

GOAL: Interact With the School or With Teachers



Contributed by Nancy Salm
Colusa County Library

Introduction

When you have a child in the school system – public or private – there will come a time when you need to engage with the school about an issue that's important to you. This takes some courage and self-confidence, especially if your own experience with school was not altogether positive. However, you as the parent/guardian, are an important advocate for your child and you deserve to have your child's needs addressed.

This curriculum will provide you with some information about the school system and how it works and will help you develop the confidence you need to meet with teachers, counselors, and administrators at your child's school, at any level.

Some things to remember about interacting with school staff about issues regarding your child:

- Teachers, counselors, and administrators want to partner with you to help make school a positive learning experience for your child;
- Sometimes school staff members use educational “jargon” without realizing that only other people working in education are able to understand them. If you don't understand what someone is saying ask them to explain. This alerts the teacher that he or she is using jargon;
- There are a lot of people who have bad memories of their own days as a student and are very uncomfortable with going back into a school building. If this describes you, keep in mind that you are an equal with the school staff members and that you are there to provide support for your child.

It is important to realize that school personnel really do care about your child and since you know your child better than anyone, you are a valuable asset to them! They need your help and encouragement in order for your child to succeed.

Getting Started

To prepare to work on this goal during your tutoring session, gather materials about your child's school and school district. Is there paperwork that has come home that provides information about what goes on during the school day? Does your school publish a Parent's Handbook? Is there a classroom newsletter or school-wide newsletter? If your child is in high school, has the teacher handed out a syllabus which describes the course content? Collect these items in a folder and bring them into your tutoring session in order to help you work on this goal.

Books and Resources

■ Books

A+ Teachers: How to Empower Your Child's Teacher and Your Child to Excel by Erika V. Shearing Karres, Ed.D. -- The author offers advice on evaluating the effectiveness of teachers but also outlines how to encourage better study habits in children. Published by Andrews McMeel.

■ Websites

How to Talk to Your Child's Teacher is a common theme in these websites:

- www.family.go.com/parenting/pkg-learning/article-196485-how-to-talk-to-your-child-s-teacher-t/ – An article from Disney Family, Says the author, "The most common misstep parents make is coming in on the defensive and being argumentative."
- www.suite101.com/content/talking-to-your-childs-teacher-a28379 - Outlines 7 tips for better parent-teacher communication.
- www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-a-teacher-about-your-concerns_67304.bc - Ideas from the National Education Association and the National Parent Teacher Association on how to get the most out of your meeting with a teacher.
- www.learning-aids.com/blog/talking-your-childs-teacher-about-behavior-problems - Talking with your child's teacher about behavior problems.
- www.learningdisabilitiesinfo.com/Learn/tips-for-talking-to-your-childs-teacher.htm - "Think cooperation, not confrontation," and other simple tips for talking to your child's teacher.

Other websites especially for parents of high school students:

- www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/ - Graduation from high school now requires that students pass the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) in order to receive a diploma. Here you'll find information regarding this test.
- www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/Parents/pdf/A-G%20requirements%201-25-08.pdf - Shows the sequence of high school courses that students must complete to be eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. These courses

represent the basic level of preparation that high school students should achieve to undertake university work.

- www2.ed.gov/pubs/Prepare/pt2.html - Explains what you can do to help your child prepare for college. Includes recommended classes, information about testing, questions to ask guidance counselors, and other tips and tools.

