

Morgan Hill Unified School District

Handling Issues and Complaints at the School Site

Whether parents have an issue regarding an employee, a disciplinary action, a curriculum issue or any other type of complaint it is always critical that you follow the procedure outlined below. As a principal, your goal should be to resolve the issue at the school site. MHUSD Board Policy 1312.3 Uniform Complaint Procedures states: *The Board encourages the early, informal resolution of complaints at the site level whenever possible.*

Procedure

- Step 1. The complainant is encouraged to discuss and attempt to resolve the issue directly with the employee. (ex. classified staff or teacher attempts to resolve the complaint before it is referred to the Principal or Assistant Principal)
- Step 2. If unresolved at step 1, the complainant can discuss and attempt to resolve the complaint with the employee's supervisor/manager. (Ex. teacher to Assistant Principal to Principal through the "chain of command")
- Step 3. If unresolved at step 2, call Pat Blonar, Director of Curriculum & Instruction who will assist you resolving the conflict.
- Step 4. If unresolved at step 3, the complainant must be provided a copy of BP #1510 or BP #1312.3 depending on the type of complaint and the complaint form.
- Step 5. The complainant can present the complaint in writing to the Superintendent and/or designee and can request a meeting with the Superintendent and/or the designee.
- Step 6. The Superintendent and/or designee must respond within ten (10) days of receipt of the written complaint or the conference, whichever is later.
- Step 7. If unresolved at step 4, the complainant can request a closed session Board of Education hearing within a reasonable time.

Helpful Hints

- Hint 1. **Be proactive.** Know what is going on at your school.
- Hint 2. **Be strategically reactive.** Respond to the complainant as soon as possible.
- Hint 3. **Be engaged and listen.** Schedule a face-to-face meeting and hear the complainant's entire story. Remember that in most cases, parents just want to be heard and their feelings validated.
- Hint 4. **Be balanced.** Investigate the issue fully on behalf of both the complainant and the employee and check your facts before responding to the complainant.

- Hint 5. **Be accurate.** Document everything because you will be asked for this information.
- Hint 6. **Be aware of the consequences.** Prepare to present before the Board of Education if it goes that far.
- Hint 7. **Be accountable.** Resolve the complaint at your school if possible and only then refer the complainant to the District Office.
- Hint 8. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Contact another principal or a district office administrator if you feel the need to talk through the issue anytime throughout your investigation. We all need a "critical friend" and our team has a wealth of experience.
- Hint 9. **Be reflective.** Learn from each incident and interaction.

Resources

The following board policies and articles are attached for your review and reference.

MHUSD Board Policy 1312.3 Uniform Complaint Procedures

MHUSD Administrative Regulations 1312.4 Williams Uniform Complaint Procedures

MHUSD Board Policy 1510 Public Action Involving Staff and/or Students Complaints Concerning District Employees

Dealing With Difficult Parents - In *Dealing with Difficult Parents*, Doug Fiore and Todd Whitaker offer strategies and techniques that make it easier to deal with seemingly difficult parents and with the difficult situations in which they find themselves.

Dealing With Angry Parents - Over the years, Education World's "Principal Files" team of principals has tackled a wide variety of issues. They always provide practical tips for sticky situations. This month is no exception, as they tackle what to do when confronted by angry parents. Included: Tips for calming upset parents and solving problems.

UNIFORM COMPLAINT PROCEDURES BP 1312.3

The Governing Board recognizes that the district is responsible for complying with applicable state and federal laws and regulations governing educational programs. The district shall investigate complaints alleging failure to comply with such laws and/or alleging discrimination and shall seek to resolve those complaints in accordance with the district's uniform complaint procedures. (5 CCR 4620)

Upon receipt of a written complaint from an individual, public agency or organization, uniform complaint procedures shall be initiated. The district shall follow uniform complaint procedures when addressing complaints alleging unlawful discrimination against any protected group as identified under Education Code 200 and 220 and Government Code 11135, including actual or perceived sex, sexual orientation, gender, ethnic group identification, race, ancestry, national origin, religion, color, or mental or physical disability, or age, or on the basis of a person's association with a person or group with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics in any district program or activity that receives or benefits from state financial assistance. (5 CCR 4610)

Uniform complaint procedures shall also be used when addressing complaints alleging failure to comply with state and/or federal laws in adult education programs, consolidated categorical aid programs, migrant education, career technical and technical education and career technical and technical training programs, child care and development programs, child nutrition programs, and special education programs. (5 CCR 4610)

(cf. 0410 - Nondiscrimination in District Programs and Activities)
(cf. 1312.1 - Complaints Concerning District Employees)
(cf. 1312.2 - Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials)
(cf. 3553 - Free and Reduced Price Meals)
(cf. 4031 - Complaints Concerning Discrimination in Employment)
(cf. 5141.4 - Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting)
(cf. 5148 - Child Care and Development)
(cf. 6159 - Individualized Education Program)
(cf. 6171 - Title I Programs)
(cf. 6174 - Education for English Language Learners)
(cf. 6175 - Migrant Education Program)
(cf. 6178 - Vocational Education)
(cf. 6200 - Adult Education)

Complaints related to sufficiency of textbooks or instructional materials, emergency or urgent facilities conditions that pose a threat to the health or safety of students or staff, and teacher vacancies and misassignments shall be investigated pursuant to the district's Williams uniform complaint procedure (AR 1312.4).

