and inviting both student and parent participation in the learning community.
3. *Cultivating interpersonal responses*: Considering what students and parents are willing and able to give of themselves and providing appropriate support and encouragement.
4. *Dealing effectively with engagement challenges*: Anticipating and handling setbacks and complications related to connecting with both students and parents.
5. *Extending the learning community*: Tapping outside resources.

Being the Difference, Being the Advocate

The approach I outline in this book reflects my own experience as a teacher and a parent, as well as the experiences of my students, children, friends, and colleagues. As noted, my writing has been further informed by the insights of the Parent Leadership Network and by research on parent and student involvement. What I advocate here is in many ways an extension of my first book, *Managing Your*

Classroom with Heart (Ridnour, 2006), which explored how a compassionate teacher can bring out the best in students. Teachers who focus this same compassion on parents will be able to initiate productive and rewarding conversations about forming home-school connections that support student learning.

An advocate is a person who supports or promotes the interests of another, and that is what a teacher is doing when he or she works to engage students and their parents as partners in a positive, learning-focused classroom community. An advocate is also one who promotes a cause, and I believe every teacher must be an advocate for student and parent engagement in learning, and for learning in general. They must promote it actively; they must embed these efforts into their classroom practice on an everyday basis. Some students and parents will be prone to engagement—easy to reach, easy to know, and eager to be involved in the classroom—due to the very nature of who they are. Other students and parents are the exact opposite. I believe it is up to the teacher to cast a net wide enough to pull in students and parents—those who are naturally inclined toward engagement and those who reject the traditional methods of engagement.

Each of this book's five parts focuses on one of the key elements of meaningful engagement, identifying and answering specific questions you may have, and offering strategies for tackling the associated challenges. Taken together, these elements provide a stable groundwork for a collaborative partnership among schools, students, and parents—a partnership that, once established, becomes as much of a part of the classroom environment as curricula, pencils, and paper. And from that point, the question for students and parents is not *if* they will be engaged in classroom learning, but *how* they will choose to engage, *how far* that engagement will take them, and *what else* is possible.

Every teacher has the power to be a tremendously positive force in the lives of their students. The fact that you are reading this book suggests you share this belief, and I hope that the questions asked and strategies explored in the pages ahead will be helpful in your work. Let's get started.

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