Key Vocabulary

- ♦ **assessment** – the act of making a judgment about skills or progress; a tool for evaluation. For example: "The school uses many tests for its annual student *assessment*."
- ♦ **benchmark** – a measure or standard that can be used as a way to judge the quality or level of progress or achievement. For example: "Schools may use *benchmark* tests to see if all children are performing at their expected grade level."
- ♦ **California State Standards** – define what a child should know once s/he has completed a grade level. Teachers will often show you your child's standardized test results or these results will be sent home with your child. The California Department of Education has created these standards for each grade and for these subjects: Mathematics, Social Science, Language Arts, Physical Education, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, and English Language Development. To see the California standards for each grade and subject, go to www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/
- ♦ **criteria** – the reasoning for making a judgment or decision; the standard. For example: "High test scores are part of the *criteria* used by colleges to decide which students to admit."
- ♦ **curriculum** – the courses that are taught by a school including the information that will be taught in that course. For example: "The social studies *curriculum* covers both world wars."
- ♦ **hierarchy** – a way to arrange or organize items to show how they relate to one another in rank, value or importance (see the diagram on p. 11). For example: "At our elementary school, the person at the top of the staff *hierarchy* is Ms. Jones, the principal."
- ♦ **jargon** – language that is specific to a profession, occupation, or other group, often meaningless to outsiders. For example: "The doctor used so much medical *jargon* that the patient could not understand whether her condition was serious."
- ♦ **portfolio** – a collection of items that, viewed together, demonstrate a student's skills or progress. For example: "At the conference, the teacher shared a *portfolio* of John's schoolwork since the beginning of year."
- ♦ **potential** – an ability or talent that has not been discovered or developed. For example: "Too many people give up and fail to realize their *potential*."
- ♦ **remedial** – concerning students who need special help to improve in a particular subject; also describes those classes that help students catch up to grade level. For example: "Many of the new students need *remedial* classes in math."

♦ **standardized test** – an assessment that is given to all students at the same grade level. For instance, all 7th graders might take the same test as a way to measure the average knowledge of a 7th grader and to see how individual students compare to other students in that same grade. If your child scores 75% on a standardized math test he or she did better than 74 out of 100 students, and 25 out of 100 students did better than your child.

♦ **STAR Test** – Standardized Testing and Reporting – the name of the testing program administered annually to schoolchildren in California. Test results are published for schools, counties, districts, and the state on the California Department of Education website: <http://star.cde.ca.gov/>.

♦ **syllabus** -- typically given to high school students by the teacher, the syllabus is an outline of what will be covered in the course including a schedule of test dates and the due dates for assignments; the grading policy for the course; classroom rules; etc.

Reading Practice/Activities

Website Review. Go to the websites listed on pages 2 & 3 and print out the articles that interest you the most. With your tutor, read through them one paragraph at a time. Using colored highlighters, highlight the more difficult words that you would like to practice. Copy these words onto flash-cards for practice at future tutoring sessions. With a different color highlighter, highlight the ideas that you like the best from the article. These are the ones that you think you will be able to use.

Parent Handbook. All schools should have parent or student handbooks written for parents and guardians. Obtain a copy of the school's student or parent handbook from the school office or on-line at your school district website. Think about some things you would like more information about... Do you want to know the phone number for your child's teacher? Where on the school grounds is your child's classroom? Where is the office? How much does the school charge for school lunch? How do you spell your child's teacher's name? Together with your tutor, brainstorm the things you would like to know about your child's school and then use the handbook to answer them.

Writing Practice

Notes for School. Compose a short note to your child's teacher or to another school staff member. Use the Language Experience Approach to get started if you would prefer to *tell* your tutor what you want the note to say. Your tutor will write down exactly what you say and then together you can review the note and -- if it sounds good to you -- you can make a copy of it in your own writing. Here are some situations where you might need to send a note to school:

- Asking for a conference
- RSVP to a conference request
- Thanking the teacher for meeting with you

- Requesting a meeting
- Excusing your child for an absence or for being tardy

School Memories. First, think about your own experiences as a student, starting with kindergarten. What do you remember about each grade? What do you remember about your teachers? What was fun for you, and what did you dislike? What kind of student were you? Discuss these memories with your tutor.

- Pick out some of the questions above or make up your own. Have your tutor interview you, and then you interview your tutor. Both of you should practice being good listeners and should ask follow-up questions to clarify what you have been told.
- Write about some of the above questions, even if only a sentence or two. Think about the way you felt about the school as a child and how that might influence the way you see the schools now. Are there any "hot-button" issues or memories that make you angry or upset? Identifying these in a safe situation -- with your tutor -- will help you be aware that you are reacting to a memory. If you recognize that these feelings are triggered by the past you can practice setting them aside in your mind. This strategy may help you better focus on the present situation and your child's best interests.
- Consider how the schools have changed since you were a child. Make a list of these changes. For instance: How has the relationship between teacher and parent changed? What about the relationship between parent and principal? ...teacher and child? How has the role of the parent changed? How does the school day look different? How does the school building look different? How has discipline in the schools changed?