(cf. 1312.4 - Williams Uniform Complaint Procedures)

The Board encourages the early, informal resolution of complaints at the site level whenever possible.

The Board acknowledges and respects every individual's right to privacy. Discrimination complaints shall be investigated in a manner that protects the confidentiality of the parties and the integrity of the process. This may include keeping the identity of the complainant confidential, as appropriate and except to the extent necessary to carry out the investigation or proceedings, as determined by the Superintendent or designee, on a case-by-case basis.

(cf. 4119.23/4219.23/4319.23 - Unauthorized Release of Confidential/Privileged Information)

(cf. 5125 - Student Records)

(cf. 9011 - Disclosure of Confidential/Privileged Information)

The Board prohibits any form of retaliation against any complainant in the complaint process, including but not limited to a complainant's filing of a complaint or the reporting of instances of discrimination. Such participation shall not in any way affect the status, grades, or work assignments of the complainant.

The Board recognizes that a neutral mediator can often suggest a compromise that is agreeable to all parties in a dispute. In accordance with uniform complaint procedures, whenever all parties to a complaint agree to try resolving their problem through mediation, the Superintendent or designee shall initiate that process. The Superintendent or designee shall ensure that the results are consistent with state and federal laws and regulations.

Legal References:

EDUCATION CODE

200-262.4 Prohibition of discrimination

8200-8498 Child care and development programs

8500-8538 Adult basic education

18100-18203 School libraries

32289 School safety plan, uniform complaint procedure

35186 Williams uniform complaint procedure

41500-41513 Categorical education block grants

48985 Notices in language other than English

49060-49079 Student records

49490-49590 Child nutrition programs

52160-52178 Bilingual education programs

52300-52499.6 Career-technical education

52500-52616.24 Adult schools

52800-52870 School-based coordinated programs

54000-54041 Economic impact aid programs

54100-54145 Miller-Unruh Basic Reading Act

54400-54425 Compensatory education programs

54440-54445 Migrant education

54460-54529 Compensatory education programs

56000-56885 Special education programs

59000-59300 Special schools and centers

64000-64001 Consolidated application process

CODE OF REGULATIONS, TITLE 5

3080 Application of section

4600-4687 Uniform complaint procedures

4900-4965 Nondiscrimination in elementary and secondary education programs

PENAL CODE

422.6 Interference with constitutional right or privilege

UNITED STATES CODE, TITLE 20

6301-6577 Title I basic programs

6601-6777 Title II preparing and recruiting high quality teachers and principals

6801-6871 Title III language instruction for limited English proficient and immigrant students

7101-7184 Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act

7201-7283g Title V promoting informed parental choice and innovative programs

7301-7372 Title V rural and low-income school programs

Management Resources:

WEB SITES

CSBA: <http://www.csba.org>

California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov>

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR>

REVISED: April 11, 2006 (Renumbered replacing BP 1502)

MORGAN HILL UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT Morgan Hill, California

WILLIAMS UNIFORM COMPLAINT PROCEDURES AR 1312.4

These procedures pertain only to concerns or deficiencies related to textbooks and instructional materials, conditions in emergency or urgent facilities that pose a threat to the health and safety of students or staff, and teacher vacancy or misassignment. (Education code 35186)

For procedures related to other complaints regarding employees, specific instructional materials, discrimination or failure to comply with state or federal law in certain categorical programs, see the appropriate reference.

(cf. 1312.1 – Complaints Concerning District Employees)

(cf. 1312.2 – Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials)

(cf. 1312.3 – Uniform Complaint Procedures)

Types of Complaints

The district shall use the following procedures to investigate and resolve complaints when the complainant alleges that any of the following has occurred: (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4681, 4682)

Textbooks and instructional materials:

A student, including an English learner, does not have standards-aligned textbooks or instructional materials or state- or district-adopted textbooks or other required instructional materials to use in class.

A student does not have access to textbooks or instructional materials to use at home or after school.

Textbooks or instructional materials are in poor or unusable condition, have missing pages, or are unreadable due to damage.

(cf. 6161.1 - Selection and Evaluation of Instructional Materials)

Teacher vacancy or misassignment

A semester begins and a teacher vacancy exists.

A teacher who lacks credentials or training to teach English learners is assigned to teach a class with more than 20 percent English learner students in the class.

(cf. 4112.22 - Staff Teaching Students of Limited English Proficiency)

A teacher is assigned to teach a class for which the teacher lacks subject matter competency.

