

ARE OUR MIDDLE SCHOOLS CUSTOMER-FRIENDLY? TEN POINTS TO PONDER

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Abstract

While parents of elementary school children generally feel invited and involved with their children's schools, the same cannot be said of middle school parents. Surveys consistently indicate that as children move from elementary to secondary schools, parents feel less welcome and connected to the school. The problem, and its solution, can be viewed through the lens of customer service. Ten straightforward strategies are shared that will assist middle school leaders in developing a more customer-friendly school.

Another year. The results are in. Indicators of strong customer service in our middle schools look lousy.

Some districts in North Carolina report survey responses from parents regarding their feelings and perceptions about the schools. As expected, middle schools score lower than their elementary counterparts. For example, in one survey, 93% of the parents felt the elementary schools encouraged parent involvement; only 80% of the middle school parents did ("CMS Family Survey," 2005-2006). Similarly, 90% of the elementary parents felt they were provided with adequate information about their school; only 81% of the middle school parents were satisfied with the information they received ("WCPSS Parent Survey," 2005-2006).

In other surveys, parents do not think that middle school principals are accessible. They point out that it is difficult to contact their child's teacher, and they do not feel as comfortable expressing their concerns to the middle school staff as they did at the elementary level. They also "mark down" the secretarial staff in middle schools more

so than they did at the elementary level, saying they do not make the parents feel welcome.

There are other indicators that middle schools are not as customer friendly as the public deserves. In South Carolina, the Department of Education and the Public School Public Relations Associations have developed an annual award for schools that are inviting, warm places for parents and visitors. For each of the past three years, only a handful of middle schools received this Red Carpet Award. However, the middle schools that are successful in achieving Red Carpet status have deliberately made decisions about serving their parents and public in order to be more effective schools.

Schlechty (2001) clearly states that to be effective, schools must first have a clear understanding of who their customers are and what their needs are. He continues to explain that the schools should understand customer needs better than the customer does. Schools serve the students, and the school's job is to ensure their success. Parents can be the

school's best allies if staffs work with them as partners.

If not, why not?

If our middle schools are *not* customer friendly, it begs the question, "Why not?" Charleston (SC) public education reformer Jon Butzon boldly asserts that, "If you don't have parents in your school, it's because you don't really want them there" (personal communication, June 30, 2006). This suggests that good customer service – or the lack thereof - is an attitude, or an organizational culture, if you will.

"So," Butzon asks, "are some schools unsuccessful at serving the customer because they don't know what they need to do, or are they unsuccessful because they really don't want parents, their customers, in the school anyway?" For the purposes of this article, the authors will assume the former but urge the reader to seriously consider the possibility and implications of the latter, as well.

Are parents welcome?

"Once your child enters middle school, you are done. They don't even want to see you in the school anymore." This comment is a familiar one among middle school parents. Maybe their children don't want Mom or Dad eating lunch with them anymore, but there are other easy ways for parents to be involved. Do middle school parents need to remain active in the school? Absolutely! Parents leave elementary schools with a feeling that the school belonged to them. They were invited into classrooms as volunteers, as

chaperones on trips, and as organizers of special events. They frequently received calls, notes, and newsletters from their teachers. As the student entered the next level, the school scene changed. Parents felt less informed, invited, and involved. If this pattern is to change, schools must change their public relations strategies and help parents know they are indeed valued by their child's school.

First, *everyone* must understand what excellent customer service looks like in a middle school. The staff must recognize that the way the school treats parents and students affects the school's climate, reputation, and effectiveness. Customer service is evidenced by the manner in which staff members interact with students and parents. Friendliness, availability, fairness, and respect are the essentials of strong customer service. Information that is made available to parents influences their sense of belonging to the school community. In Austin, Texas, schools have instituted a RAVE recognition program to thank staff members who take customer service seriously. This recognition extends to teachers, custodians, cafeteria staff, and office personnel.

Where to begin?

What can be done to fix this disconnect between middle schools and the home? Can staff create a cultural change by looking at specific practices in the school? The answers to these questions lie in some basic rules of service that must be adopted by the principal and must be noticeable in the way the school does its daily business. While these rules are not magic, neither are they complicated. But frequently, educators need to refresh their thinking

and remember a few basic premises of customer service.

