

## PARENT ADVOCACY STRATEGIES: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

Parent Conferences Panel – February 13, 2014

**Panel Members:** Tiffany Miller- Principal at Conrad Ball MS, Valerie Wirt – 8<sup>th</sup> Gr. Teacher at Conrad Ball MS, Sue Teumer- GT Teacher at Lucile Erwin MS, Diane Lauer – Director of Learning Services, Niki Weitzel- GT Counselor at Loveland HS, Kathy Sather- Early Literacy TOSA, Lanny Haas – Principal at Thompson Valley HS, Larry Shores- Principal at Winona Elementary

*Reminder – these are notes from the conversation, not verbatim dialogue:*

Q: I have a first grader who left Kindergarten with J reading level. He hasn't moved at all; we feel that his teacher isn't challenging him at all. What can we do to keep moving this challenge along? He loves to read but is bored in class.

A: Ask teacher, "How can we help you move our student along?" Every teacher wants to move students along at least one year every year. Share student's interests and see if that sparks a dialogue. If that doesn't work, schedule a time with the principal because the principal might have more ability to respond at a system-level to the issue (like moving a kid from one class or grade to another for a particular subject).

J is a transition level for reading to switch from picture books to chapter books. You might have to try a lot of different books to find a series of something that will spark his interest.

Q: GT student moving to BHS next year for STEM program. How does GT continue in HS?

A: Parents are used to pull-out in elementary and special classes in middle school, but at HS all services are integrated. GT counselor works to help students advocate for themselves in their classrooms and choose challenging classes, but they won't have a special GT class like in earlier grades.

Follow up – what do GT kids do with you as their counselor?

A: It depends. We can do a lot or a little, from personal counseling to simply helping kids register for classes. We don't drag kids down to see us. But they can drop in if they need help with college planning, picking classes, setting goals, etc.

Q: Son in 5<sup>th</sup> ready to go to MS. They have a good program at his school but everyone says that he won't get the personal attention in MS. I'm meeting with them this week, so what do I need to ask them or tell them about my son?

A: Your GT person will have access to test scores by end of May, so it's really more about talking about what your son is interested in and what he likes. Kids tend to not like to be pulled out in MS starting in about 7<sup>th</sup> grade so there is some pull-out, but most of the work is done in the classroom or during intervention blocks. If we have a better understanding of your son's needs, we know better where to place them and what classes they might need next year. You will also get an understanding of what the GT program looks like in MS. It's also a good opportunity to meet and build a relationship with the GT teacher at that school because you'll be working with her for the next three years. Also, ask about extra-curricular options and what opportunities are there for your child to try out that they can begin to develop passions for.

Q: How do you push them (and is there such a thing as pushing too much?) but keep them socially accepted at school?

A: A critical piece is establishing a partnership with the school. A lot of kids will be happy to take on challenging work from us if they have a good relationship with the GT teacher. It may not be in front of a whole class – maybe it's with a small group – but they will often rise to the challenge. Also, we need to make sure kids have a voice in the goals we are writing (not just based on parent and teacher goals) so that we're not just pushing them, but they're involved and buying into what they should be doing.

Some kids do have too much pressure, but just by allowing students to know that we have developed a goal, but you don't HAVE to do, then kids respond to that.

Q: Do you ever have students question their placement in advanced classes and how do you respond to that when they have high test scores?

A: GT kids do have a lot of frustration when they have experience with doing well without working hard and that's where Carol Dweck's research on growth v. fixed midsets really helps. Kids need to struggle through difficult situations so they can learn how to struggle and persevere. A lot of this is working with the student to help them realize that outcomes can be tied to effort and that putting forth effort when tasks are difficult is required.

Q: My 8<sup>th</sup> grade son won't work because when I advocated last year and the year before for harder work, the teacher just gave him more work. He's lost his love of learning because he hasn't been challenged the last two and a half years.

A: Share these experiences with the high school during a transition meeting. Knowing ahead of time about this can help the HS plan for him. Try to find a buddy at HS NOW for him to connect with to get him excited about going to HS and sports opportunities there. Then when they start, they know someone who can show them around. This buddy can help them understand what time they'll need to set aside for studying and other ways to keep ahead in HS. Also, it's important for kids to know that smart doesn't get you all the way you need to go – you have to persevere. It's about your learning and your growth.

Maybe the homework isn't getting done because he already knows it. Maybe we need to think about whether he knows the information from the class, rather than does he turn in homework that may not be relevant to them. If he already knows it and this is just busy work, does he really need to do it? It's hard not to get bothered by it as a parent, but maybe it's not that big of a deal. At high school, we have seen this in kids and it doesn't necessarily translate to not turning in assignments in college and later in work.

Q: How do we know when to advocate for our kids and when they should be advocating for themselves?

A: I give parents a general guideline when they come in at 6<sup>th</sup> grade to start to support their kids, even if it's something as simple as helping them send an email from their own account (teachers are more excited to open email from students). GT teachers are there to help role play and support, too, when students feel like they hit a wall with the classroom teacher. MS is where the kids learn those how to develop and practice those skills. It might even be sitting there with them for moral support, but letting the kid to run the conference.

We use a gradual release of responsibility with students academically (I do, you watch; we do; you do, I watch). Same thing can be used with advocacy. You know they are ready to be fully released when they come home with a story of how they advocated for themselves. But you have to practice with them. You have to do the "we do" part.

Story about how a son advocated for himself with a parent about college choices, making a choice that seemed wrong to the adult at the time, but worked out so that the son is now very successful. It's better to let them tell me what they need to do rather than me telling him what he needed, as a parent. They just need to know you care and then they can prove to you that they are doing the right thing.

Q: When might you have experienced a well-meaning parent that approached you with wording or a communication style that was a put-off? How might the same parent have approached you in a way that was more uniting?

A: As a teacher, I definitely want to be open in communication with parents about their children. I do not have any problems with parents/guardians addressing the giftedness of their kids and asking me about their student's classroom achievement. I know that as the teacher, I really appreciate it when parents are forthcoming about making sure their kids can reach their potential. With that being said, I think approaching teachers with the mindset that a student's achievement is about encouragement from both the teacher and the parent is a good way to start a conversation. I think teachers sometimes feel the need to be a bit defensive if the conversation begins with "what are you doing to challenge my student?" rather than, "Can you tell me a little bit about what you are seeing from my student in the classroom? What kinds of challenges do you think my student is capable of and how can we, as a team, get him/her to a level where they are being challenged and encouraged to grow?" With the latter type of approach, I have had very productive conversations with parents and am able to walk away knowing that these parents are advocating for their kids without placing blame. I also enjoy it when parents ask about grading systems and the rubrics I use so that they can see exactly where their children are performing and I can point out specific areas of learning that I see both strength and room to grow in their children's work.