Vacancy means a position to which a single designated certificated employee has not been assigned at the beginning of the year for an entire year or, if the position is for a

one-semester course, a position to which a single designated certificated employee has not been assigned at the beginning of the semester for an entire semester. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4682)

Beginning of the year or semester means the first day classes necessary to serve all the students enrolled are established with a single designated certificated employee assigned for the duration of the class, but not later than 20 working days after the first day students attend classes for that semester. (5 CCR 4600)

Misassignment means the placement of a certificated employee in a teaching or services position for which the employee does not hold a legally recognized certificate or credential or the placement of a certificated employee in a teaching or services position that the employee is not otherwise authorized by statute to hold. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4600)

(cf. 4112.2 - Certification)

(cf. 4113 - Assignment)

Facilities:

A condition poses an emergency or urgent threat to the health or safety of students or staff:

Emergency or urgent threat means structures or systems that are in a condition that poses a threat to the health and safety of students or staff while at school, including but not limited to gas leaks; nonfunctioning heating, ventilation, fire sprinklers, or air conditioning systems; electrical power failure; major sewer stoppage; major pest or vermin infestation; broken windows or exterior doors or gates that will not lock and that pose a security risk; abatement of hazardous materials previously undiscovered that pose an immediate threat to students or staff; or structural damage creating a hazardous or uninhabitable condition. (Education Code 17592.72)

Filing of Complaint

A complaint alleging any condition(s) specified above shall be filed with the principal or designee at the school in which the complaint arises. The principal or designee shall forward a complaint about problems beyond his/her authority to the Superintendent or designee in a timely manner, but not to exceed 10 working days. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4680)

The principal or designee shall make all reasonable efforts to investigate any problem within his/her authority. He/she shall remedy a valid complaint within a reasonable time period not to exceed 30 working days from the date the complaint was received. (Education Code 35186)

Complaints may be filed anonymously. If the complainant has indicated on the complaint form that he/she would like a response to the complaint, the principal or designee shall report the resolution of the complaint to him/her within 45 working days of the initial filing of the complaint. If a response is requested, the response shall be made to the

mailing address of the complainant as indicated on the complaint form. At the same time, the principal or designee shall report the same information to the Superintendent or designee. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4680)

If a complainant is not satisfied with the resolution of a complaint, he/she has the right to describe the complaint to the Governing Board at a regularly scheduled meeting. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4686)

For any complaint concerning a facility condition that poses an emergency or urgent threat to the health or safety of students or staff as described in item #3 above, a complainant who is not satisfied with the resolution proffered by the principal or Superintendent or designee may file an appeal to the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) within 15 days of receiving the district's response. The complainant shall comply with the appeal requirements specified in 5 CCR 4632. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4687)

All complaints and written responses shall be public records. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4686)

(cf. 1340 - Access to District Records)

Reports

The Superintendent or designee shall report summarized data on the nature and resolution of all complaints to the Board and the County Superintendent of Schools on a quarterly basis. The report shall include the number of complaints by general subject area with the number of resolved and unresolved complaints. These summaries shall be publicly reported on a quarterly basis at a regularly scheduled Board meeting. (Education Code 35186; 5 CCR 4686)

Forms and Notices

The Superintendent or designee shall ensure that the district's complaint form contains a space to indicate whether the complainant desires a response to his/her complaint and specifies the location for filing a complaint. A complainant may add as much text to explain the complaint as he/she wishes. (Education Code 35186)

The Superintendent or designee shall ensure that a notice is posted in each classroom in each school containing the components specified in Education Code 35186. (Education Code 35186)

Legal References:

EDUCATION CODE

1240 County superintendent of schools, duties

17592.72 Urgent or emergency repairs, School Facility Emergency Repair Account

33126 School Accountability Report Card

35186 Alternative uniform complaint procedure

60119 Hearing on sufficiency of instructional materials

CODE OF REGULATIONS, TITLE 5

4600-4671 Uniform complaint procedures, especially:

4680-4687 Williams complaints

Management Resources:

WEB SITES

CSBA: <http://www.csba.org>

California Department of Education, Williams case:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/ce/wc/index.asp>

REVISED: April 11, 2006 (Renumbered replacing AR 1502)

MORGAN HILL UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT Morgan Hill, California

Public Action Involving Staff and/or Students BP 1510

Complaints Concerning District Employees

Complaints concerning District employees shall be resolved at the earliest possible level and in a confidential manner. Parents and other citizens are urged to discuss any such complaint directly with the employee concerned.

If the matter is not resolved at this level, the complainant should discuss it with the employee's supervisor or other appropriate manager/administrator.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the supervisor's/manager's response, the complainant will be given a copy of this policy, and may present the complaint in writing, along with an explanation of the prior discussion, to the Superintendent or designee for review. The complainant may also request a conference with the Superintendent or designee to discuss the matter. The Superintendent or designee shall respond in writing within ten days of receipt of the complaint, or within ten days of the conference, whichever is later.

If not satisfied with the Superintendent's response, the complainant may appeal to the Board of Education by requesting a closed session hearing at a regularly scheduled Board meeting within a reasonable time.

Throughout the process described above, the employee involved shall be given every opportunity for explanation, comment, and presentation of facts. The district prohibits retaliation in any form for the filing of a complaint, the reporting of instances of discrimination, or for participation in complaint procedures.

Cross References:

1502 Uniform Complaint Procedures

Legal References:

EDUCATION CODE

35146 Closed sessions

35160.5(a)(3) District policies; rules and regulations

GOVERNMENT CODE of REGULATIONS, TITLE 5

4600-4671 Uniform complaint procedures

ORIGINAL ADOPTION: February 23, 1981

MOST RECENT REVISION: June 28, 1993

MOST RECENT REVIEW: November 23, 1998

MOST RECENT REVISION: March 27, 2000

Dealing with Difficult Parents

In *Dealing with Difficult Parents*, Doug Fiore and Todd Whitaker offer strategies and techniques that make it easier to deal with seemingly difficult parents and with the difficult situations in which they find themselves.