1. *Be intentionally invitational.* Begin by taking a close look at what it feels like to be a visitor in the building. Ask a team of teachers, parents, or business people to do a walk-through, looking at the school from the eyes of a newcomer. First, are visitors and parents able to park close to the building? Is it clear which door to enter? Are there signs by the entrance doors that are welcoming and clearly point visitors to the office? Is the building clean? Is it clutter and graffiti free? Are the halls free of roaming students but filled with student work? Retail businesses know the importance of getting the customer in the door with a favorable first impression.

Since all visitors will likely begin their school contact at the front office or reception area, be sure it too is inviting. Buy a nice couch or chair. Keep it clean. Dust off the artificial flowers. Throw away the out-of-date magazines and clutter. Take another look around. What is displayed on the walls? Posters should be inspirational and encouraging. Make sure the secretary's desk is neat. What information is available for people to read? Is it current? Does it relate to the school? Even the professional dress of the people in the front office sends a message about what the principal believes is important.

Find new ways to welcome people into the school. One middle school uses its marquee not only to tell about upcoming events, but to add comments like "parents expected" or "community invited."

2. *Customers come first.* Never ignore visitors when they come into the building or allow them to feel invisible. Remember how it feels in a retail store to be unable to find someone to provide assistance; sometimes customers leave and take their business elsewhere. Students and parents should not be seen as interruptions to the school's work; they *are* the school's work. Handle the interruptions as an opportunity to serve. Smile, and make the greeting genuine. Make eye contact and tell them their visit is appreciated. Put any "to do" list on hold for few minutes and value the customer that is present.

A positive, helpful greeter is a must. One middle school uses student ambassadors in the front lobby during lunch periods to greet visitors and meet their needs. Even if the customer needs to wait for assistance, she deserves a smile and an acknowledgement. Visitor nametags are helpful so that teachers and other staff can speak to parents by name. Everyone likes to be greeted personally. When someone says, "Thank you for getting off work and coming to school today," parents feel that their efforts have been affirmed. Many parents do not feel comfortable making their way into a conference or school meeting, so it is the educator's responsibility to acknowledge the efforts they are making.

3. *Stay off of all pedestals.* Teachers and principals are not above students and parents and therefore must not act that way. Everyone is trying to accomplish the same goals for the students. Parents should not be told what they ought to be doing. Be humble. Sometimes educators appear to be "know-it-alls," yet sometimes they do know what the

parent does not know but needs to know. As assistance is provided, it must not be done in a condescending manner, even if the parent is angry or inappropriate. Parents may have the solution to the problem that has been stumping the school staff for months. It can be helpful to ask them directly, "How would you like to see this issue resolved?"

When students are asked about their best teachers, they mention the ones that take time to know them. They like for teachers to commit a little extra time to help them with work or to show they care about them individually. Building these relationships with students and parents makes a positive impact on classroom management and climate.

4. *Treat every student as a unique, special individual.* Each one matters. Never favor one student or student group over another. All children have different gifts and talents, strengths and interests. A principal must ensure that all sports teams, arts groups, and clubs are valued for what they offer. In the classrooms, the poorest students need to be treated like they live with a school board member. Teachers must be fair, impartial, and consistent. A hard, but realistic question to ask is, "Would I want my own child to be in this school or classroom?"

Middle school teachers must be the advocates for all children and find ways to recognize student success. Parents trust their VIP (very important person, their child) to the school every day and expect that their child will be served well. In one school, when students receive perfect attendance awards, the parents are also sent a letter of appreciation for their support in helping

the child do well in school. When a parent comes for a conference, teachers must realize that this parent is concerned with one child and does not need to hear about others in the class. They are asking for their child to be seen as unique.

5. *Always be respectful.* Students or parents must always be treated respectfully. Remember to maintain confidentiality when discussing any student's circumstances. There are many ears in a school and negative comments travel fast. Damage done this way is not easily fixed.

Adults in the school must model the way conflict should be handled. Middle school students do not understand sarcastic humor and parents do not appreciate it. No matter the situation, leaders and teachers must be courteous and respectful and must listen when the customer needs to vent. Nothing is gained by arguing or interrupting. Defensiveness sets the process backwards. Rather, stay calm and focus on understanding the problem. Look past the frustrations, identify the real problem, and consider everyone's feedback. Parents then will see administrators and teachers as open and responsive. Try to take at least one of their suggestions and agree to work on it together. Even the parents who want to swear at the teacher or hang up on the secretary want the school to help their child. They just may not know how to ask for the help. Educators must understand their needs and frustrations and address them in a supportive way.

