Do schools really want input from parents? My recent experience tells me that school personnel are usually willing to accept input from parents when it is favorable or at least not disturbing; but educators are not inclined to listen to input from parents that points out serious defects.

My story is a personal one. Although I am a professor of education with 150 books and articles to my credit, I was shocked by a situation involving my own son and the personnel at his school. Concerned about the quality of instruction in my son’s high school honors English class, I investigated and compiled a list of concerns. Most of the concerns focused on pedagogical practices that I found misguided, but one item related to the calculation of my son’s grade in the course.

When I took my concerns to the teacher, he gave me a copy of his grading system and suggested that I make an appointment with my son’s counselor. I wrote a letter to the guidance counselor, but I received no response. I then sent a letter to the principal.

The principal invited me and my wife to a conference. Acknowledging the weakness of the English program, the principal said he could not change a teacher’s grade or require a teacher to change his teaching strategies. He arranged for a meeting with me and the teacher.

Prior to the meeting with the teacher and principal, I sent the teacher a letter enumerating my concerns. At the meeting, the teacher seemed not to have read my letter and wanted to concentrate only on the question of the grade. Finally, I suggested that the issue of the grade be put aside so we could discuss my concerns about the teacher’s instructional practices. We discussed a few of my points, but the teacher did not budge; problems were the fault of the students.
After my meeting with the teacher, I sent another letter to the principal summarizing my perceptions. I asked the principal to correct any inaccuracies. I received no written correction, and the principal later told me that he could not deny any of my allegations. The principal simply asserted that he could not interfere with teaching strategies that the teacher believed were effective.

When more examples of poor teaching practices surfaced, I sent another letter to the principal asking him to justify the practices. He replied that he saw no rationale for the teacher’s actions, but that he could do nothing about it.

If I thought my story was a rare incident in the world of schooling and that I was over-reacting because I was so personally involved, I would merely deal with my own frustration. But my experience with other parents and teachers convinces me that the problem is systemic. I am both a parent and a teacher; I am proud of my profession and offended that we allow poor teaching practices to go uncontested.

Of course, the system would not allow a teacher to physically abuse a student, or to use racial slurs. But if a teacher is poor at his craft, if he is incompetent at engaging students in learning, nothing can be done.

In the case of my son’s teacher, the principal does not deny that my observations are accurate, nor does he suggest that he believes the teacher’s practices are a good way to teach. He simply says that he can do nothing about it. What is a parent to do? Lacking the choice of schools, a parent might:

- drop the issue and accept the inevitability of inferior education,
- initiate long and expensive legal action,
- appeal to popular opinion by rallying other concerned parents and alerting parents not yet concerned.

All of these remedies seem heavy-handed when the alternative would be for schools to have procedures to respond to parental complaints with legitimate examination of teaching practices. If parental input is truly desired, as the educators at my son’s school say it is, why is it not channeled seriously into the school’s process for continually improving instruction? The answer, I am afraid, is that schools have no processes for continually improving instruction. Otherwise, poor teaching would be first dealt with by the professional staff and not left for a parent to uncover.

There is a long-standing, well-understood, implicit and unwritten rule in schools that teachers’ support of the principal depends on the principal’s support of teachers. Because of this, teachers have advocates on both sides of the table—their unions and their administrators. Students and parents, unfortunately, have little power and no organized advocates. It is not likely that our system of education will be permanently improved until parents
and students have an advocate with power within the system.

The research literature deals with teacher incompetence from the perspective of school administration, but not from the perspective of parents. There is a lack of research on the role of parents in the evaluation of teachers and the improvement of instruction. As a university professor and officer in my faculty's professional organization (AAUP), I am acutely aware of the need to protect the rights of teachers and to support their dignity. But universities typically hold teachers to rigorous standards over a period of several years to obtain tenure and then continue to review their effectiveness through peer and student evaluations. The system is not perfect by any means, but college students have the prerogative of not enrolling in the classes of poor teachers and of selecting colleges based on the strength of their faculties. In public schools, students seldom have this choice, have no advocates, and they and their parents have little influence in the improvement of instruction. Too many public schools have negotiated contracts that permit teachers to teach any way they wish. Too many public school administrators are afraid to take the complaints of parents too seriously for fear of provoking teachers. Schools can not really become communities until all their constituents are afforded respect and all of their employees are held accountable.

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