

Where you can get more info

New York State United Teachers and its national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers, offer a variety of materials to help teachers enlist parents in the educational process.

"Helping Your Child Succeed in School" is a 52-page booklet of practical suggestions and fun activities parents can use to help their children do well in school. The book is part of a series co-published by AFT and the U.S. Department of Education. Others include "Helping your Child Learn Responsible Behavior," "Helping Your Child Learn Math" and "Helping Your Child Learn to Read." Booklets cost \$1 each, but are available to local unions for 65 cents a copy for quantities of 10 or more. Mail prepaid orders to Order Department, AFT, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20001.

NYSUT offers a series of free parent guides, including "Parents As Reading Partners," "Teaming Up on School Discipline," and "Your Child - Middle School Years." Write to: NYSUT Publications, 800 Troy-Schenectady Road, Latham, New York, 12110-2455.

Oct. 7, 1998

Ten things you should never do in a parent-teacher conference... and ten strategies for success. Veteran teachers share their dos and don'ts.

New teachers are understandably nervous about their first parent-teacher conferences. So much to say, so little time! Even veteran teachers still may have qualms about upcoming parent-teacher conferences. To help you prepare, New York Teacher interviewed experienced classroom teachers, including master teachers who offer courses in the union's Effective Teaching Program. Here are their thoughts on 10 common mistakes, along with ways to have a successful session:

1. **DON'T** summon parents into the classroom and direct them to sit in front of your desk. Parents may be anxious or fearful about meeting with you, a key authority figure in their child's life. If you distance yourself, put them in a subservient position, or appear to condescend, you're undercutting the chances of a successful meeting.

DO always greet parents warmly at the door. Plan and create an inviting environment. Accompany parents to a place where you can sit together and converse comfortably. Some teachers opt to group chairs in a semi-circle near a table or other surface where they can share student work. (And make sure the chairs are big enough!)

2. **DON'T** begin by focusing on the student's problem. An Albany-area teacher recalled a parent-teacher conference when she was on the receiving end as the mother of a second-grader. "The teacher's first words to me were: 'Well, she's very messy.' She went on in detail about my daughter's messy desk, her writing - even her hair - until I wanted to

subjective statements such as "His conduct is bad." Instead, cite specifics such as: "She talks out of turn," or "He won't sit in his seat."

DO use materials from the student's work folder. It is much easier to demonstrate progress or show parents concretely what a student needs to do to improve.

- 6. DON'T** point a finger at parents or place blame. **DO** use positive, nonverbal behavior. Listen reflectively. Maintain good eye contact. Lean in when you speak or make suggestions. In your suggestions, acknowledge the stresses of parenting: "I know it can be difficult to find the time to read with your child every night. Try asking your child to read aloud while you're preparing dinner."

- 7. DON'T** dominate a meeting so that

parents can't ask questions or make suggestions. There's so much you want to tell them, but think hard about how much information parents need. Parents are most interested in specifics related to their child, and will almost always have concerns or questions of their own. Allow for occasional silences, which give the parent an opportunity to ask a question or voice a concern.

DO engage parents in planning best ways to help their child. Seek their suggestions first.

- 8. DON'T** send them home empty-handed. **DO** give parents something to take home with them. They can review material more completely and refer back to it during the year. This can also save time at the conference. If you offer a handout on curriculum, for example, you won't need to go over it verbally in exhaustive detail.

- 9. DON'T** use educational jargon or acronyms. This can have a chilling effect on parent communications. Some common buzzwords that you know but parents might not: whole language, math manipulatives, SATs, ACTs,

instructors cover strategies and tips that apply to any grade-level teacher. NYSUT's workshop also examines scenarios, such as an open school night, a meeting with parents of a middle school student whose work has slipped, and a session with an antagonistic parent of a high school senior.

The presentation includes a 35-minute video of teachers demonstrating concrete strategies. For example, an elementary teacher shows how students can be involved in parent night by preparing displays, selecting special work for their student folders, and acting as hallway hosts during open school night.

"Often, the teacher must take the lead explaining to parents how they can assist their child's education - homework, responsibility, discipline," said NYSUT Second Vice President Walter Dunn, who oversaw production of the educational video. "The workshop is representative of the union's commitment to professional growth."

The workshop is one offshoot of a NYSUT task force that developed an action plan to better serve new members as those numbers continue to rise.

"Participants really appreciate the chance to see a model parent-teacher session," said DeCicco, who heads the Rockville Centre Teacher Center. "Our group chose to stay late because they got so caught up in watching the role-play." He noted many elementary schools are moving away from traditional report cards and adding more parent-teacher sessions during the year.

Shirley McCaffrey, who conducted a recent workshop in Warwick, said her group of first-, second- and third-year teachers traded many useful tips. "The one that impressed most people was the idea of sending follow-up letters after open house night," she said.

NYSUT.org. Copyright New York State United Teachers. 800 Troy-Schenectady Road, Latham, New York, 12110-2455. 518.213.6000. <http://www.nysut.org>. For questions about this web site, contact the webmaster at bthomas@nysutmail.org.