6. *Use the telephone as a tool of customer service.* Everyone in the school needs to know how to use the

telephone correctly, and secretaries especially need comprehensive training in customer service. Then, as they put into place what they have learned, they must share expectations with others who work occasionally in the front office. How long does it take for the phone to be answered? When the phone starts to ring, everyone in the office should mentally begin to count the rings and jump in to help as soon as possible. How long are callers left on hold? Are messages delivered and handled appropriately? Call a school - what is heard on the other end speaks volumes about the climate in the school.

Make sure everyone knows the principal's expectation for returning calls. Are calls to be returned within 24 hours or on the same day? Sooner is better. It does not get easier to make the tough calls later. If delayed, the caller is not only upset about the issue about which he called, he is now perturbed that no one thought his call was important enough to return in a timely fashion. It never fails: when a call is ignored, the caller phones back angry or he calls higher up the ladder. He does not go away.

There are ways to make the tone of any conversation better. Smile while you talk; the positive attitude is audible. Ask how assistance can be provided, and always thank him for his call. Ask other questions to let him know his ideas are important. And remember to use the caller's name in the conversation.

7. *Be sensitive to the diversity in the school.* Ways to include everyone must be found as well as ways to communicate with parents who speak other languages. Secretaries should be

provided time and support in learning a few basic phrases to greet Spanish speaking visitors to the building. Is everyone who enters the school made to feel equally special and valued, or do some get the cold shoulder? When a family is away because of a religious or cultural celebration, is support provided to their student upon return to school, or is she made to feel like an outsider? One middle school introduces new students via the in-school television program. Another offers morning announcements in both English and Spanish.

8. *Be cautious about making promises.* Remember that promises made are reflections of character. If a parent is told the school staff will do something, be sure it is done. If help is offered, don't forget. If following up with someone is promised, follow up. Customers don't stay where they do not experience trust, and trust rides with the promises.

9. *Maximize the communications.* Use every tool available and be proactive. Middle school teachers must continue to send notes or emails to parents. One teacher sends out emails to her parents and ends with a question or two asking the parents to please respond back to her. While teacher's cell phones should never be used for personal use during instructional time, they can be used as a valuable tool for quickly getting good news to parents.

One teacher frequently asks different students for the parent's number at the end of a lesson and they quickly call together to share a positive message about the child's class assignment, test grade, or participation. Three things happen immediately: a) the parent is

aware of what is going on during the day and appreciates the teacher's concern, b) the student is affirmed immediately and feels positive about the teacher and her work, and c) the other students in the class quickly see that parents and teachers are partners and they know their teacher might make a similar call for them. This teacher ends by thanking the parents for helping their child at home. When she has to leave a voice mail, she lets them know she looks forward to seeing them the next time they visit the school.

One middle school has an expectation that every teacher will call at least five parents a week, and three of the contacts must be positive. Other middle schools remind teachers that a negative call should always receive a follow-up call as soon as something positive is noticed. Middle school staff must remember to omit the education jargon and say what is meant. School websites must be kept current so that contact information for all teachers is easy to locate. Suggestion boxes also show a willingness to listen to feedback.

10. *Be visible, available, and real.* When parents come to school events, they want to see administrators and teachers. All staff should take time to listen and respond to questions. Many times parents and community partners just want to share an idea, pass on a compliment, or make a suggestion. They want to know someone heard them and cared about their comments.

Principals need to get out of their offices and walk around the buildings. Talk to students, parents, and volunteers. Teachers also need to be out where the action is! When teachers participate in

parent meetings or special events, the message is clear that they like being part of the total school program.

Be willing to admit mistakes. Everyone makes them and if students are expected to learn from their mistakes, they must be shown how to respond. When a teacher or administrator offers an apology to a parent or student, she is seen as being human and honest. Then when she makes amends or works to remedy a problem, the parents appreciate the staff even more. Showing humor and being able to laugh at one's mistakes with students is a real climate booster. A meaningful faculty meeting can be built around role-plays where parents make suggestions for school improvement, criticize a teaching practice, or question the principal's judgment on an issue. Responses need to be open and show an eagerness to hear their feedback and continue to refine educational practices.

The challenge

There is no reason why middle schools cannot be customer-friendly places. To make this happen, educators have to take a critical look at themselves and their daily practices. Constantly reflecting on the way they do business will pay off in better school climate and more satisfied customers. Principals must stay positive and talk to the school's customers in terms of what the school can do, rather than what it cannot do. Everyone must do whatever is possible to let parents know that the enormity of them entrusting their children to the school every day is acknowledged and appreciated.

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