Welcome Families by Focusing on Strengths

Justin Minkel

A focus on deficits hurts both struggling students and their families. We need to build families up—especially in these times.

Imagine a visit to the doctor for a checkup. You're feeling good—you lost a few pounds in the past year, you eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and you exercise four days a week. Your doctor, though, looks you over with a grim expression.

You're still seven pounds overweight, she tells you. Your cholesterol is too high. And, she can't help but point out, you have more gray hairs than you did at your last physical.

Your initial ebullience suddenly sags. You have the feeling that you are being reprimanded for something, although you're not quite sure what you did wrong.

That's how some students' families feel all the time, especially the parents of children who struggle in school. Many struggling children work really hard. They make decent progress. They have a multitude of hopes, dreams, ideas, interests, and questions about the world. Yet we, their teachers, have been trained to diagnose only deficits.

I blame the focus on testing for a lot of that. A standardized test is not designed to capture a child's creativity, brilliance, or capacity for innovation. Even if a student fills in 100 percent of those little bubbles accurately, it's not exciting and doesn't reflect his originality the way a piece of writing, an engineering design project, or an artistic creation does.

What tests are good at is diagnosing deficits, areas where students—and, by implication, their teachers or families—fall short, the flaws and failings of an entire school, community, or district. Educators often internalize that deficit mindset. Its grasping fingers sometimes infiltrate beyond the academic parts of our students' lives. Families who live in poverty, families of color, and immigrant families feel this focus on their shortcomings at a visceral level.

One solution is for educators to recognize families' circumstances and honor their efforts. Consider what a teacher friend of mine in Colorado told me about a time when a substitute principal helped teachers perceive the positives:

There is one dad who brings five kids to school every day, and he's always late. Like any school, we get frustrated with tardies. This principal saw one teacher and the dad have an exchange. It was clear the
teacher was super frustrated that these kids were late and didn't appreciate how learning was interrupted.

The principal asked the dad to come sit with him. He asked him what his story was. It turns out this dad has a couple of kids of his own and is taking care of his sister's kids. He talked about how impossible it is to get five kids out of the house on time. The principal pulled the kids' attendance records and saw that the kids make it to school every day. He thought about it for a minute and said, "You know what? You are doing a great job. You're getting your kids to school every single day."

"Thank you," the dad said. That was all he needed. Just someone to acknowledge what he was doing right instead of where he wasn't measuring up.

The principal followed up with the teacher who was so frustrated and suggested that the next day, when the student showed up late again, she thank the child and the dad for coming to school. The teacher followed this suggestion, and it worked wonders. The dad felt respected and supported rather than judged, and that one affirmation changed his relationship with his children's teachers in a deep and lasting way. He began following school policies he hadn't before because he felt reciprocal respect from the school's staff.

Moving the Dial to Strengths

It's hard to make that shift toward focusing on children and families' strengths rather than weaknesses. Three actions can help move the dial in that direction.

1. Let parents know you see their child's strengths.

Try to make every first contact with a child's family members about something positive. Send home a note about how hard she worked on a difficult math problem this morning, or call to tell a parent how kind her child has been toward other students this week.

During parent conferences, lead with strengths. Criticism is hard for all of us to hear. It hurts our feelings, and we get defensive. The same is true for kids—and especially for parents.

If you've ever been on the other side of the table at a parent-teacher conference, you understand why parents' hackles rise quickly at any negative talk about their child, even when they acknowledge there's truth to it. My daughter's kindergarten teacher, for instance, went on a brief monologue about how messy and disorganized my daughter is. It was all true—my darling girl leaves apple cores and used Kleenexes all over her bedroom—but it tainted the whole conference for me. I left the classroom thinking not about the great writing samples her teacher had shown me or my daughter's exceptional math scores, but about that rankling criticism.

We can't highlight our students' positive traits if we don't make the effort to notice them. If a student drives you crazy when you're teaching a whole-class lesson, make some time for a one-on-one writing conference that day to interact with her in a different context. If a child's misbehavior has you fervently hoping he'll be out sick, invite him to have lunch with you in the classroom or play soccer with him at recess, to strengthen that relationship and gain insight into what he does well.

Remember that these little imperfect humans are, for the most part, doing their best. So are their parents. Being a kindergartner or a teenager can be hard. It's especially hard for the kids who struggle with reading or math. It can be a spirit-bruising trial for those who come from a culture that isn't always reflected in the curriculum or in behavioral norms.
Accept your students as they are, as much as you can, and help them learn how to become their better selves. We don't need to ignore their flaws. But they have a better chance of overcoming those flaws if we make it clear that we see their strengths, too.

