

1 Why So Many Parents Are Angry, Troubled, Afraid, or Just Plain Crazy

Seek first to understand, before you seek to be understood.

—Stephen Covey (1989, p. 235)

There's a lot of questioning, blaming, and downright hostility out there. And it's going both ways. Parents aren't as willing as they used to be to support the schools, either philosophically or financially, and educators in the trenches are becoming more vocal about parents' shortcomings. A Public Agenda (2003) poll reports that an overwhelming majority of teachers (81%) believe that parents are at fault for not making their children study hard and behave well, but on the other hand, some educators are beginning to label parents as "helicopters" (Advising Forum, 2003; Definition of helicopter parent, 2004) and "enablers" for their hovering interference and indulgent overinvolvement both in and out of school (American Society of Professional Education, 2004). Nearly half of the superintendents polled say they personally spend too much time dealing with complaining parents. And the relationship

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between parents and school principals is not particularly rosy, either. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: An Examination of School Leadership* (MetLife, 2003), reports that “half of the parents polled do not feel that the principal-parent relationship at their child’s school is supportive, mutually respectful or friendly” (p. 46). Although the principals who were surveyed reported that they frequently meet with parents, this is not the parents’ perception (p. 49). “Parents do not feel that they are among the principal’s priorities, but principals do not seem to be aware of parents’ dissatisfaction” (p. 61). At a time when parental support is essential for raising achievement standards, far too many parents feel estranged and unwelcome at school.

I’ve personally experienced school problems from both sides of the desk. I’ve been angry, troubled, and afraid. I can also think of at least one occasion when my daughter’s principal probably muttered, “That woman is crazy,” under her breath as I left the office steaming over an unresolved problem. I know how parents feel when they have a problem and find that no one is willing to address it. As an administrator, I’ve also encountered my share of parents whose overwrought emotions and aggressive behavior stood in the way of seeing issues clearly and addressing problems squarely. Educators cannot afford to ignore distraught parents, for when moms and dads are unhappy with the schools (and the people who run them), their kids pay the price. One of our key responsibilities as instructional leaders is to maintain positive attitudes toward students, staff, and parents to ensure that all children can learn. This includes “demonstrating concern and openness in the consideration of student, teacher, and/or parent problems and participating in the resolution of such problems where appropriate” and “modeling appropriate human relations skills” (McEwan, 2003a, p. 180). We are the frontline interpreters of educational policy. We are responsible for the quality and effectiveness of classroom teachers. We are “accountable for fostering the kind of school climate where the dignity and worth of all individuals without regard to appearance, race, creed, sex, ability or disability, or social status is of paramount importance” (McEwan, 2003a, p. 172).

Although dozens of distressed and disturbed parents may walk into your office, few should leave feeling the same way. Will they always get what they want? No. Will you always agree with them? Of course not. But should you listen carefully to everything

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they have to say and engage in meaningful problem solving with them? Always. It's easy to be gracious and warm to parents who are positive and cooperative, but how do you handle those who question and accuse? First of all, try to understand why they feel the way they do. In many cases, their distress is well founded. I must warn you that you may be tempted to close this book in frustration before you finish this chapter. The litany of scenarios that disturb parents can make for depressing reading. But even when you're not responsible for parents' hostile feelings, you have to deal with them, and how better to do that than armed with information and understanding?

THE PARENTS OF TODAY

Gone are the "good old days" when educators were revered and respected for their wisdom and position by parents. Now, we have to earn our respect the old-fashioned way: Work for it. As one beleaguered administrator told me, "Twenty years ago, all I had to do was keep the teachers and the parents happy. Now, I need to get results" (McEwan, 2003b, p. xiv). And today's parents *are* a different breed—less trusting of our educational platitudes and quick to point out what they perceive to be stupidity, inconsistency, stonewalling, or incompetence in both administrators and teachers. Parents don't want us to select curricula, hire teachers, and make policies that impact their children without using common sense, sound reasons, and scientific research to inform our decisions. They resent being told to "just trust us." Here's a small sample of the kinds of parents you may find waiting in your office on any given day.

