We Need to Talk About Parent–School Relationships

Trust is broken between students' caregivers and educators. How can it be rebuilt?

By Daniel Buck

ADOBE STOCK

Serving as assistant principal at a K–12 charter school this past year, I fielded more parental complaints than ever before in my 10 years of teaching and administration. For any bad grade, parents demanded to know how the teacher had failed the student, not what their child had done to earn poor marks. Parents griped about homework loads or groused that teachers gave tests in the final days of the year instead of wasting a week with craft projects and movies. Any behavioral consequence, no matter how minor, faced scrutiny. Policies related to school uniforms were criticized on social media. Lost recess time triggered a backlash. It seemed as if every policy, decision, or rule was resisted and questioned.

Others have witnessed this unfortunate shift in the relationship between parents and schools. A survey from the American Psychological Association found a 10 percentage point increase in the share of teachers reporting encounters with verbally aggressive parents. And school board meetings, once sleepy affairs, now feature parent testimonies that go viral on social media. In her best-selling book, *The Teachers*—which I

reviewed for this journal—journalist Alexandra Robbins describes parents hectoring school boards, blasting their teachers or administrators on social media, and badgering educators at all hours for every bad grade, disciplinary infraction, perceived slight, and small discontent. Robbins goes so far as to describe parents as "monsters indeed."

While I'm certain many teachers would echo this sentiment, to cast off disgruntled parents as monsters—or, as the National School Boards Association did in a 2021 letter to President Joe Biden, to suggest that acts or threats of violence against school board members are "equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism"—ignores the causes behind this recent trend in behavior. It's not that parents have become monsters, but rather that the trust between schools and parents has dissolved, making more conflict a predictable result.

Quality education necessitates trust. For parents to watch their daughter struggle through late night studying sessions, they must believe her efforts are worthwhile. If their son is about to have a suspension notice placed on his permanent record, parents must trust the school administration has done its due diligence in investigating that infraction. High-stakes assessments at the end of the year require parents to trust that these tests make better use of their child's time than a Disney movie. Poor behavior reports, bad grades, and less than stellar comments all pit a teacher's appraisal of a student against parents' natural sentiments.

Indeed, system schooling—sending one's child to public, public charter, or private schools—amounts to a 13-year act of trust. When parents watch their child walk through the schoolhouse doors at drop-off, they entrust the care, safety, and academic development of that child to a building full of veritable strangers. If parents have lost trust in what happens behind those doors, it's because schools have in many ways proven themselves untrustworthy in recent years.

Declining Trust and Its Consequences

The story is familiar. It began with the Covid-19 pandemic. While the country has seemingly moved on from the public health crisis, parental resentment over school closures lingers. As recently as this last school year, I had exasperated parents holding me on the phone to vent their frustrations about the shutdowns. While their child got headaches from sitting at home staring at a tablet for six hours, patrons at the local bar played darts with a beer in hand. The reflexive trust that schools and policymakers would consistently do right by their child shattered.

Then came years of investigative journalists and culture war crusaders uncovering far-left antics cropping up in classrooms—gender theory in kindergarten, critical race theory in English class, sociopolitical consciousness-raising in math. While many teachers shun such political posturing in the classroom, enough of it goes on to make many conservative parents leery.

Controversy over the teaching of reading has also undercut parents' trust in schools. Beginning in fall 2022, the podcast *Sold a Story* initiated a nationwide realization that public schools have almost universally been miseducating children by following pseudo-scientific theories of early language instruction. Hitting record downloads, *Sold a Story* broke into the public consciousness in a way that niche education stories

rarely do, demonstrating that schools were failing even at their most basic duty of literacy instruction.

It is hard to measure with data how pervasive this recent mistrust actually is. A few animated parents causing a ruckus at school board meetings could very well be outliers. When I was still an administrator, my school had several classrooms per grade level, which meant that one parent complaint per class each week amounted to daily issues to tackle. This constant fire extinguishing gives the perception of widespread dissatisfaction, when in reality the majority of parents may be content.

In an attempt to gauge the extent of the problem, one intriguing study analyzed almost 100,000 videos of school board meetings—totaling 150,000 hours of deliberation and more than a billion words. The researchers' findings mirror the preceding conjectures: Conflict at school board meetings has indeed increased, especially in urban and suburban districts with high per-pupil expenditures. Still, the large majority of school board meetings remain civil.