Little Love Note. Write a note to a your child or grandchild expressing love, concern, and perhaps even a regret about your own schooling. Make sure to include some encouraging words, focusing on the child's talents and abilities. Edit the letter together.

Games and Activities

Role Play. Practicing always makes things easier and makes you feel more comfortable when you actually have to do something for real. You'll find two practice dialogues below to use with your tutor. Read through each dialogue together to get an idea of what is going on and to look at the "commentary" in the right-hand column which tells you the parent's strategy. Then go through it playing the roles, pretending to be the parent or teacher. Switch roles and go through it a third time. Remember, you don't have to read the script word-for-word, just use it as a jumping off point, and add your own thoughts and ideas.

Role Play Dialogue #1 – Child Has A Behavior Issue

Commentary

Teacher: Hello, Parent's Name. It's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to see me today.

Shake hands.

Parent: It's nice to meet you, too, Teacher's Name. After talking to you on the phone I am concerned about what is going on with Mary during class.

Be friendly & warm.

Teacher: Why don't we have a seat? (Pulls a folder off her desk and sits opposite parent.) Mary isn't mean or malicious; she just can't seem to keep from talking all the time. She talks to the students across from her, in front of her, and behind her. When I remind her that she shouldn't be talking she stops, but within 2-3 minutes she is talking again. She's disrupting class so often that we are getting behind.

Parent: Mary has always been an extrovert. She's the family entertainer; she's really good at telling stories that make all of us laugh.

Don't contradict the teacher's perception but you can explain how you see things differently.

Teacher: Yes, she is funny. Because she gets a reaction from other students I think she has come to believe that it's now her job to entertain everyone.

Parent: I am wondering why she is not paying attention? Is she bored? Is the work too difficult? Too easy? She never seems to talk about having homework.

Ask about the context or the environment surrounding the behavior. There might be clues to why the child is behaving the way s/he is.

Teacher: I do assign homework; Mary tends to complete it in class while I am explaining concepts to the other students. She completes it quickly then starts talking to other students. She is very bright.

Parent: What consequences are you using when she doesn't follow the rules?

What is the teacher already doing? What steps are currently being taken?

Teacher: I've had her stay in with me at recess but she starts talking to me and we end up having a conversation. Mary is talented at getting people to listen to her. I've often spent most of recess talking to her. I'm not sure that she sees staying in as punishment.

Parent: At home I have to send Mary to her room and she has to stay in there alone -- no TV or music or phone. That drives her crazy. She really enjoys being around people. If you want to change her behavior you may have to isolate her completely.

Share anything you know about your child that might help the teacher get positive results. What works at home?

Teacher: That's good to know. Now that we have talked I will be sure that Mary sits quietly the entire time the class is at recess and I won't talk to her anymore, or let her talk to any of the other students.

Parent: Or another approach might be to let Mary know that if she behaves in class she can come and talk to you at lunch, recess, or after school, which would be more of a positive consequence. I know she likes having you all to herself, she's told me she likes talking to you. Then, if she does misbehave in class she will have to stay in and you will not talk to her.

Emphasize rewarding the child for good behavior rather than punishing the child for bad behavior.

Teacher: I see what you are saying. If we can both explain this new approach to her maybe we can motivate her to sit quietly and listen during class time. I will call you in two weeks and let you know how Mary is doing with the new plan.

Make sure there are next steps. What's the new approach? What will the teacher do? What will you do? Repeat this information back to the teacher to confirm.

Parent: Good. We'll both talk to Mary and then I'll expect a call from you in about two weeks. I appreciate this.

Teacher: Thanks for coming in to meet with me.