Less Respectful of Authority

Lack of respect by parents shows up everywhere—in their exchanges with teachers, in public meetings, and especially in how they treat administrators. Angry exchanges at school board meetings are commonplace, and courtesies that once were taken for granted are now unusual and noteworthy. Of course, educators aren't the only middle managers dealing with a frustrated

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and hostile clientele. But when one's children are at risk, emotions overheat and tempers flare more readily than they do over car repairs or changing a cell phone plan. Dealing with parents who lack respect for us means that before we can move to problem solving, we must first establish rapport and gain respect.

More Educated About Education

When the first edition of this book was published in 1997, I investigated a number of books geared to an audience of affluent parents, eager to find the inside track to ensuring preferential treatment and the best teachers for their children in public schools (Harrington & Young, 1993; Keogh, 1996; Nemko & Nemko, 1986). A second generation of books, written by and for African American parents, now echoes the themes from the earlier volumes—be proactive, hold high expectations, and become involved in all matters of schooling (Brown, 2003). And another category of books by African American authors seeks to illuminate the cultural issues of language and class as they relate to minority student achievement (Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2002).

In addition, parents of today, empowered by Google and informed by the public debates surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) are informed about drop-out rates, disaggregated data, standardized testing, and comparative school and district ratings. Hassel and Hassel (2004) use the term “picky parents” to refer to a group of well educated and discriminating parents who are informed and knowledgeable about school options and what to look for in a school. Experienced administrators have their own definition of a picky parent—someone who is never quite happy.

Angrier Than Ever

Far too many parents subscribe to the notion that the healthiest way to handle their enmity against educators is to “get it off their chests” and “tell it like they see it.” Unfortunately, for educators who are the recipients of these angry tirades, the supposed cathartic effects of getting mad are only a myth. Angry parents don't turn into positive people once they've unloaded on the principal. In fact, as you no doubt know from your own experiences, parents

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end up with more anger, not less, when they continually unload their vitriol on others (Berkowitz, 1970; Lewis & Bucher, 1992; Warren & Kurlychek, 1981).

Cynical and Distrustful

Today's parents are a reflection of our society at large, unwilling to trust institutions that have taken their trust and misused it. They don't believe it just because we say so. They want to see budgets, curricula, test scores, and research. They question our judgment, quibble with our reasons, and demand more information than they ever wanted in the past. They have read books with titles like *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America's Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem* (Stout, 2001) and *The Conspiracy of Ignorance: The Failure of the American Public Schools* (Gross, 2000), and some even believe that school administrators are part of some vast conspiracy to take over the minds of their children.

Activists

As an administrator in today's schools, be ready for parent involvement that is far more sophisticated than making cupcakes for the bake sale (Bradley, 1997). The Internet provides an ideal venue for parents who question what is going on in their local schools and want to check it out with others. If you have never visited an education consumers' Web site, head to the Illinois Loop (2004) that "helps to provide information on issues in Illinois education to the parents who are consumers of that education, to the taxpayers who pay for it, and to everyone who wants to restore quality to Illinois schools." And a national consumers' network provides a forum for parents who have questions about curriculum, pedagogy, and policies (Education Consumers Network, 2004).

In his book, *Is There a Public for the Public Schools?* David Matthews (1996) writes that the public has become deeply ambivalent about the role of public schools. People want to support them but also want their children to receive a good education, and increasingly, they see the two goals as conflicting. Many parents respond to this feeling by pulling their children out of the public schools

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after experiencing frustration at being stonewalled over issues they deem nonnegotiable, but surprisingly, these same parents often remain deeply involved in community activism, even running and winning seats on the school board or forming school watch-dog groups (Informed Residents of Reading, 2004).

