

Science: Meeting Parents

What id meetings with parents fostered hope?

Steve and Anna attended a parent-teacher conference at their son's school and were struck by the different approaches they encountered.

"We had conversations in quick succession with two science teachers.

"The first introduced himself, noted our names, and then opened his gradebook. He ran his finger down the list of names until he found the name of our son. He then ran his finger along the line of scores for each activity during the term, and read each one out to us. Finally he read out the overall percentage and grade for the term, sat back, smiled, and asked if we had any concerns.

"The second also went through introductions, then sat back and looked thoughtful. After a pause, he began to talk about how he had appreciated having our son in his class, because of how he interacted with another student who had some learning difficulties and sat behind him. He told us that our son, unprompted, had been finding appropriate moments to turn around and make sure the other student was up to speed with what was going on. The teacher added a comment about how this fit with the kind of caring community that he wanted to have in his classroom, and how they had talked as a class about helping one another. Finally, he assured us that things were going fine academically.

"We were struck by the difference in the way these two teachers saw their jobs and the way they saw our son. The second conversation was much more encouraging to us, because it focused on our son's overall growth, not just numbers."

What's going on here?

The second teacher saw his student more holistically, not just in academic terms. He not only let Steve and Anna know that he was truly aware of their son, but also helped them to see anew the possibilities for their son's growth in a science classroom. Values had an explicit place in his science classroom.

He chose to engage the parents in reflecting with him on a bigger vision of learning, and he made the encounter personal, with a relational focus.

This teacher reshaped his practice by approaching the parent-teacher conference thoughtfully and intentionally in terms of interaction, body language, and his choice of words and stories, communicating the values that he was looking to embody in his classroom.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Many parents would expect a science teacher of all people to be focused on the facts and on whether information was mastered. The second teacher believed that it was also part of his role in a science classroom to be attentive to whether students treat one another with love while they practice science. He left the parents with a hopeful vision of their son's growth.

What difference does it make?

One way of finding out how someone sees their job is to listen to what they say when asked to summarize what they have been doing recently and what they have achieved. Both of these teachers care about their students learning the material. But only one of them communicates a concern for the whole student's moral and spiritual growth.

Where could we go from here?

The ways that we talk about our students and about their learning reveals a lot about what we believe and hope for. When we talk to parents, what vision of education might they take away from the conversation? How do we encourage them to see their child? What vision of the school's task are we communicating? Similar questions could be asked about the ways in which we talk about students and the stories that we share about our classrooms when we talk to colleagues in the lounge. Do our conversations about and with our students during the day resonate with faith, hope, and love? Does any of what

we share help those around us to see new possibilities in their students or in their teaching?

Digging deeper

Students are not just minds; they are whole, complex human beings—body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The Bible sometimes refers to people as “body and soul” or “body, soul, and spirit,” with soul and spirit including the will, emotions, thoughts, and our relationship to God (1 Thessalonians 5:23, Psalms 31:9).

Who can map out the various forces at play in one soul? Man is a great depth, O Lord. The hairs of his head are easier by far to count than his feeling, the movements of his heart. St. Augustine

Soul includes our personality, our awareness of ourselves, and our reasoning and feelings. Spirit focuses on our ability to relate to God (Romans 8:16). The body joins us to this world and to other people. People are not like hand puppets, with the soul inside the body. The two are intricately connected and affect each other—they describe different facets of what we are as whole people. Our relationship with God often is stimulated by our connection with the world and other people. Our minds and bodies relate to our spirits, as do our emotions. A bout of the flu can have a spiritual effect just as a change in emotions can affect the body. When the Bible talks about Jesus’s early life, it says Jesus grew in stature, wisdom, and in favor with others. It mentions his physical, emotional, and spiritual growth (Luke 2:52). God is interested in all of our being—spirit, soul, and body. Jesus healed broken bodies, minds, and spirits.

Education can easily drift into seeing students only in terms of their minds rather than as whole beings. This does not mean that teachers see themselves as social workers or parents; it just means we see students holistically.



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