We've all run into them. They're the parents every educator dreads -- the *difficult* parents. They might be the parents who always run to the defense of their "perfect" children -- even though their children might be as guilty as sin. Others simply get pleasure from making waves. Or maybe they have a legitimate axe to grind.

Whether we think they are justified or not, it is important for educators to treat difficult parents with the same respect as they treat any other parent in any other situation. That means keeping emotions in check, choosing words carefully, looking them in the eye, and being friendly and direct. "By understanding how to effectively deal with parents...we can turn negative situations into very positive ones," writes Douglas Fiore in *Dealing with Difficult Parents (And With Parents in Difficult Situations)*.

It is important to remember that, while parents might be different than we think they ought to be, they are not necessarily wrong. "But since they are different, dealing with them, in many cases, requires understandings and strategies that are different than what we might otherwise expect," said Fiore.

"The first step is to understand parents. It is only after we make an honest effort in this regard that we can really hope to employ practices to effectively deal with them," Fiore added.

In [*Dealing with Difficult Parents \(And With Parents in Difficult Situations\)*](#), Fiore and co-author Todd Whitaker offer suggestions for coping with "challenging" parents and the issues they present.

Education World: If a teacher is at the end of his rope with a student, you offer one piece of advice: While most teachers would send the student to the principal's office, your advice is to *meet the parents*. What would that accomplish?

Douglas Fiore: While that response is partly tongue in cheek, the reality is that many of us need to heed Covey's advice and "Seek first to understand... then to be understood." Oftentimes, a challenging student comes by his or her problems naturally. Meeting the parents helps us to understand where the child comes from. Ultimately, this can lead to greater understanding and a stronger willingness to work at helping the student.

EW: Your cardinal rules for dealing with difficult parents include *never argue* and *never hang up...*

Fiore: Never argue, yell, use sarcasm, or behave unprofessionally with a parent. And, we do mean *never*. There are several reasons for this. Perhaps the most important reason is because difficult parents have more practice arguing and yelling than we do. Educators are nice people. We spend most of our time harmoniously, trying hard to be positive influences in people's lives. Oftentimes, a parent who comes to school to argue with the principal or a teacher already has had multiple arguments before they even get to school. They argue all the time, and they have become quite good at it. Why in the world would we want to argue with somebody who has had more practice at it than we have? Equally important, we must remember that we are role models. It is up to us to show the most difficult parents a better way to communicate.

GIVE THEM YOUR HOME PHONE NUMBER (DON'T WORRY; THEY AREN'T LIKELY TO USE IT!)

EW: You offer suggestions in *Dealing with Difficult Parents* for developing trust between the school and parents. You even suggest that principals make a special point of providing their

home phone number when speaking to parents gathered on open house night. A principal providing her home phone number! Are you nuts?

Fiore: Experience has shown us over and over again that providing parents with your home phone number does *not* increase phone calls to your home. Let's face it, if a parent wants to contact you at home, they will often find a way to do so. Providing parents with your phone number is a tremendous way to *demonstrate* that you care and that you *want* to be accessible. For most parents, that will be the clear implication when you give out your phone number. In reality, the opposite reaction from what you'd expect usually occurs. Parents don't call you at home because they assume that you already get lots of calls at home. They recognize how much you care, and they are often more willing to wait and talk to you at school.

EW: Many schools have set up a referral form/system for teachers to use when they must send a student to the office for discipline. You suggest taking that same idea and creating a form for making *positive referrals*.

Fiore: The only way for principals to positively impact students' lives is to share in positive moments with them. Students need to see that principals are caring individuals whose primary concern is student learning. It's always a good idea to have a system for sending students to the office so that good news can be shared. That helps the student see the principal in a positive light, it helps the principal have enjoyable interactions with students, and it sets the stage for the times in which students must be sent to the office for negative things. This is particularly helpful if the parent is involved. Calling a parent with positive news is a great idea. That is particularly true if you need to call that parent later with some negative news. People believe you are fair when you share in positive events as well as negative events.

"It's always a good idea to have a system for sending students to the office so that good news can be shared," says principal and author Douglas Fiore. "Calling a parent with positive news is a great idea."

ESTABLISH AN INVITING ATMOSPHERE

EW: When parents show up at school, one of the first things they see is a great big red sign that reads something like *STOP! All visitors must sign in at the office before proceeding further*. In your book, you offer some ideas for presenting that same message in a little less threatening -- a little more inviting -- way...

Fiore: Which of these messages sounds better -- "All visitors must report to the office" or "Welcome to our school. We are so glad to have you here. We do require all visitors to sign in at the office before proceeding to other areas of the school"? Clearly, if we want people to feel welcome, we need to greet them in a friendly, welcoming manner. Good people will report to the office no matter how the greeting is worded. Some other folks will not report to the office, no matter how the greeting is worded. Therefore, it only makes sense to greet people in as friendly a manner as we possibly can. We get the same results, but when we are friendly we tend to get friendlier responses.

EW: Many teachers are intimidated by angry parents. They get unnerved. What advice might you give to teachers to help them calm their nerves in a situation like that?