Stressed

Many of today's parents lead complicated lives replete with daily planners, cell phones, and nannies. Or they fall into another category of working parents, those who are juggling three part-time jobs to stay alive. Well-off or struggling, huge numbers of parents rarely have enough time to do the things they should be doing, and finding fifteen minutes of quality time per day per child is a futile dream. These parents are counting on the schools to take up the slack. The time bind that most families face translates into increased school stress for students, teachers, and administrators. Parents want educators to handle all of their children's problems at school without bothering them at work; latchkey kids and blended families add further stress to the system.

Worried and Fearful

Parents who see education as the answer to a better future for their children are concerned that watered-down curricula, lack of standards, poorly trained or incompetent teachers, and out-of-control student behavior will deprive their children of the skills they need to succeed in life. They see the schools in their neighborhoods failing to provide discipline, basic skills, and moral values and are worried that even if they exercise the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) option to choose another school, it's all too little and too late.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE EPIDEMIC?

There are four big reasons for the epidemic of angry, troubled, afraid, or just outrageous parents:

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- The world in which we live is filled with influences and circumstances that often foster hostility, rage, and out-of-control behavior.
- Educators unwittingly or even intentionally upset parents with the things they do and say.
- Education is characterized by broad swings of philosophy and methodology, a steady stream of innovations that often defy logic, and constant pleas to the public for more money to solve its problems, creating the belief among some that educators don't know what they're doing.
- Parents have pervasive family dynamics or personal psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems that impact the ways in which they interact with almost everyone, but most especially educators.

Reason 1: The World Is a Stressful Place

When I started teaching school several decades ago, life was simple. All of our students went home for lunch, and teachers enjoyed a quiet hour to talk with colleagues or plan lessons. I even had time during my lunch hour to wash and dry my clothes at a nearby laundromat. Teachers nowadays have scarcely thirty minutes in which to wolf down sandwiches while they supervise the cafeteria and fit in calls to upset parents from their cell phones. Most administrators don't "do lunch" at all.

Today's world is stressful, fast paced, and fragmented. C. Leslie Charles (1999) suggests ten reasons why "everybody is so cranky," and several of them help to explain why so many of our parents are angry, troubled, afraid, and out of control. Unfortunately, administrators and teachers are subject to the same societal and cultural forces, perhaps explaining why quiet conversations in which educators and parents listen to one another and come to mutually agreeable solutions are becoming more rare.

Here are just three of the trends described by Charles (1999) that definitely make us all a little crankier: compressed time, communication overload, and disconnectedness (pp. 10–11). Our days speed by like a fast-forwarding video; sleep deprived and hyped on sugar and caffeine, we're assaulted by nonstop communication. We're bombarded with voice mail from multiple phones, e-mail

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from multiple computers, and express mail from Airborne, Fed-Ex, UPS, and USPS, to say nothing of the calls from telemarketers that jam our phone lines and the spam and viruses that invade our computers. Unfortunately, this communication overload does little to build meaningful bonds between people since we hardly ever talk face to face.

Reason 2: Educators Do Things That Upset Parents

The list of ways that educators distress parents is a long one, and although you may not be guilty of doing any of the things listed here, you will undoubtedly encounter parents who, based on their past experiences with other educators, will treat you as though you have. Before you get defensive and start making excuses, try to understand these parents. Be aware of the following reasons why parents are blowing their proverbial tops more frequently:

Failure to Communicate

This is the number one reason why parents get mad. Consider the principal who, two weeks into the school year, was authorized to hire another third grade teacher to alleviate overcrowding. Jubilant at solving the problem, the principal never stopped to consider the necessity of notifying the parents and students who were being reshuffled and displaced. Kids were upset, parents were furious, and the principal is still licking the wounds.

Making major changes without giving parents input or even a heads-up has a way of making them seethe. Although public hearings, newsletters, advisory councils, and opinion polls do take a lot of time and don't always give people what they want, information sharing and discussion can defuse anger and quell rumors. In a small eastern community, one solution to overcrowding was to move the kindergarten class to a vacant high school classroom. Imagine the rumors of children being plowed down in the parking lot by power-crazed teens in hot rods. Consider the possibility of mere infants exposed to teens smoking and making out in the hallways. Or even worse, the prospect of drugs being offered to

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fresh-faced five-year-olds. After public meetings and joint problem solving, an early childhood education program staffed by high school students (who received credit) proved to be an innovative educational offering that everyone could support.

