

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

As parents hover, some new teachers flee

Gen X parents challenge
young teachers

By Joan Richardson

Helicopter parents are landing in schools across the country — and often scaring off the newest teachers in the building.

For more than a decade, educators have been focused on issues of how to encourage parents to become more involved in schools. But, in recent years, schools have been reporting experiences with parents who are more demanding and less respectful of educators.

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“These parents are definitely different. The Baby Boomer parents and the Gen X parents have different attitudes and different expectations. The Gen X parents are not intimidated by teachers



and they view schools very differently from earlier generations of parents,” said Suzette Lovely, deputy superintendent of personnel services for the Capistrano Unified School District in southern California and co-author of *Generations at School* (Corwin, 2007).

The challenges of dealing with Gen X parents — parents who are between the ages of 25 and 44 — appears to be borne out by recent surveys of teachers. The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Expectations and Experiences (2006) documents that the quality of parent support is a significant factor influencing teacher satisfaction and likelihood to leave the

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profession (p. 82). New teachers view engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge and the area they were least prepared to manage during their first year of teaching (MetLife, 2005, p. 5). New teachers also report that they are least satisfied with their relationship with students' parents. Only 25% of new teachers describe the relationship as "very satisfying" and 20% described it as "unsatisfying" (p. 5).

"For new teachers, parental involvement is a more common challenge than getting sufficient resources, maintaining orders and discipline in a classroom, preparing students for testing and getting needed guidance and support. Relationships with parents are also mentioned by many new teachers as their greatest source of stress and anxiety as educators," the MetLife survey reported (p. 29).

Teachers who say they will leave the profession are more likely than others to be dissatisfied with their relationships with parents (32% vs. 17%). "If educators did not believe that teachers' working in concert with parents was so important, perhaps these findings would not be that noteworthy. But teachers view parent involvement as a critical component of children's educational experience. The gap between educators' high expectations and their daily experiences may serve to heighten their dissatisfaction in this area," MetLife reported (p. 29).

The severity of the situation was highlighted by a recent article in the *Baltimore Sun* which reported that a survey by the Howard County Education Association revealed that 60% of its members had been harassed and that parents were the offenders in a majority of those cases. The situation has become so serious that the system has implemented a civility policy and the PTA has sent a warning letter to parents about e-mail communications with teachers. "Teachers are leaving teaching because of parents," said Ann DeLacy, HCEA president (Williams, 2008).

The clash between parents and young teachers becomes easier to understand with some background about the generational personality of each.

The bulk of the parents of today's schoolchildren are primarily Gen Xers between the ages of 25 and 44. Gen X parents have delayed child-

bearing longer than earlier generations as they pursued careers, said Helen Johnson, an educational consultant who specializes on issues of parents and education. Their families are smaller, rarely more than three children in a home. That means parents have more time to focus on fewer children. As a generation, Gen Xers tend to view the world as a dangerous place so they are striving to protect their children in a variety of ways. These parents tend to perceive their child's achievement as a personal achievement for the parent. That's been aided by brain research suggesting that parents can affect brain development and thus influence a child's intellectual capacity. "We have never been in this place before in American history," Johnson said.

"Parents are more involved with their children and that's a good thing. The bad news is that these parents are overprotective and overinvolved and truncating their child's development," Johnson said.

Suzette Lovely said the conflict becomes most obvious in schools because "we now have a generation of teachers who were raised by helicopter parents.

"They're not used to dealing with conflict. They didn't deal with that a lot as a youngster. Their parents rescued them from difficult situations," Lovely said.

Now, as professionals, they find themselves on the receiving end. And they are struggling.

Helping young teachers respond

Coaches and mentors play a vital role in helping beginning teachers develop an effective partnership with parents. That applies whether young teachers are trying to encourage parental support or define an appropriate level of parental support.

If working with parents is not one of your strengths, solicit the help of a veteran teacher who has good rapport with parents in your community. "It's a mistake to believe that all veteran teachers or even mentors have had positive experiences with parents," said Wendy Baron, associate director of the New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

Be honest with new teachers about the

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✓ MetLife began the Survey series in 1984 to bring the views and voices of those closest to the classroom to the attention of education leaders and the public.