A survey of special education directors finds that almost all have perceived a rise in parent-school tensions. Surveys of the general public also indicate a dissolution of trust. A recent Gallup poll revealed that public opinion toward American education is at an all-time low, with 73 percent of respondents expressing dissatisfaction. When pollsters ask public school parents what they think about public education, opinions are warmer, with 46 percent would give their local schools an "A" or "B" grade. American education as an institution is easy to hate, but everyone still loves Mrs. Pennyworth in the red brick building down the street.

Even so, that generic dissatisfaction will affect the interactions between parents and their schools. I reflect on the angriest parent with whom I have ever spoken. Her son had terrible grades, and she blamed the teacher. I made what I thought was a benign observation by suggesting that the accommodations we had offered her son had proved counterproductive. Continual retakes, burdensome tutoring regimens, and the opportunity to review the teacher's slide presentation at home removed all incentive for this young man to focus in class, and instead foisted the responsibility for his success onto his parents, his tutors, and his teachers—everyone except him. After the meeting, several of my colleagues remarked on the volume of shouts they'd heard echoing down the hall.

But who was right in this situation? Had our school failed this student, or should his mother have accepted my assessment and placed the responsibility for failure on her son? Both views probably had at least some validity, but in these moments of conflict, without trust or the assumption of competence, even otherwise happy parents will be more likely to cast blame on the teacher, administrator, or school.

Looking through an even wider lens, schools often require that the wants of the individual be subordinate to the needs of the group. It's often as simple as asking a talkative child to keep quiet so his peers can focus. One could argue that experiencing this kind of sacrifice imparts a valuable lesson—that forgoing our own desires and sloughing off childhood solipsism for the greater good represents a virtuous shift in character. But why would a parent consider it virtuous or advisable for their child to suppress their own desire to an institution that they distrust?

Or consider the tough-as-nails teacher who hammers away at their students, maybe even unfairly at times. With strong trust between school and families, students could benefit from this experience—the

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Parents and students demonstrate against mask mandates during a Brevard County (Fla.) school board meeting in 2021. Schools that responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with shutdowns and mandatory masking provoked the ire of many parents, beginning a dissolution of trust that is still evident five years later.

teacher's exacting standards toughening them for the hard lessons of life. Such teachers should pose challenges for students to overcome, and not be seen as untrustworthy, incompetent operators to remove, steam roll, or fire. When trust is lost, intent becomes muddled, rigor can be misinterpreted as mishandling, and parent-teacher relationships deteriorate.

Today's digital communications have also influenced the parent-school dynamic. Before the era of email and online forms, one of the only ways to get a teacher's time was through an in-person meeting, and for working parents, making time for that was often impractical. Now, the opportunity cost of sending off a disgruntled email is functionally zero.

Moreover, it's a slippery slope. If a few parents manage to get a letter grade bumped up or an exception to a policy by complaining, other parents will try similar tactics. Before long, you have the makings of a social contagion, where complaining gets rewarded.

Social media also magnifies complaints and can feed hysteria. In the past, a school might have faced public scrutiny if an enterprising local journalist uncovered a genuine controversy; parents might have kvetched amongst themselves while watching the children at the public park—but they had little recourse. Now, a parent can cause a ruckus with a Facebook post to every parent in a school or district. Such transparency has some benefits, but a bad grade that would have been a minor event a decade ago can now spiral

into a public campaign for a teacher or administrator's removal.

I acknowledge my tendency toward "back-in-my-day"-ism, but the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the society-altering effects of social media, and what little public polling we do have on parent-school relationships all make me suspect that my personal experience reflects a broader shift. A significant rupture remains between parents and schools, and that has caused an outpouring of parental antagonism—both reasonable and needlessly hostile.

Rebuilding Trust

How do we repair this fracture? On the parents' side, we need to re-establish that while they are indeed their child's first and primary educator, that does not empower them to control an institution. Terry McAuliffe, running for governor of Virginia in 2021, notoriously said that parents should not "be telling schools what they should teach." Though this political gaffe may have cost him the election, he was actually correct. Parents do not have final say over a school's every decision, from policy to curriculum.

Parents do have delegated power in schools. They influence school board elections and thereby the ultimate governance of a district. There can and should be avenues for parental input during handbook and policy reviews. Ultimately, they can pull the lever and choose the exit option, either enrolling their child elsewhere or taking full responsibility for educating their children through homeschooling. But unless parents want and can afford to homeschool or fund a private tutor—and truly have all control and final say—they must opt for system schooling, where tens, hundreds, or even thousands of other children go. By necessity, they forfeit total control.