If a lack of communication on the administrative level annoys many parents, failure to keep information flowing from teachers to parents makes all moms and dads mad. They hate surprises. In response to a public outcry in one school district where parents were constantly blindsided by report cards with failing grades, the superintendent mandated midterm reports.

Educators constantly talk about the importance of communication, says parent activist Daniel Wolff (2002) in an *Education Week* essay: “‘*We have to improve our communication skills*’ is a favorite [edu-speak statement] among administrators. When it turns out there’s no publicity for a meeting on how children get into advanced classes—or when the \$5000 raise for the director of special education is passed in private—the district will say it has to improve its communication skills. A good rule of thumb for parents is to assume that when you hear this phrase, you’ve stumbled on a secret.”

Circling the Wagons

Automatically backing teachers against parents and kids, without really hearing the issue described from the parents’ perspective or talking to the children involved, ranks high on the list of things that make parents furious. I call this practice “circling the wagons.” Many teachers believe that their administrator’s first responsibility is to back them, no matter what they do. But when teachers are abusing children (psychologically or physically), wasting children’s time, or freelancing with the curriculum, parents are hard pressed to understand why an administrator would defend or cover up for the wrongdoers.

Consider a case in Berkeley, California, where the school district paid \$1.15 million to settle a lawsuit brought by nine female students and five of their mothers that claimed the district failed to investigate sexual abuse complaints against a teacher. Because the teacher in question was a popular one, no one believed the students, and the wagons continued to circle even as the students were testifying against him in court (Walsh, 1996).

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Stonewalling and Spinelessness

Saying you'll do something about a problem and then doing nothing or promising to call a parent back and then misplacing the message are other practices that make parents climb the walls. Knowing that a disciplinary problem exists (e.g., bullying on the playground, smoking in the washrooms, rebellion in the lunchroom) or that a personnel issue is approaching an emergency (e.g., a teacher is harassing a student, instruction is ineffective, a classroom is out of control) and choosing to ignore it out of fear, indifference, or just plain indecision is a risky business.

In a decision by a nine-member federal jury, a school district in Ashland, Wisconsin, was found guilty of discrimination against a gay high school student by failing to protect him from the verbal and physical brutality of his classmates. The case was settled out of court for nearly \$1 million. This incident is a disturbing example of what can happen when pretending nothing is wrong becomes a way of life for administrators. Although the boy's parents repeatedly brought their complaints to school district officials, the abuse their son suffered at the hands of his classmates continued over a six-year period ("A Lesson," 1996; "Gay Student Wins," 1996).

Assumptions and Stereotypes

Having labels put on us because of marital status, religious beliefs, sex, color, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status makes us all angry, parents included, and justifiably so. Just because I go to church and want my children to learn phonics, don't label me as a right-wing conservative. If I'm a single parent, don't assume that I neglect my children, and just because I'm poor, don't type me as a lazy good-for-nothing.

Defensiveness

Getting defensive whenever a parent questions our actions or motives is a natural, *but unwise*, reaction. Our behavior will surely escalate what could have been a calm discussion into an angry exchange on both sides. When we get defensive, we appear guilty, stupid, and dishonest. All of these postures only serve to inflame a parent who only wanted answers or explanations.

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Breaking Promises

In the heat of the moment, principals sometimes make promises they can't keep. "*The bus will stop right at your front door.*" Parents later find out that the bus stop is a half a mile away. "*Oh, yes, we'll be hiring a middle-school band director for next year.*" Parents read in the newspaper that the school board decided to double up music teachers at its last meeting. "*Even if we don't have a full class of students, we'll still have that fast-paced math class.*" As it turns out, there's only one student, and the class is canceled. Whether or not you are the individual to blame for the change in plans (and you usually aren't), the angry parent will forever remember *your* broken promise and blame *you*.