✓ To read more about any of the MetLife Teacher Surveys and the MetLife Foundation, visit www.metlife.org.



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challenges of working with parents in your community. If your new teachers do not share the same cultural background as the families in your school, ensure that they understand the different perspectives of those families. Introduce them to a parent liaison or representative from the parent council before school begins. A tour of the community before school begins will also familiarize them with community resources and provide a glimpse of community expectations.

Guide beginning teachers in developing a partnership relationship with parents. Lay the groundwork for beginning teachers to help them understand the value of having parents involved in a child’s education. Share research with them that demonstrates the value of having an involved parent. Ask teachers to recall how their own parents interacted with schools when they were growing up.

Be proactive about establishing strong communication with parents from the get-go. Encourage new teachers to contact a parent or family member for every student soon after school begins and before any problems develop. This initial introduction allows the teacher to invite the parent to “tell me about your child.” Provide beginning teachers with templates they can use to create a classroom newsletter or e-mail letter to parents.

Improve beginning teachers’ knowledge about child development. Johnson believes that parents often lack sufficient information about what’s appropriate behavior at various grade levels. “Generally, they’re parenting in the blind,” she said. If teachers can develop more knowledge about child development, they can educate parents as they navigate challenging situations. Young teachers may also enhance their credibility with parents if they are armed with information that parents lack, she said.

Prepare teachers to collect data about their students. Although teachers may be prepared to go over test scores and report card grades with parents, they also need to be prepared to present other kinds of information about children to their parents, said Lee Alvoid, a former principal in Texas and now a senior lecturer at Southern Methodist University. Alvoid recommends that new teachers learn how to collect

The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher:

The Homework Experience (2007) examines homework as a frequent and specific topic of communication among teachers, students, and parents; compares their respective views; and documents significant differences in how new and veteran teachers view and use homework (p. 24).

work samples and informal observations about student growth and progress. “If you go into parent conferences without actual information, it can become too personal,” she said.

Identify expectations for parents at the start of each school year. Young teachers have to establish themselves at the beginning of relationships with parents, Johnson said. “Tell them immediately, ‘this is what I expect of you in your son or daughter’s education and this is how I will be interacting with you.’ If you don’t make it clear, they’ll run all over you,” she said. Being specific about expectations in the beginning — possibly including putting it in writing — allows teachers to remind parents of the agreement later if they overstep their bounds. Take advantage of parents’ interest in being involved and give them jobs to do that do not involve having them in the classroom, she suggested. “Involve them in appropriate ways so they can be part of the experience without taking over the experience,” she said.

Plan extensively for back-to-school night and the first parent-teacher conference. Write guides for beginning teachers to follow for their first conference and role-play a parent-teacher conference with every new teacher. Talk with new teachers about how to arrange their rooms and how to prepare materials for back-to-school night or parent-teacher conferences. Alvoid suggests including students in parent-teacher conferences as a way to ensure that the discussion is focused on student learning. See p. 5 for a preparation guide that new teachers could use for conferences.

Prepare teachers to make home visits. If parents are unable to visit school for a conference or if teachers would benefit from learning more

See the April 2008 issue of *The Learning Principal* to read about **principal support for beginning teachers.**

See the April 2008 issue of *The Learning System* to read about **using technology to ease new teachers into the profession.**



See the May-June 2008 issue of *Tools for Schools* to learn more about the unique characteristics of **the Millennials, the new teachers who are entering the profession.**

about their students' home life, then prepare teachers to visit their homes. Review Margery Ginsberg's article, "Lessons from the kitchen table: Visiting with families in their homes" (*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, Dec. 2007) to learn about one process for making home visits.

The New Teacher Center's Wendy Baron has one caution about home visits to consider. "If new teachers are doing home visits, hopefully, it's because veteran teachers have started this practice," Baron said. She does not recommend that beginning teachers introduce this practice in their communities.

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