2. **Listen to families.**

When you email parents or send letters home, make sure you’re inviting two-way communication. Don’t just tell them what you think they should know; ask them what they think you should know.

This can begin with simple questions: What is your child’s favorite part of school right now? Is there anything your child doesn’t like about school? What would you like me to do differently as your child’s teacher?

Parent-teacher conferences are notorious opportunities for teacher filibusters. We have parents sign some paperwork, then we address behavior problems, discuss homework policies, and share test scores, which often come across as arbitrary, incomprehensible numbers. The 10 minutes is almost up by the time we pause for a breath and finally ask, "Do you have any questions?"

We need to see parent-teacher conferences as a time to learn from parents. We might learn something that helps us see a family member’s resilience.

This year, my student Lupe’s mom refused to come to her conference. Lupe explained to me, "She doesn’t like teachers." When Lupe's mom finally did come in, I asked her whether she liked school when she was a child. She looked startled to be asked about her own experience and said, "Me? No." I asked why, and she said that in the town in Mexico where she went to school, the teachers used physical punishment if you misbehaved or didn’t know an answer. I left that conference with a deeper understanding of why this mother had been so reluctant to walk through the school doors even for a quick conference.

We have to learn, in the words of Myles Horton, to "listen eloquently." The conversation may be awkward at first, especially for parents who are nervous about coming into school or who have limited English. It's easier to just ramble on as the parent nods dutifully. But our main job as teachers is to build relationships. We spend so much time the first month of school getting to know our students and helping them get to know one another. We should do the same thing with our students' families.

3. **Reflect families' cultures in the classroom.**

As a starting point, look at your classroom library and classroom walls. Do you have books in your students’ home languages? Do you display posters of artists, writers, and leaders from their cultures?

In my classroom—where 85 percent of students are English language learners, mostly from Mexico and the Marshall Islands—the Mexican and Marshallese flags hang near the U.S. flag. Paintings by Diego Rivera and photos of contemporary Latino/a leaders like Sonia Sotomayor decorate the walls. My classroom library has a basket of books in Spanish, many of them reflective of cultures in Mexico, El Salvador, and Mexican-American communities.

To affirm their cultures, during writer’s workshop I sometimes encourage students to write stories or poems in their first language or to include dialogue in Spanish even when they’re writing a story in English. Many of our class read-alouds feature Latino/a protagonists, like the “Get Ready for Gabi” series by Marisa Montes, featuring a 3rd grader whose parents are from Puerto Rico.

Sometimes parents come in to share their stories. One Mexican-American mom visited during a unit about immigration through Ellis Island in the 1900s. She shared her reasons for coming to this country—for improved economic prospects and better schools—and the kids immediately noticed how similar her reasons were to those of European immigrants a century ago. Spanish-speaking parents also do bilingual read-alouds with me; they read each page in Spanish, and then I read it in English.
A Crucial Time for Welcoming

Teachers have always done what we can to make parents of various cultures and backgrounds feel welcome at school. We know what a tremendous act of trust it is for them to leave their children with us every day.

Our efforts have become even more important in recent months. We now have a president who has openly stereotyped Mexican immigrants as violent criminals and called for a ban on immigration from some predominantly Muslim countries. Some of our students and their families feel that hostility at a physical level. The morning after Donald Trump was elected, my student Xiomara asked me in a trembling voice, "Do my mom and I have to put our stuff into bags tonight?" She thought they would be deported immediately. For many students, such fears haven't diminished.

Many of us may feel helpless in the face of the incendiary rhetoric, policy changes, and hostility toward immigrants, religious minorities, and people of color that has surfaced during Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency. But we cannot underestimate the power of kindness, genuine respect, and a heartfelt welcome toward families who may feel marginalized in this country.²

During the school week, children spend more waking hours with their teachers than with their own parents. We have the capacity to determine whether children and their families feel seen, respected, and valued for the gifts and strengths they carry within them and into our classrooms every day.

EL Online

For a discussion of family engagement in public libraries, see the online article "Lessons on Family Engagement from Librarians" by Donna C. Celano, Naomi A. Moland, and Susan B. Neuman.

Endnotes


Justin Minkel teaches 2nd grade at Jones Elementary in northwest Arkansas. He founded The Home Library Effect, which puts books into the hands and homes of children living in poverty, and writes a monthly column for Education Week Teacher. Follow him on Twitter.

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