Intimidation, Control, Power, and Blame

There are dozens of ways that we educators can subtly intimidate parents; most are unintentional but nonetheless damaging. We send parents notices of meetings without bothering to check with them ahead of time about their availability. We don't tell them what the meetings are about. And once we get them into our offices, we sit behind large desks in oversized chairs and seat parents as far away from us as possible. Sometimes we're sarcastic, belligerent, or demeaning. We bring in armies of specialists and support personnel to overwhelm a lone parent, rather than asking ahead of time if there's someone the parent would like to bring along. We feel free to take telephone calls in the middle of a conference or leave parent meetings with no warning. We tell parents rather than ask them. We accuse them rather than listen to them. Here's what one frustrated parent had to say:

I hate it when school officials say "You must do this for [or with] your child." I'm not a teacher. I have some skills, but teaching is not one of them, and it frustrates me completely when the teacher tries to pin my child's learning failures on me, which, believe me, has frequently happened. After all, the teacher is the expert, right?

Condescension and Rudeness

Parents who are treated rudely and with condescension by educators carry the scars for a long time. They feel demeaned and

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powerless. Listen to the advice given to administrators by this parent who recently had a serious mad-at-school experience:

Treat parents as though they have brains in their heads (some of them might just be smarter than some of you). Don't ever be condescending in your responses, and even when you know you're going to have to make an unpopular decision, practice diplomacy and at least hear out the opposition and validate their opinions.

Dishonesty

Principals don't tell outright lies very often, but when they do (usually to cover something inane they did), the parent-principal relationship can be destroyed forever. Little white lies are seductive, but don't be tempted. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," goes the oft-quoted phrase (Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, act III, scene i). My paraphrase is, "Hell hath no fury like a parent who's been duped."

Sometimes dishonesty comes in the form of just "forgetting" to share some vital information with parents. Families in a Lincoln, Nebraska, school were oblivious to an infestation of brown recluse spiders in the school until a teacher tipped off the community late in the school year. The principal's ostensible reason for keeping the news under his hat: Spiders are nocturnal, so he didn't figure the kids were in danger (Williams, 2004).

Political Correctness to the Max

In an effort to create safe and inviting schools, we educators have banned weapons, drugs, sexual harassment, and profanity, with a vengeance. If questioned about the worth of such policies, most parents would be positive, I'm sure. But can you blame parents for wondering if educators have taken leave of their senses when they suspend a student for having Midol at school or for kissing a classmate on the cheek? By following the letter of the law in their overreaction to fears of being sued, some educators have become the brunt of talk show comedians and newspaper columnists (McElroy, 2003; Riechmann, 1996, p. A4). In a Pittsburgh school where profanity is prohibited in the student code of conduct, a second grader was suspended from school for

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saying the word “hell.” The punishment seems a bit over the top for a seven-year-old who warned a classmate who said “I swear to God,” that she would go to hell for taking God’s name in vain. Her pronouncement was Biblical but definitely not politically correct. Her father, a police detective, said that his family has a healthy respect for God (World Net Daily, 2004).

Unwillingness to Admit Mistakes and Apologize

Every administrator has done his or her share of dumb things, but parents will usually forgive a mistake, bad judgment, or a momentary lapse of common sense. What they can’t abide is unwillingness on the part of the educator to admit the mistake and apologize. I collect ill-advised actions that schools and districts take, and in spite of all of the policies and supervision we have in place, they continue to happen. Several school districts in California, Pennsylvania, and Florida sent out letters to parents of overweight and obese children warning them of the risk factors posed by their conditions. The letters made the news (Galley, 2002; Saunders, 2002), but to date no district personnel have been willing to concede some culpability. As many parents who received the letters pointed out, it isn’t the fault of parents that students are served unhealthy school lunches containing more than thirty percent fat; parents have no control over the presence of vending machines that sell high-caloric drinks and snacks in the school cafeteria; and a recent decision to cut physical education classes compounded the problem.