Fiore: By nature, most educators are kind, warm, and gentle people. It is easy for us to become unnerved and to get quite nervous when confronted by an angry parent. While it's difficult to change our personalities and to learn to be less intimidated, there are some things we can do to make our nervousness less obvious. In the book, one of the suggestions we make is for teachers to maintain strong eye contact with angry or aggressive parents. This is somewhat counterintuitive; our impulse might be to look away when we are feeling uncomfortable. However, we must remember that looking away is exactly what the angry person wants us to do.

As an illustration, consider the typical playground bully. Bullies ordinarily expect us to back down, bow our heads, and shake when they confront us. On the playground, we see children exhibit this behavior from

time to time. Well, one of the best ways for combating this type of bullying is to look the bully squarely in the eye. We're not implying that this look should be an intimidating one. Rather, simply maintain eye contact, and do not look away. When dealing with an angry parent, such a look will ordinarily cause the parent to back down slightly. Now, it likely will not cause them to be completely disarmed. Such a hope would be irrational. However, the edge is taken off when somebody maintains eye contact with you. Let's face it. It is difficult to bully somebody when they are looking right at you.

EW: Open house night is a school staple. But, you say, most open house nights are contrived, ritualistic events that leave very little time for real and positive parent-teacher interaction. Have you any thoughts about ways in which schools might present events that enable *real* communication between teachers and parents?

Fiore: First, there is nothing wrong with the traditional, somewhat contrived open house format, provided other opportunities for dialogue occur. If, however, the open house is the only time for parents and teachers to come together, then it is a real mistake to make that evening one that is characterized by one-way, teacher-to-parent communication. Many schools that enjoy great relationships and rapport between parents and teachers report that there are a few evenings each year set aside for question/answer sessions. These sessions can be focused on specific topics (assessment, for example), or they can be open ended. What's important is that parents feel like there are opportunities for them to be heard.

Dealing with Angry Parents

Over the years, Education World's "Principal Files" team of principals has tackled a wide variety of issues. They always provide practical tips for sticky situations. This month is no exception, as they tackle what to do when confronted by angry parents. **Included: Tips for calming upset parents and solving problems.**

All teachers and principals must deal with angry parents from time to time. In those times of heated passions, our responses carry great weight. A miscalculated response can backfire; it can fan the flames of a parent's upset and even burn bridges we've worked hard to build between school and home. That's why experienced principals use techniques aimed at extinguishing fires before they develop into full-fledged infernos. The key to controlling the blaze, most principals agree, is *listening*.

LISTEN, AND THEN LISTEN SOME MORE

The first thing Addie Gaines does when confronted by an upset parent is to smile and extend her hand. Gaines, who is principal at Kirbyville (Missouri) Elementary School, invites the parent into her office and offers a seat. "Doing that helps make the parent feel respected, and it communicates that I am willing to listen and try to find a solution to whatever is on their mind," said Gaines.

As she is making the upset parent feel welcomed, Gaines is also reminding herself that the parent is usually not angry with *her*. Instead, the parent is usually upset by an event or something else in their life -- and it's her job to listen. Listening intently can go a long way toward resolving most problems, said Gaines.

"It's been my experience," added Gaines, "that most people get glad in the same pants they were mad in." ...

AND THEN LISTEN SOME MORE

Principal Bridget Morisseau has a similar routine when she is approached by an angry parent. She greets the parent warmly and invites them to talk privately in her office. "There is nothing worse than a parent who is upset and yelling in the halls where they are in earshot of students, teachers, and other parents," said Morisseau, of William Winsor School in Greenville, Rhode Island.

Almost always, Morisseau added, parents calm down once they know that she is willing to listen and assist them. "I make sure that I actively listen while parents are talking. Empathy goes a long way in finding a solution to any problem we may be facing."

The Wisdom of... Listening

"Listening is the key to dealing with any upset parent or community member. After actively listening and taking notes, it's important to let parents know that you thank them for bringing the situation to your attention and that you will investigate it."

Jesus Acosta, assistant principal, Sanchez Charter School, Houston

Principal Jack Noles of Shallowater (Texas) Intermediate School, agrees that the most important thing "is to show genuine concern about a parent's feelings. I always make sure they hear me say that I understand and will do whatever I can to make things right."

Karen Mink tries to remain calm and offer the parent compassion. "They need to let it out, and doing that will make them feel better," said Mink, who is principal at the O.C. Allen School in Aurora, Illinois. "If I become angry or defensive, it becomes a power play -- and they feel helpless and lash out. It is better to show that I understand how they feel... even if their complaints might be out of my control."

Mink agrees that listening is the most important thing a principal can do in this situation. "I listen, and then I listen some more," explained Mink, adding, "I have learned that many parents just want me to hear them all the way through. If you stop a parent before he has had a chance to say everything he came in to say it might appear that you don't really care to get to the bottom of the situation. It will appear that you just want to defend yourself, your teacher, or your school."

KathiSue Summers, principal at Rogue River (Oregon) Middle School, relies on her faith to keep her calm in the face of parent upset. That *and* listening and taking notes. "I tell them I am going to take notes so I can get down exactly what they are telling me. Doing that helps give me a better understanding of the issues, and they realize I am listening to them. Sometimes I even give them the opportunity to read over my notes and add anything that I left out."