Parent: Thank you for your time and concern for my child.

Role Play Dialogue #2 -- Student May Need Special Education

Commentary

Teacher: Hello, Parent's Name, it's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to the conference today.

Shake hands.

Parent: It's nice to meet you, too, Teacher's Name. I am happy to be here so I can find out how Child's Name is doing in school.

Be friendly & warm.

Teacher: Why don't we have a seat? (Pulls a folder off her desk.) These are John's test scores. As you can see, he's doing very well in math but I'm concerned because his English grade is low.

Parent: What seems to be his problem with English?

Teacher: I'm not sure, but I think he might have a learning disability. John stumbles over his reading and when he's finished I will ask him what the passage was about and he'll say he doesn't know, that he didn't get it. I'd like to have John evaluated by our school psychologist for a possible special education placement.

Parent: I will need time to think about that. What are you doing now to support his reading skills?

What is the teacher already doing? What steps are currently being taken?

Teacher: Well, I spend a lot of one-on-one time with him but it's getting harder for me to do that as I have to focus on the class as a whole. It's difficult for me to give him the individualized attention I believe he needs. I really think he needs to be tested.

Parent: I don't feel comfortable about making that decision right now. Can we set a date to talk about this after I have had some time to research it?

There is no need to rush into a decision unless you are comfortable with it.

Teacher: That would be fine.

Parent: Is there someone at the school or at the district office that I can talk to about Special Education and what this decision means for my child?

Use the school as a resource.

Teacher: Yes, let me give you some names and numbers.

Parent: I will give them a call.

Teacher: Can we meet again in a week or two? How's next Friday at the same time?

Make sure there are next steps. What will the teacher do? What will you do? Repeat this information back to the teacher to confirm.

Parent: I will research this and then meet with you next Friday.

Teacher: Thank you for coming.

Parent: Thank you for your time and concern for my child.

Create Your Own Role Play. Maybe you have an actual teacher meeting or conference planned. Read the article below, "What Happens at Parent/Teacher Conferences?" to get an idea of the basic format of the meeting. Think of the issues that you will likely cover with the teacher. Think about your strategy in advance: what do you want to accomplish? How do you want to come across (confident? friendly? assertive?)? What questions would you like to ask? All of this preparation will help you to feel more comfortable for the actual meeting and will likely help you get the results you want. Keeping all of these factors in mind, create your own role-play and practice it just as you did for Dialogues 1 & 2, above.

What Happens at Parent/Teacher Conferences?

By Sandy Carpenter, Teacher and Early Education Specialist

Conferences are usually 15 to 20-minute conversations with the teacher and classroom aides about your child's progress and classroom behavior. Most schools schedule two or three conferences a year. The meetings are rarely mandatory, but they can be very helpful.

Be prepared to hear an honest report of your child's behavior and progress. A good teacher will talk about your child's strengths and weaknesses and suggest ways to meet learning goals.

There are usually three parts to these meetings:

1 The teacher will report on your child's academic and social progress in school. Many teachers will have a portfolio of your child's work assembled to share with you. Some schools require that teachers fill out forms describing your child's progress in subject areas such as math and reading, and summarize their social and emotional adjustment. The teacher will probably have specific anecdotes ready to illustrate his/her points; if not, ask him/her to relate some. Ask for clarification about anything that you don't understand, particularly if s/he uses confusing jargon about curriculum or teaching standards.

2 You'll share your own perspectives or concerns about your child's progress. Perhaps your child is reluctant to go to school in the morning, or maybe you disagree with the teacher's homework policy. It's a good idea to come prepared with a list of questions that cover all aspects of your child's development: what s/he's learning, how s/he's socializing with others, and how s/he's coping with his/her feelings.

3 Talk about ways to improve communication between school and home, and ways to work together to address any particular concerns or problems your child is having. For example, if your child is struggling with reading, the teacher may suggest some fun activities to do at home to boost competence.

If an issue comes up that needs more in-depth discussion, schedule another meeting at a mutually convenient time. Most teachers welcome your involvement.