Failure to Give Parents Credit for Understanding Their Children

Parents would like to have their personal knowledge and understanding of their children validated; they get angry when educators assume that the experts always know best. One parent describes her frustration at being left out of the loop:

One of the things that bugs me the most about school officials is that they think they know best. Personally, I think the parents usually know best. Officials get hung up sometimes on what they learned in school and start classifying kids. They are so sure a certain method will work with a child and don’t bother to ask the parent’s opinion.

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Lack of Respect for Parents and Children

Administrators are frequently accused of treating parents who are educationally or economically disadvantaged without respect. And that makes the shortchanged parents boil. Administrators talk down to them or take advantage of them in ways they would never dream of doing to the PTA president or a CEO. Assigning the kids of “people who count” to the best teachers, meting out discipline and awards based on parental pressure, and giving perks to a select inside power circle are very demoralizing to the “have-nots.” And don’t think they aren’t aware of exactly what’s happening.

Being Asked for Advice and Not Having It Taken

Parents are often invited to be part of local decision-making groups, and they interpret these invitations as a genuine desire on the part of educators for their input. Too often, what educators really want is a rubber stamp process that will allow them to say “we solicited parent input.” Parents get angry and feel disenfranchised when the recommendations they make are rearranged or worse yet, ignored.

Unprofessionalism

Administrators draw the ire of parents by doing things such as gossiping, sharing parental confidences, talking derogatorily in public about parents and kids, or looking the other way when teachers are guilty of these same practices.

Reason 3: Education and Educators Fail to Meet Parents’ Expectations

Journalist Robert Holland’s (1996) book title, *Not With My Child You Don’t*, neatly sums up this third category of reasons why parents may be angry, troubled, or afraid: They believe that the schools their children attend are either doing them more harm than good or not doing them any good at all.

Lack of Student Learning, Schoolwide or Districtwide

Although many parents do not understand the debate between the phonics and the whole-language proponents or the difference

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between process writing and old-fashioned grammar and spelling, they *are* concerned about whether their children will learn to read and write, and they do know when they aren't learning. Being told to "trust us" by educators does nothing to assuage their worries. In fact, an answer like the following response (Ledell & Arnsperger, 1993), given in all sincerity to a question about whether implementing a new curriculum will improve student achievement, can be more disconcerting than reassuring to parents.

Not conclusively . . . Right now, we don't have reliable ways to measure students' improvements in learning. Traditional standardized tests are inadequate measures of thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, creativity, communication skills, and teamwork. . . . The preliminary indicators of success mentioned earlier [higher graduation rates, better attendance, fewer discipline problems, more students going on to higher education, more comments about improved learning from students and parents], combined with the enthusiastic support of key educators, leading businesses, and many policymakers are sound reasons to have confidence that restructuring will increasingly be recognized as a successful approach to improving student achievement" (p. 20).

Lack of Learning or Behavior Problems Closer to Home

When a child is "falling through the cracks" or being left behind and parents sense that no one at school cares or is even able to respond, they get worried. A mother recently e-mailed me, attracted to my Web site by its focus on reading problems. She and her husband, concerned about their first-grade daughter's lack of reading progress and stonewalled by school personnel, took her to be privately evaluated at a reading clinic where she was diagnosed with a learning disability. They immediately enrolled her in the research-based multisensory reading program at the clinic; she started learning to read immediately. After paying for the extra tutoring for more than a year, the parents finally asked school personnel to take some responsibility. School personnel grudgingly conceded that the child *was* learning disabled but only after redoing all of the tests. They were unwilling, however, to assign a teacher to use the multisensory program in which the child was making

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progress. Instead, school personnel offered Reading Recovery, an approach very similar to the one used in the classroom that had already proven ineffective.

The frustrated mother wrote to me, "Aren't we entitled to reimbursement from the district for our child's tutoring if they can't provide it within the district? I thought the No Child Left Behind Act was supposed to make sure that all children received what they needed. I know I must sound incredibly naive. I just can't believe that in a school district as wealthy as ours is, with parents who are so interested in their children attending Ivy League schools, that this is what they offer to help her." This parent has just moved from being worried to being downright mad.