When Marguerite McNeely greets concerned parents at Hayden Lawrence Middle School in Deville, Louisiana, she does so with a smile and a firm look directly into their eyes. "I let them know I want to hear them out but that there are rules in my office. I expect them to behave like an adult and, if they don't, I will end the meeting immediately.

"Then I listen, listen, listen... and I repeat what they are saying so they know that I am really listening. I take a few notes, even if I am already aware of the matter. That ensures them that I am being attentive. The bottom line: I attempt to treat them as I would like to be treated if I was the one who was upset."

PUT YOURSELF IN THE PARENT'S SHOES

Before Les Potter became a principal he was a teacher and a guidance counselor. His experience as a guidance counselor helps inform the way he handles concerned parents at Silver Sands Middle School in Port Orange, Florida. "Also, being a parent and having the ability to put myself in the parent's shoes has helped," he told Education World.

"The fact that I am older than most of my students' parents might help too, because they may look at me in a different perspective -- as someone who can offer the wisdom of experience."

When Tim Messick must deal with an angry parent, he reminds himself that the parent is there because of their child -- because they want what is best for their child. Therefore, he tries "to listen with an open ear and keep the child first and foremost in mind."

"We ask parents to be their children's advocates," added Messick, who is principal at Providence Day School in Charlotte, North Carolina, "and, often, that is what they are doing. Unfortunately, we seldom provide them with training or lessons on how best to do that."

The second thing that Messick tries to keep in mind is that the parent probably only has part of the story. "I continue to be surprised by parents who believe the words of their children are gospel. They often react and respond without all of the details. So I need to listen, and then I need to find out as much as possible before I react or make any decisions."

Like Messick, principal Nina Newlin tries to remember that the parent has only heard one side of the story and is reacting, through love and concern, to that side. "Keeping those things in mind keeps me calmer, because I am less likely to take any vituperative remarks personally."

No Children Allowed

The first thing Nina Newlin does when an upset parent approaches is to invite the parent into her office, away from eyes and ears that don't need to see or hear the exchange. "The one thing I will never do at that point is to invite a child into the conversation. The last thing I need for my future relationship with that child is to have him or her witness their parent unloading on me.

"Later, if necessary, I will invite the child in -- when it is time for him or her to contribute to the conversation and after the initial hostility has been diffused.

Newlin, principal at Rock Hall (Maryland) Middle School, also tries to remember that the parent is coming in out of love and concern for their child. "Many parents are like I am as a parent," Newlin told Education World. "I will forgive just about anything you do to me, but don't mess with my kids."

Jack Noles tries to see everything the parent brings to the table through the lens of the student. "I find it is very difficult to become overly upset or emotional when I focus on the child, not the parent," said Noles.

"I just tell myself *never* to take a parent's upset personally," echoed Marguerite McNeely. "That helps me remain calm, professional, and consistent."

Bonita Henderson is another school leader who tries to put herself in the parent's shoes. "Mostly, they just want to know that their concerns are heard and that you feel their passion for their child," said Henderson, who is an assistant principal at the Parham School in Cincinnati. "If you can relate to parents that their child is number one with you too, and that you understand their concern for their child, the parent usually calms down and you can have a conversation."

IF THE ABUSE CONTINUES...

The one thing that Henderson will not stand for is verbal abuse of any kind. If a parent turns abusive, Henderson remains polite but ends the meeting. She tells the parent they can continue the conversation when the parent has better control. "No one deserves abuse, not even a servant of the public," added Henderson.

Lee Yeager, principal at S&S Middle School in Sadler, Texas, is always willing to listen to a parent. "If the parent is willing to explain the problem to me, I try to be as open and understanding as possible," said Yeager. "But if they refuse to calm down, or if they use profanity, I calmly explain that we will have to have the conversation at another time. I will not allow the parent to verbally abuse me or a staff member."

A Last Resort

What if you have to deal with a parent who is so completely out of control that you feel he or she is a danger to your staff or students? One of our "Principal Files" principals encountered just such a situation. "In that case, I put the school in lockdown and called local law enforcement to have him removed from school property," the principal, who chooses to remain anonymous, told Education World. "Later on, I followed up by getting him banned from school property altogether. Although I didn't like doing that, in view of today's climate no one should hesitate to ask for help if there is a perceived threat to anyone in the school."

KathiSue Summers tries to encourage parents to talk calmly, but she also tries to turn a deaf ear when the parent edges toward being abusive. "I make sure the parents understand that I am there to listen to the message -- not the inappropriate language and angry outbursts."

Sometimes, by assuring parents that you are there to listen to their unedited thoughts, a principal can actually help calm down an angry parent.

MORE CALMING TECHNIQUES THAT WORK

When a parent is clearly heated up, some principals have found that it can help to give that parent a little space.

Marguerite McNeely has never had to call in the law to gain control of an angry parent, but she always has a couple strategies in mind for handling difficult situations. For example, if a parent is extremely

agitated, "I might simply inform them that I am going to take a walk around the school so they can get control of their thoughts, and that we will continue the conversation when I return," she explained.

Giving an angry parent a little space sometimes helps to diffuse the situation, she added.

Jack Noles tries to get the gist of a parent's complaints at the start of conversation. "If it looks like the conversation might run long, I offer to get the parent something to drink. Leaving them alone for a few minutes often helps calm them down. When I return, they are almost always more receptive to what I might have to say."

