

Teachers Are Parents, Too

Every year, the sound of the first school bell in September brings the excitement and promise of a new school year chock full of fresh ideas, rigorous lesson plans, invigorated bodies, and determination. New faces, sharpened pencils, clean book bags, tidy school attire, and a chance to do things better than before for both students and teachers elicits the undivided focus of all. But for many educators who are parents themselves comes the anguish of not being able to be present for their child's first day of school and myriad events throughout the school year. The empty seat haunts them.

School leaders must be cognizant of how important it is for educators to be a part of their own children's lives. Let us not forget all of the die-hard mothers and fathers who have missed seeing their child's first steps onto a school bus, first play, first concert, or other school-related milestone that will never repeat itself—all in the name of being a responsible and accountable educator.

In this current climate where educators have fallen folly to the media's latest witch hunt, how often do we take the time to recognize the great sacrifice that so many of our teachers make for the sake of educating other people's children? Quite often, educators are not able to practice what we preach: the importance of involved parents in our schools. This may be because the institution of education is not philosophically designed to encourage educators themselves to be dedicated involved parents.

Over the years, I have discovered that many times, teachers feel guilty if they want to take off to attend their own child's school events, mainly because they sense that they will not be looked upon favorably. I am disheartened when teachers state that they left their ill child with someone without the caliber of mothering skills needed to properly care for their child.

As the leader of an elementary school, my office has naturally served as a judgement-free venue for spilling intimate secrets of all kinds, and sharing details of personal and professional

Let those who change lives forever know that being a parent doesn't make them any less of an educator.

deeds. Teachers routinely divulge the activities they have missed and supplies they have forgotten to purchase for their children because of their preoccupation with planning for their students. This secret society of suffering parents gleans comfort from comparing stories of unspeakable child neglect that is often a result of their professional responsibilities.

A painful memory of my own makes me wish I could turn back the hands of time. I was fully dressed in my professional attire, ready for another day as principal, when I realized my elementary school-age daughter was much too sick *this* time to send to school. Let the record show that I had sent her to school many times knowing she was sick, but hoped that she could survive the day so I wouldn't have to miss a day of work. I must confess that I was and still am proud of my work ethic and exemplary attendance, and I never entertained staying home for any illness my children acquired. I was fortunate that my retired mother

or mother-in-law could quickly assume the role of *in loco parentis* extraordinaire.

This particular morning, I entered my child's room as she lay on her bed, barely able to speak, and I told her with reluctance in my voice that I would stay home and take care of her. At that moment, though weak and feverish, she asked me if I was angry with her because I had to miss work. If words could kill, I would have met my demise on the spot. With a broken heart, and a clear mind, I promised never to turn my back on my own child and family in the name of work. I made a pact to be around whenever she didn't feel well and to rely less on extended family to be the parent that I chose to be. But for me, the promise had come too late. My child was approaching middle school when not feeling well would come less often, as would the need for mommy's care.

Those in supervisory roles need to break down the walls of hypocrisy and communicate to teachers that it is an expectation that they not miss their children's play, art show, class trip, literacy celebration, or class party. If we expect the parents of our students to be involved in our schools, then teachers should be encouraged to participate in their children's school life and not be made to feel like a pariah when they need time off to be a parent. Let those who change lives forever know that being a parent doesn't make them any less of an educator.

As a result of the emotional support, inner peace, and happiness they experience when taking the time to parent, teachers are likely to work even harder to deliver the best instructional program possible. The days of the perpetual empty seat in school auditoriums across the nation will cease to exist. **P**

Cindy Sue Lee is principal of grades 1-4 at Number Two School in Inwood, New York.