Erosion of Values

Many parents are worried that what they hold dear in the areas of morality and decency is being ripped away from them. They watch in dismay as some schools hand out condoms (Berger, 1991) and a middle-school counselor tells parents it's none of their business when she takes their children to a county health clinic to receive birth control pills, Pap smears, and tests for the AIDS virus (Lindsay, 1996).

Pam Angelo, a parent in Antioch, California, objected repeatedly to a required tenth-grade course that asked students personal questions about depression, drugs, grief, and what their parents talk about at home. She didn't ask school officials to change the curriculum, only to have her children excused from the course. To accomplish her goal, she was forced to file a lawsuit. Only after winning the suit was her son finally allowed to enroll in an alternative class ("Lawsuits That Target Schools," 1996).

There is a growing public perception that schools are undermining parental authority and co-opting parental rights (White, 1996). Dana Mack (1997) says, "At the heart of parents' frustration . . . is a deep unbridgeable chasm between the vocabulary of moral dictates, rules, and authority that parents think are best for children and the vocabulary of autonomy and 'choice' that emanates from the classroom" (p. 123).

Lack of Qualified and Competent Teachers

At the bottom of many parental worries about schools is the teaching staff. Parents know that any given school year can be

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heaven or hell for their child depending on the teacher. Here is one parent's take on teacher competence:

I have a lot of respect for good teachers. My kids have had some really good ones, with whom I have worked well. They've also had some bad ones, who have been frustrating for me.

Lazy teachers, inept teachers, rude teachers—they run the gamut. When my kids got really good teachers, I would do anything for them. Unfortunately, most of the good ones I've found are in private schools. That's where people work because they love the kids, not money.

The perception that incompetent teachers are protected by unions and receive raises each year simply by staying alive rather than by producing results worries parents. Issues of competence, tenure, and the feeling of powerlessness that overwhelms them when their children have incompetent or uncredentialed teachers cause many parents to become angry with public schools and their administrators.

Lack of Safety

The safety of their children at school continues to be one of the most pervasive worries of parents, and for good reason. The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) reports that seventy-three percent of the U.S. public elementary and secondary schools experienced at least one violent incident during 1999–2000 to include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks and fights with and without weapons, threats of physical attacks with and without weapons, and robbery with and without weapons, for a total of nearly 1.5 million violent acts (p. vi). In addition to the high-profile and well-publicized incidents of murder and mayhem in schools across the country during the past few years, there are tens of thousands of violent acts that never even make the news. No wonder parents are worried, particularly if they live in urban or high-poverty areas.

Having to Settle for Poor Schools

Financially secure parents can pay their bills and still choose the best public schools or the priciest private schools. But for families

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who feel they have no choice about their children's education, the fear of having to settle for second-rate schools is real. These parents look at test scores and school finance inequities and know immediately that their children are being cheated out of a quality education by virtue of where they live. Their fears and discontent are driving the voucher and charter schools movements (Peterson, 2003).

Reason 4: Parents Have Personal Problems

A significant number of parents arrive in your office with personal problems that are distressing and often disruptive. Although these problems may not be directly related to their own children, the mission of the school, or education generally, they nonetheless impact the ability of their children to be successful. How can you identify such a parent? Here are the major categories: estranged, separated, and divorced parents; school groupies; complainers, troublemakers, and whiners; abusive parents; and addicted, and dysfunctional, and mentally ill parents.

Estranged, Separated, and Divorced Parents

Consider yourself most fortunate as an administrator if the parents in your school community who are having marital difficulties don't bring their disagreements to school. Most readers have no doubt encountered parents like the noncustodial dad who shared his tale of woe in this letter to the editor of his newspaper:

I was arrested and spent 12 hours in jail when I attended my son's basketball game. My ex-wife attempted an 'ambush restraining order violation.' Charges were never filed because I provided seven days written notice to her attorney that I would be at the game. My written communications to my son's high school go unanswered. Requests for copies of report cards are ignored. Schools need to make the divorced dad's involvement easier."