DO STRONG SCHOOL COMMUNITIES YIELD FEWER PROBLEMS FOR ALL?

Principal Shari Farris has worked hard to build a school community that focuses on the positive. "I find that if I have established a relationship and built a community with families that is consistently focused on positive school news and child celebrations that parents and community members then feel like partners with the school," explained Farris, principal assistant at Regal Elementary School in Spokane, Washington.

A school community built on such a positive foundation helps Farris deal with the difficult issues that arise from time to time. "When I have to deliver difficult information to a parent, we have already established a healthy relationship. They know that I value them as a partner and a valuable member of our school community."

Creating such a strong community "takes some additional time and effort, but it is truly a case of an ounce of prevention being worth gold," added Farris.

William Winsor School is another school where creating a positive atmosphere helps teachers deal with an occasional upset parent. "Positive, frequent, and ongoing communication between parents and teachers is vital to our success," said principal Bridget Morisseau. "That communication has fostered very strong relationships between the staff and families."

Morisseau often includes advice, communications strategies, and reminders of communication expectations in her weekly Staff Notes bulletin. Her back-to-school bulletin includes an entire section in which she outlines her communication expectations, including

- Keep parents informed on a regular basis about their child's academic progress and social-emotional growth. Inform them of any behavioral concerns.
- Never use sarcasm with children or parents.
- Refrain from using educational jargon with parents.
- Include parents in school activities to the greatest extent possible.

"I feel strongly that the culture of a school community largely determines the frequency with which its principal must deal with angry parents," said Morisseau. "Is the school community one that cultivates respect for differences? Fosters and promotes dialogue between home and school? Creates an overall sense of warmth, kindness, and high expectations for learning and behavior?..."

"Preventative, common-sense measures that create a strong sense of community ensure that the number of angry parents I see is minimal."

FINDING SOLUTIONS THAT WORK...

Even in the strongest of school communities, disagreements or difficult situations can arise. When that happens, Addie Gaines listens to a parent's complaints -- without interrupting. In the end, I hope to be able to propose a *logical* solution, and a parent must be calm before a logical approach will work.

When the parent finishes venting, Gaines tries to stick to the facts. "I'm very careful not to say anything that inflames the situation," said Gaines. "Instead, I focus on the fact that we all want *what is best for the child*."

If the conversation stays tuned into what is best for the child, "I am usually able to empathize with the parent's frustrations but lead them to a reasonable and logical solution," said Gaines.

Gaines always tries to offer alternatives, so the parent has some control over the situation and so there is a sense of shared decision making. "I also calmly and politely stick to my guns as necessary," added Gaines. "For instance, if there is a bus problem, the number one consideration is the safety of all riders. In that situation, I will not back down on consequences no matter how mad a parent might be. When I mention safety, it is difficult for a parent to continue to argue, because no one logically would say 'It is okay for my child to endanger the safety of everyone else on the bus'.

"I have found that [Love and Logic](#) types of techniques -- including using empathy and offering choices -- work with people of all ages, not just children."

When Bridget Morisseau finds herself confronted by an angry parent, she listens. Then she listens some more. *Then* she asks questions and listens some more.

"Experience has taught me that it doesn't pay to become defensive when a parent is sharply critical of my leadership, a decision I have made, or a colleague," said Morisseau. Instead, she asks questions such as *What do you think we should do to solve this problem?* or *How can I help you find a way to make this work for you/your child?* By asking questions, the angry parent often proposes a very workable solution.

But what if Morisseau's tactics don't work? What if the parent is still on a tirade?

"Sometimes, out-of-control parents expect me to continue down the path to disagreement and contention," she said. "Instead I will state 'Thank you for making me aware of the situation and your concern.' That final statement, as simple as it sounds, usually brings finality to an endless litany of complaints and ranting dialogue."

Marguerite McNeely is another principal who tries to use questioning techniques to solve problems. After she listens to a parent's complaints, she often poses a question such as *What do you want from the matter?* "If their suggestions are something I can do that is fair and follows our rules, then I attempt to settle them down. If they offer something I cannot do or do not feel is in the best interest of the school, I tell them so. And I tell them why.

"Maybe I am lucky, but this direct approach seems to work for me."

Solving Problems: Take the LEAP!

Early in her career as a school principal, a colleague shared with Deborah Harbin the LEAP method of handling upset parents. "And the method has always worked," said Harbin, principal at Duryea Elementary School in Houston.

The **LEAP** method is quite simple to remember:

Listen. "When parents are upset, they want to be heard. Many seem to think they must raise their voices to be heard. So listen -- actively!"

Empathize. "Even if you think the parent is wrong or misguided, their feelings are real. Acknowledge that they are upset. Say something like *I'm sorry this happened* or *I'm sorry you feel that we made a wrong decision* or *I can see you're very upset*. All of those statements help the parent feel like you are hearing their complaint."

Ask. "Ask questions such as *Is there is anything else you want me to know?* or *Do you have anything else that you are concerned about?* or *What is bothering you the most?* Those questions help a parent feel you care and are concerned, and that their feelings and viewpoint are valued. Many times you get an earful, but that does help diffuse the anger."

Problem Solve. "My favorite questions to end with are *What do you want me to do?* or *What do you think I should do?* Many times, parents don't have an answer or a comment, but if they do I see if I can use some of their ideas in my action plan.