Real World Practice

Become a School Volunteer. Both private and public schools look for parent volunteers to do all kinds of jobs: photo-copying; cutting things out; helping students who have fallen behind; being a "room mom/dad;" and many others. You might find it difficult to volunteer during the day if you work, but fortunately, volunteer opportunities are also available in the evening or for take-home. Volunteering is a good way to participate in your child's education and get a better sense of what his/her day at school is like. See the "Become a Volunteer," goal in this curriculum guide for more suggestions on how to get started.

Make the First Move. Make an appointment to visit with the teacher to get acquainted and to see the classroom. Introduce yourself and tell the teacher you want to get to know him/her, and that you care about your child's academic performance and behavior in the class. When there are no specific issues to discuss, the interaction between you and the teacher is friendly and non-threatening. This kind of very short meeting will make you feel more comfortable with the teacher in case you ever are called for a conference.

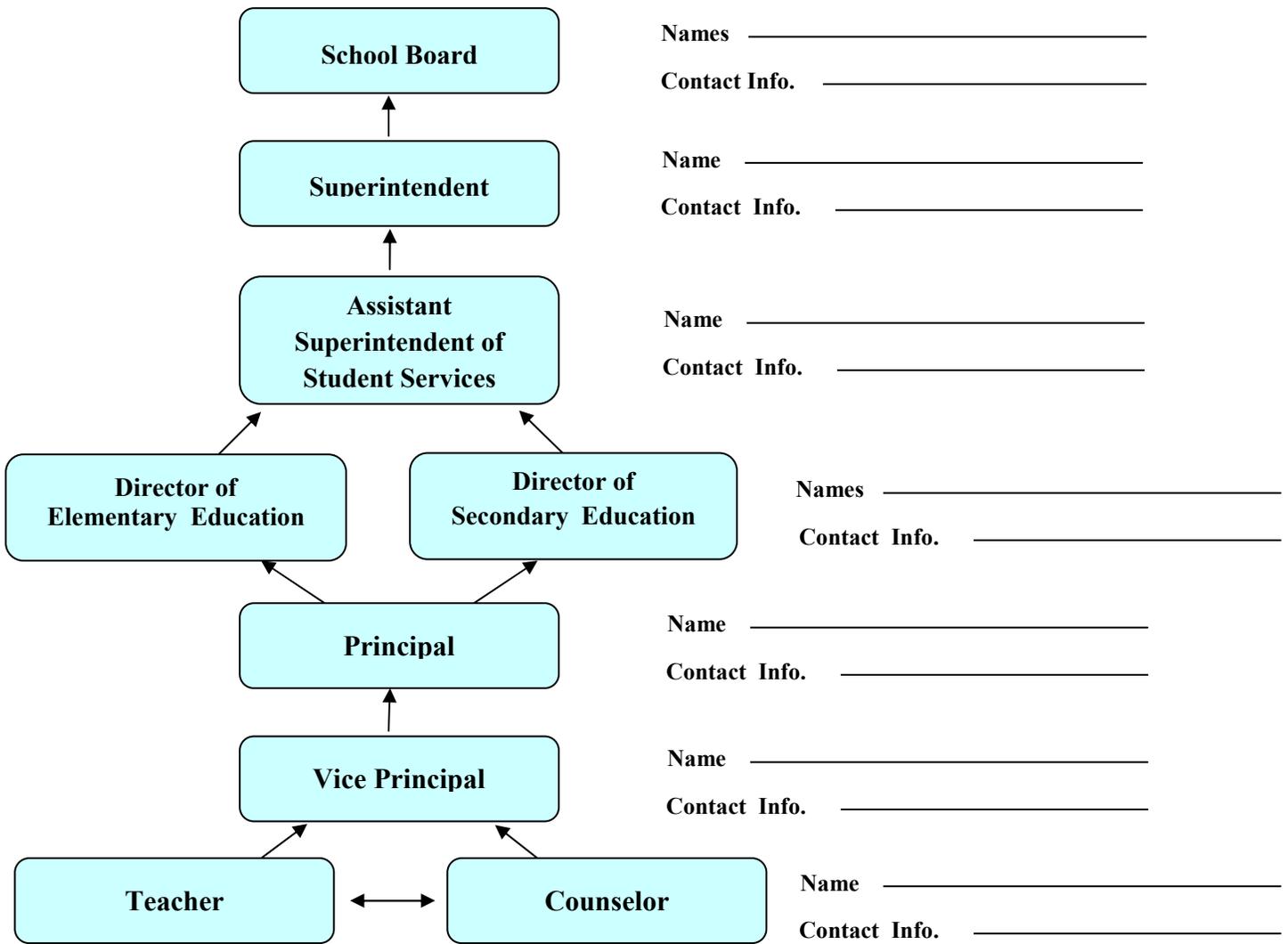
Get to Know Your School Websites. Become familiar with your school or school district website. If you don't know how to find those websites, go to Google.com and enter your school name, city and state or your school district name and state. Here's a typical school district website below. Across the top are the following menu options: "About Us," "Board of Education," "Calendars," "Employment," "Newsrooms" and "Our Schools." Options to the left of the page include items specifically for "Parents," "Community," "Students," and "Employees."