With a single school often serving hundreds of families, the desires of one family will likely conflict with others'. Schools must manage these factions and competing motivations.

Parental rights are not absolute. An abusive parent does not get to dictate disciplinary policy. Conspiracists do not get hiring and firing powers. "Parents' rights" does not mean that a parent can demand that every book with a gay character be purged from library shelves nor that another can insist that all kindergarteners learn about transgender pronouns. There must be limits and boundaries.

Counterintuitively, rebuilding trust between schools and parents actually requires that building-level leaders relearn the ability to say "no" to parents. Imagine that School Z offers a content-rich, phonics-focused, classical education. I would certainly hope many parents would choose that school for their sons and daughters, but if a handful or even a small coalition demanded that this school become an institution of Deweyan progressivism, School Z can and should politely but firmly decline.

Parents are not policymakers, nor are they the leaders of these institutions, and so they do not bear responsibility for rectifying the relationship between themselves and the schools. That responsibility falls to school leadership and school leadership alone.

Sad consequences can ensue when school leaders haven't learned this lesson. I witnessed this firsthand when I worked at what was formerly one of Milwaukee's best urban schools. A choice school in the city's highest-crime ZIP code, it outperformed many suburban districts on state tests. Maintaining that success

required exacting standards: strict dress codes, rigorous curriculum, teacher-led instruction, tight routines and procedures, relentlessly enforced policies, and no excuses.

It worked, but many parents bristled at the enforcement of school policy. The decline and fall began with the dress code. Do students really need a tie every single day? Will the school actually send home a student who is wearing dark blue instead of black socks? The slow loosening of norms spread to academics. Can't a student have a homework extension this one time? Wasn't that test or this book a little too hard?

Notably, this school was a private institution running on voucher funds. School choice was no panacea; it merely introduced different incentives for administrators. Sweating financial stability, the administration caved to unreasonable parental demands in order to hold on to students. Unfortunately, in their efforts to mollify disgruntled parents, school leaders created an institution that no one wanted to attend, malforming themselves to appease a small cohort who perhaps would never be satisfied.

Each individual adjustment, exemption, and loosened standard was minor, but remove enough individual bricks from a foundation and any edifice will topple. The waitlist was once long, with hundreds of families clamoring for entry. By the time I left, the school struggled to enroll enough students to cover basic operating costs.

Schools will not regain collective trust through appeasement but through competence. They take on the responsibility of educating children and must act responsibly. One gains respect not by begging for it, but by proving one is worthy of it.

I've spent enough time in schools to understand that the blueprint for academic success is simple but very difficult to implement. Good curriculum, decent instruction, sound policies, and enforced discipline—these are the ingredients of a successful school, but to maintain them requires enterprising leaders who sustain a laser-like focus on student achievement and are sometimes willing to upset individuals for the good of the community.

School boards can assist with this mission. Many parents voice support for high academic and behavioral expectations in principle but balk at them in practice. On the ground, mediocrity and complacency offer the easier path. Passing every kid along keeps everyone happy, even if it doesn't do much to educate children. I would never have had an email inbox full of complaints or a phone ringing off the hook had I taken this route.

School board policies can both allow and encourage educators to take the rigorous road less traveled by. For example, a strong, well-worded retention policy that clearly delineates the requirements for students to be promoted to the next grade level can empower or even compel administrators to make the difficult decision to hold a student back both for the good of that individual student and for the integrity of the school's academic expectations. The same applies to discipline codes. Anytime I entered a discipline referral for a student, I knew it would trigger either a testy email exchange or a phone conversation with an angry parent. A strong, transparent discipline code provided me the tools I needed to stand my ground and maintain behavioral excellence.

A resurgence and re-popularization of school accountability would also in the long run help to rebuild parental trust. In every aspect of life, mediocrity is easy. For schools to regain the academic excellence

requisite to be trustable, policymakers at the state and federal levels will sometimes need to hold school leaders' feet to the fire. And at the Fordham Institute, teacher Ryan Hooper has proposed a few other potential remedies: parent-school agreements with clear expectations and responsibilities for both, increased curricular transparency, greater opportunities for parent volunteerism, and clear channels for parental input and criticism.

None of these policies will initiate a quick fix. Resetting parent-school relationships isn't like rebooting a computer. It will take a sustained effort and proven competency over years. But simply to throw one's hands up and say, "those gosh darn parents," as many boards and bureaucracies have done, will lead toward only more antagonism, declining enrollment, and academic failure.

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