"As I end the conference I go back over what I am promising to do and, if appropriate, share a plan for how I will report back to them."

FIRST RESORT OR LAST RESORT?

When it comes to parents with complaints or concerns about a teacher, principal Karen Mink makes it a policy not to talk about a teacher with a parent if the parent has not already spoken to the teacher. "If they have not spoken to the teacher, I ask them to come back when the three of us -- the parent, the teacher, and I -- can sit down to talk together."

Mink uses that same approach when a parent has a complaint about another student or another parent. "I want to be the last resort, not the first face they see," said Mink.

Other principals prefer to run interference for their teachers. "If a parent is upset about a teacher or about a student-to-student situation, I like letting the parent unload on me before talking to the teacher," Nina Newlin told Education World. "That way, I can prepare the teacher, which usually makes the parent-teacher conversation more productive.

"Doing that gives me an opportunity to remind the teacher that the parent is just trying to do the best he or she can do for his or her child, and I can encourage the teacher to hear the parent all the way through without becoming defensive. If at all possible, I like to be in with the teacher to mediate.

"Sometimes all it takes to diffuse a situation is to have the teacher (or the principal) acknowledge some responsibility for the situation and demonstrate willingness to compromise or work together for a solution."

In truly difficult or inflammatory situations, it might even be a good idea to have another person or two in the room with you, added Newlin. "That person should be, preferably, a person who can see both sides of an issue and remain calm," she recommended. "When you are feeling beleaguered, this person can refocus the conversation on finding a solution, rather than shifting blame. A guidance counselor is a good person for this role, because they know about mediating conflicts and may have valuable knowledge to contribute to the situation."

At Berryhill Elementary School in Milton, Florida, principal Terry Neustaedter follows the same venting-then-clarifying approach that many other principals use when approached by an angry parent. If a parent has not addressed the issue with the teacher, Neustaedter recommends that they schedule a mutually acceptable time when everyone can sit down together.

"A wise person once told me that when two people disagree, it works best if both sides feel they have taken something away from the table," said Neustaedter. "It doesn't always work like that because sometimes you have to draw the line.

"The worst thing you can do is be wishy-washy. Even if everyone doesn't agree with the final results, hopefully they understand you are not making a decision capriciously."

SECRETARIES: THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

A well-trained office staff can be an excellent line of defense when it comes to handling complaints from parents or the community. "I am fortunate to have a wonderful secretary who is often able to diffuse situations before they get to me or a teacher," said Addie Gaines. "She is a good listener and, oftentimes, upset people simply want to be heard. She is also well-versed in our policies and procedures and can explain things to parents, so oftentimes the problem is solved without involving anyone else.

"If she is not able to solve the problem, she uses our chain of command and refers the now calmer person to the appropriate person."

Principal Terry Neustaedter says his office staff is very capable too. "They present a warm, welcoming attitude to the public," he said. "They understand the concept of a favorable first impression. They are very good at diffusing parents who are upset."

If a caller is abusive, Neustaedter added, "I tell them to call me, our assistant principal, or the school resource officer. They don't have to put up with that."

When Les Potter hires new office staff at Silver Sands Middle School, "we always look for caring and calming secretaries, because any of our secretaries could pick up a call from, or be greeted by, an upset parent. We work with them on this aspect of their jobs, and our district provides staff development and workshops on this topic."

QUICK RESPONSES ARE BEST

When a parent is upset, most principals agree that the key to solving the problem is to make the parent's concern a priority and provide a quick response.

One thing I have learned is not to put off these conversations for long, Nina Newlin told Education World. If a secretary passes along a call from an upset parent, Newlin might take a little time to try to get more information, but, "While it makes sense to take a little bit of time to figure out why the angry parent is trying to get in touch with you, delaying a response might just make the parent angrier and more likely to take his complaint straight to the board office."

Marguerite McNeely agrees. "Angry people need to be addressed immediately. I feel I am the one who should handle the sticky affairs, so my office staff and teachers have been instructed to refer them to me. If I am not available, they should take a name and number so I can call them to schedule a meeting."

Tony Pallija, principal at North Canton (Ohio) Hoover High School, investigates concerns as soon as possible after he learns of them. "I try to follow the 24-hour rule," said Pallija. "I always give the parent a time frame and make sure I call them back or give them a time to call me. A call back in 24 hours, or another meeting to work out the problem within that same time frame, is best."

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Members of our "Principal Files" team offered the following suggestions for resources that have helped them get a handle on handling upset parents.

"Todd Whitaker and Doug Fiore wrote a book, [Dealing With Difficult Parents](#) (Eye on Education), that I feel is a very useful tool," said principal Les Potter.

Terry Neustaedter agrees. *Dealing With Difficult Parents* is very practical. "We used the book as a community learning tool with our teachers and staff. We were able to share successful experiences."

At Providence Day School, teachers make a conscious effort to keep up to date on generational parenting issues. The entire staff recently read [Understanding Independent School Parents](#) (National Association of Independent Schools). "It was a quick read and it inspired wonderful dialogue at some grade levels and among our faculty overall," said Tim Messick.

Addie Gaines recommends an article she found online. [Conferences Concerning Angry Children](#) includes many thoughts and tips that are helpful in dealing with all difficult situations.