- **About Us** - Names and contact information of district staff members including the Superintendent, head of the district.
- **Board of Directors** -- Information on School Board members, the elected managers of the school district
- **Calendars** -- To help you plan... When are the school holidays? When are the minimum days?
- **Employment** -- Jobs available in the district.
- **Newsrooms** -- What's happening? Sign up to receive the district newsletter via e-mail.
- **Our Schools** -- Find your child's school and go to that school's website for more localized information.

Independent Practice/Homework Ideas

Climb the Ladder. Overall, school personnel are happy to have parental input and assistance. Sadly, you may run into someone who doesn't seem to have the welfare of your child as his or her goal. If that seems to be the case, move up or across the ladder of the school system (see below) until you find someone who can help you. For instance, if you are feeling frustrated by conversations with your child's teacher the first step is to see the school counselor. Many times they can act as a facilitator between you and the teacher. If that does not work, start progressing up the chain to the Vice-Principal. You have every right to make appointments and speak with school staff and elected officials. To practice using the district and school websites, fill in the information about who fills the positions listed below and their contact information (e-mail or phone, whichever you prefer).



Name _____
 Contact Info. _____

Be in Tune With Your Child. Talk to your child every day about what is happening in school. Be interested and listen carefully. If anything your child says makes you want to learn more, make a note so you can ask the teacher. Look over any completed work your child is bringing home. Be sure to check the grade he or she receives and read any comments made by the teacher. Write down any questions that you may have and call or e-mail the teacher for clarification.

Milestones

- **Initial Effort** – You have examined school publications like the parent/student handbook and the flyers your children bring home from school. You have explored the websites of the school district and the schools your children attend and are familiar with the information offered there. You discuss the school day with your child every day and have begun to take notes about questions or concerns that arise. You have thought about and written about your own experiences in school and have determined where your “hot buttons” are (if any).
- **Making Progress** – You have practiced the role-plays included here and have created your own role-play tailored to your own concerns. You have set up an initial meeting with the teacher to introduce yourself or, if it's mid-year, have requested a conference to check in on your child's progress. Together with your tutor you have read books and websites that give advice and guidance on interacting with teachers and the school. You have enquired about volunteering at the school and are considering your options.
- **Accomplished** – You did it! You went to a conference and were able to talk to the teacher about your child. You felt comfortable and knew that you were an equal with the teacher. If your child is in high school, you met with a guidance counselor to get advice about how to best help your child prepare for life after high school including options for careers and colleges. Overall, you feel connected to your child's school and know how to take action when questions or concerns arise.

Contributor's Biography

Nancy Salm. Nancy is the literacy coordinator for the Colusa County Library. Nancy is thrilled to be able to work with adult learners and tutors after teaching high school for 17 years. Nancy has a B.A. in English Education from The University of Iowa and an M.A. in Educational Leadership from California State University, Sacramento.