This dad's letter was answered shortly thereafter by a school administrator who told her side of the story: Dealing with estranged, separated, and divorced parents is no picnic. She wrote,

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As a high school assistant principal and elementary school principal, I have had to catalogue various custody orders, restraining orders and court orders related to divorce and custody decrees. I know kids who have so many warnings stapled to their attendance cards about which parent can take the child on what day that it would make your head swim. I have sat in classrooms on back-to-school night witnessing parents and stepparents giving each other “the eye” and making the lives of teachers miserable.

Stop it. Schools should not be demilitarized zones where children are exchanged like prisoners of war. Schools cannot do the business of schooling if secretaries and administrative staff have to repeatedly be briefed regarding whom they can talk to regarding an absence. Teachers cannot teach if they need a scorecard to keep track of parenting arrangements. When it comes to court appearances, teachers and school personnel should not be dragged in to take sides. In essence, leave the schools out of your wars and battles.” (J. Jeffries, personal communication, February 2004).

Most of the parents who fall into this category are able to handle the day-to-day stresses of breaking up a marriage, but the few who can't need special handling to keep their children on track in school.

School Groupies

These parents are on a power trip. Their life is centered in your school, and they won't go home. They want control, information, involvement, and more control. They act like spoiled children, demanding their own way at all costs. In the beginning, school groupies seem supportive and concerned, but just don't cross them or tell them “no.” They will harass you, trash you, manipulate you, and are perfectly capable of carrying out a personal vendetta against you that could ruin your career. School groupies are often bright individuals with low self-esteem whose lack of self-confidence and personal worth manifests itself in a desire to make sure that you know who's boss. They often try to take over the parent organization, and many of them run for school boards with personal agendas.

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Complainers, Troublemakers, and Whiners

These are parents with multiple axes to grind. They prefer to attack people and not problems. They don't want anyone to do anything that might make things better for them or their children—it's just easier to complain. They don't like anyone, especially themselves. Their children can never please them, either. And you, the educator, will come in for more than your fair share of abuse from these thoroughly disagreeable and unlikable people to whom you are expected to be gracious, warm, and accepting.

Abusive Parents

These parents are abusing their children either psychologically or physically. In cases that are documented, you are legally obligated to report the abuse to the proper authorities, but sometimes the abuse is less obvious and must be confronted in more discreet and subtle ways. Abusive parents sometimes don't feed their children adequately, beat up on them physically and emotionally, seldom come to parent conferences, and can never be reached by phone. But just do or say something they deem inappropriate or prejudicial, and you will find them waiting at your door when you arrive at school.

Addicted, Dysfunctional, and Mentally Ill Parents

These parents consume mountains of time and energy as you attempt to help them and their children. They make promises they don't (or can't) keep, embarrass and humiliate their children, frustrate and clog up the system, lie, and frequently scare you to death with threats, harassment, and verbal abuse. Some are alcoholics, drug addicts, sexual perverts, and criminals. Many have serious mental illnesses. This category of parent is quite rare, but just one can drain your time, energy, and resources.

SUMMING UP AND LOOKING AHEAD

I hope you're not too depressed after reading Chapter 1. The challenges in public education today are enormous, and the need for creative leadership and problem solving is critical. In the face of

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this onslaught, you must be calm, thoughtful, caring, intelligent, articulate, direct, and honest. In a nutshell, you've got to walk on water *and* leap tall buildings in a single bound. If you feel unprepared to handle the challenges, don't be alarmed. You may need to acquire a new repertoire of behaviors, strategies, and systems. Perhaps dealing with people who are upset comes naturally for you, but most of us need to work hard at keeping our own cool while we're defusing anger, informing the troubled, calming the fearful, and understanding the irrational. The chapters ahead will provide help for you by describing four important steps you can take to deal with difficult parents:

1. Defuse and disarm emotionally charged behavior.
2. Engage in productive problem solving.
3. Create a healthy school culture and climate.
4. Be proactive when it comes to dealing with parents.