

A 3-Step Strategy for Addressing Difficult Situations With Parents

Administrators can resolve complicated issues by holding an information-gathering meeting, conducting an investigation, and then circling back to parents.

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Picture this: It's 8:45 a.m., and a parent has arrived at your office furious about something their child told them over dinner the night before. Since you don't have details, you flounder about while trying to come up with an intelligent response. Thirty minutes later they leave with nothing much accomplished. The day has barely started, and you already feel like you have been hit by a hurricane.

In situations like these, both parents and administrators are often acting from only partial information. Both parties can come off as angry and defensive, and a stressful meeting is the result.

In most cases, the [effective resolution of complicated issues](#) takes place in three stages: an initial information-gathering meeting, followed by an investigation on your part, and then a final wrap-up meeting or phone call. Here are my best tips for productive parent meeti

Step 1: Prepare for the initial meeting

First and foremost, preparation is key. If the parent has emailed you their concern, you can send a short reply suggesting times to meet. Lengthy explanations at this early stage will inevitably come off as excuses. I teach all of my staff this rule: "Good or neutral news via email, bad or sad news in person." In this case, you can use email in a neutral way (confirm receipt of the parent email and offer a meeting time), but any attempts to explain or justify what has occurred will likely inflame emotions further. With this email, you have now bought yourself some time to investigate (step 2) and in most cases calmed the parent down somewhat.

Sometimes, parents show up without calling or sending an email. Except in extreme circumstances, an administrator should be wary of meeting with parents on the spot. Your best move is to acknowledge the parent's concerns and let them know when you will be able to meet.

If you do meet with the parent without any background information, be sure to open by being clear that you will be taking notes on their concerns but that you can't commit to any actions until you have investigated. Keep the meeting short and productive by summarizing their concerns as they talk, and then let the parent know when they might reasonably hear back from you.

Step 2: Conduct an investigation

Once you have had an initial conversation to gain clarity on the issue, conduct an investigation. Interview teachers and students, and review camera footage if that's available. You might review key policies or any past history involving the staff or students. Take notes as you go so that your follow-up with parents is based on precise details. If this issue is racial in nature, you may have access to your board or district's equity department or to other staff who can provide guidance. If this is a serious matter, inform your supervisor early so that they can remind you about any best practices or requirements to work with institutions such as child protective services, the police, the union, or others.

When you think you have all the key information, you might call a trusted (preferably more experienced) colleague to get a second opinion. This is particularly important if the parent complaint is about admin or the management of the school. Having someone else help you "catch yourself" if you are taking things personally is invaluable.

Step 3: Circle back

When you are clear on what has transpired, set up a meeting with the parents. Offer multiple times so that it is convenient for them to attend. Share an agenda in advance. If you are going to have other staff join the meeting (school safety officers, equity department staff, special education staff, etc.), make this known.

If parents are going to bring anyone to the meeting, they need to make this known as well. I know from experience that adding in advocates with strong political agendas can destroy any of the goodwill that is essential to making progress. On the other hand, bringing in someone with knowledge of the child, such as the child's therapist, can help everyone around the table to better understand the student and their needs—but everyone should know ahead of time who will be present for the meeting.

Before the meeting, organize your notes and have a clear best outcome in mind. Have copies of any policies that you might need to reference on hand. Be clear in your own mind: If you or your staff have made a mistake, be prepared to say so early on.

Start the meeting on time by introducing everyone, reminding attendees of the time allocated for the meeting, and then ask parents if you can summarize their concerns. Ask parents if you have summarized the issue accurately. Then proceed to describe the steps that you followed as part of your investigation. Next, ask the parents what outcome or resolution they are hoping for. In most cases, once parents see that you have taken their concerns seriously and investigated appropriately, they don't necessarily want punishments or consequences. If there is action to be taken, commit to doing this, as allowed by your district's policies, and offer to send a follow-up email once this step is complete.

Troubleshooting

Sometimes even if you follow the suggested steps, a meeting can go sideways. Here are a few things to consider if it does:

- All conversations need to be respectful and productive. If you think that parents are likely to behave badly, have a copy of your school or board code of conduct on hand. Don't be afraid to end the meeting if the tone is insulting or doesn't meet the standard of expected behavior in your school.
- Having clear notes and an agenda to reference is important. If a parent gets off topic, use these to bring everyone back on track.
- If a parent is likely to be very upset about a particularly nuanced issue, such as special education, ensure that someone from that department attends so that they can provide their expertise and guidance in terms of policies and procedures.
- In very difficult situations, you may ask your superintendent to sit in for support.
- If parents show up with unexpected extra advocates or a lawyer, cancel the meeting. This is a power move and does not bode well for a mutually respectful meeting.

Most important, I would suggest that administrators approach parent meetings as opportunities to listen and learn about how kids and families are feeling about their experiences at school. After all, you would rather know about a problem than have it festering away without your knowledge. Having the courage to listen and share information with parents in a collaborative, mutually respectful setting will ultimately lead to greater levels of trust across your community and better outcomes for your students.