CAROLYN STUART

A Fresh Approach to Partnership

Meeting Parent Needs in a Real and Practical Way

Recently a senior school leader said to me: "You know, it doesn't matter how hard we try or how well an event is run, it is never enough for our parents." This comment was made in response to the seemingly never-ending feedback from their parent community.

Teachers and senior leaders now deal with a tsunami of emails, social media comments and phone calls. Whilst most of this is positive, at times the feedback can also be crushing for schools who are doing their best in what are often very trying situations. If school leaders aren't careful, this can create a defensive culture between schools and the community, which is not helpful to either party and especially not good for the kids! One of the ways in which technology is democratising education is its ability to mediate parental interactions and involvement with schools: emails, websites, texts notifications, social media. There is now a plethora of technology-enabled ways that parents and schools interact with each other. Research tells us that parental involvement contributes significantly to student learning. John Hattie's 2017 Updated List of Factors Influencing Student Achievement gave, 'Parental Involvement' a 0.5 effect size, which is significant. So, how might we innovatively strengthen parental involvement in student learning?

When I first started teaching in the 80's, parent involvement for primary schools was generally limited to signing off a notebook in regard to homework, a "Meet the Teacher,' evening in the first few weeks of the year, written reports at the middle and end of the year and a Parent/Teacher interview after the mid year report. The only other times that parents had contact with schools was if something was seriously wrong or if they were required to help with transport for a class or sport's trip. Thankfully, we are now in more enlightened times and recognise that effective partnering with parents goes deeper than two teacher-controlled meetings a year.

But in the year 2019, what might this productive partnership with parents look like? I believe that there are two big issues at play:

1. Parent Distraction

Parenting in the year 2019 is significantly different from parenting a decade or two ago. Look around any cafe and notice the numbers of parents allowing phones to take their attention away from their offspring sitting in front of them. This phenomena, coined by Linda Stone, as 'Continuous Partial Attention,' has a significant impact on the way children learn about communication and understand emotional responsiveness. I cannot even begin to imagine how it must feel like to be a child and have your one-on-one time with a parent constantly interrupted by a device. But why is this important for schools?

I have a hunch that deep down parents feel guilty about how often they allow devices to distract them when they are with their children. Instead of addressing this guilt by putting down their phones and giving their children undivided attention, they look for something or someone else to blame when things begin to unravel. Often this guilt plays out in parental interactions with schools, projecting a lack of focussed parenting onto what is seen as inadequate schooling practices. Parents then use the plethora of digital channels to convey their opinions.

2. Communication Channels

The other big problem is the number of digital channels that are regularly used by schools: Newsletters, Facebook pages, Instagram, Twitter and text messaging. These different digital channels emerged over a period of time and were generally added to what schools were already doing, rather than replacing old practices and strategies. This has caused two issues. Firstly, parents are in a state of confusion as to where or what they need to rely on to get the information that they require. Secondly, schools struggle to keep all their communications channels up-to-date.

If any of this is resonating with you, then it just might be time for a reset. I want to suggest that the approach to take for this is a human-centred design and NOT another parent consultation evening! Upon reflection, I believe parent consultation evenings, which I employed continuously when I was a principal, only deliver two outcomes. They enable schools to tick the consultation box and they provide the space for a very narrow slice of your parent body to be heard, with these folks often holding polarising views.

A human-centred design approach does require an upfront investment of time. But the deep understanding you'll gain of parent needs from which you will design new strategies for partnership will mean that what you develop will have a much greater chance of working and a more rapid uptake.

Human-centred design always starts with the people for whom you will be eventually designing a new approach or strategy. It begins with one-on-one conversation in which your job is to listen carefully and delve deeply so that you get to understand the needs, pains and gains of the person to whom you are talking. These conversations take place in a space that is comfortable and familiar to the person you are gaining insights from, which means in an education context, these conversations happen in homes, workplaces, or cafes: anywhere that is familiar and comfortable to the person to whom you are talking.

Having bravely written that last paragraph, I am now channelling the voices of thousands of overworked, busy educators saying, "Get real! We don't have time for this!!!" Hmmm. Going back to one of my leadership gurus, Stephen Covey, you need to decide what it is you want to do and then decide how you are going to do it. So, if you truly want to design new strategies that meet the needs of your parent community you will be able to come up with ways to get yourself and others out of your school and into the community for these conversations.

Once you've undertaken these conversations, it is time to synthesise what you have learnt into an Empathy Map. These can take many forms but will basically summarise what you have learnt into Jobs, Pains, Gains, Influencers, Connectors and Contributors. It is also helpful to tell a brief, anonymised narrative to give more context about the people you interviewed.

Once you have your synthesised Empathy Maps, writing user stories will deepen your understanding about your parent community.

For example:
"As a stay-at-home dad, I want opportunities to help in the classroom so that my children will see that I am personally invested in their schooling."
"As a mother who travels a lot, I want to be able to connect in real-time with my child's learning so my kids will know that even though I am away, I am still connected in with what they are doing at school."

"As a mum who has a full-on job I want to be able to quickly locate important school communications so that I do not waste precious time scouring different places to get the information I need."

You then add to these user stories your "Known Knowns." This is your professional knowledge as an educator. The combination of your Empathy Maps, User Stories and Known Knowns

will provide you with an in-depth understanding of the opportunity you now have to build partnership between your parents and the school. It will also shine a spotlight on the things you can safely stop doing, and the things you need to keep doing. You will also uncover ideas from which new innovations might arise. ™

Carolyn Stuart

Carolyn Stuart is the founder of Weaving Futures. Carolyn supports people to achieve their preferred future.

She can be contacted through:
www.weavingfutures.nz

"We cannot keep doing what we have always done and expect a different result. We need to be adopting design strategies that help us weave together the preferred future for ourselves and our community."