

Friday Focus

From Emory

Perfectionism is Anything but Perfect

There is a folder that I keep in my office, and during the course of the month, between PCS Board meetings, I place information pertinent to the interests of board members in it. Among the items I place in the folder each month are the exit interview forms that are filled out by families of students who have left PCS during the month.

At times we get some rather kind comments directed toward teachers and administration. More commonly, however, the comments are critical and sometimes even biting negative about circumstances or direction taken that a family feels our school has unjustifiably chosen. Almost always, I know the ‘inside’ story of the details (and perhaps even the motives behind the comments), but there is no place on the form for my rebuttal and I try to be careful with where my mind goes in response to what someone has written.

I know I must guard my mind as well as my heart, as dealing with negative and sometimes destructive criticism can take its toll and can adversely affect my own attitude. It’s another reason I don’t read unsigned letters.

Keeping guard over one’s outlook on what we are trying to accomplish through the Lord here, in light of these comments and suggestions, is a struggle with which we all deal. Yet, I must be available and listen to those who have concerns and address the validity and legitimacy of them when they are exposed. Discretion and confidentiality are important attributes, as well, and are sometimes why we are limited in what we can tell staff as to circumstances involving students and their parents.

So how *do* we maintain a proper perspective on our mission as a school and yet remain sensitive to and respectful of critical comments that come from families, and how do you handle them with parents in a conference?

A ‘Christian’ school is perhaps one of the most difficult places to work in education. Like me, I am sure that you, too, run into people frequently who are teachers in other school circumstances and who, once they find out where you work, are quick to point out how wonderful it must be to work in an environment where everyone loves the Lord and is submissive to His Word. (I can hear some of you chuckling now!)

Why is this humorous? Is it because it is not true? Well, no. But then again, yes! What?

Let me explain. The world is ready to attach itself to ‘good things’ that it sees. Most of its expectations are unrealistic and even false. Naïve optimism abounds in our culture and is one area that ultimately becomes the most frustrating to those holding those expectations, and it eventually leads to cynicism.

Many people are shocked to discover that we have sin here, too. But with it, we have expectations because we are Christian educators. The first step in dealing with this conflict is that we must all recognize that we are sinners and that ‘I’ am the chief of sinners. None of us has escaped. In spite of what others may think of a “Christian” school, we all fall short personally in our own sin and we are not very good at stopping others (including our students) from failing as well. (Most of the time we *do* fairly well in our efforts, but sometimes we fail miserably.)

Trying not to sin doesn’t work and trying to make others think that we don’t sin individually or collectively as a school will expose the phony hypocrite that lives inside every ‘good’ person or school. (Don’t try pretending that, it won’t work. In fact, it is repulsive!)

People (including students!) are attracted to transparency, so there is no use pretending that we are the *good* guys. Once we understand that, we no longer have to wear the albatross of ‘living up to’ something. Francis Schaeffer says it well:

If men are going to find a real solution to the problem of who they are, they must come to terms with the fact that they need a Savior because they are sinners in the presence of a holy God. Sin is serious business....On the other hand, knowing that all men are sinners frees us from the cruelty of utopianism. Utopianism is cruel, for it expects of men and women what they are not and will not be until Christ comes.... I have said that sin is serious business, and we must never minimize that. But we are also being less than biblical if we slip into romanticism and utopianism.

Another thing that I have learned over the years is to not take it personally when someone gets upset with me. One of my strengths is that I am a people pleaser. One of my weaknesses is that I am a people pleaser. I, too, am trying to learn to not take it personally when that parent you have known over the years and who has 'come into your circle of trust' has now become upset with you and possibly even turned into a critic because of a decision that you made or a grade that their child earned. One of the hardest lessons to learn in this business is to guard relationships, thoughts, and information.

We must trust God as the provider of our self-worth and significance and not try to get people to recognize and appreciate what we are doing for their acclaim. In fact, I would be willing to bet that most of the disappointment we feel when rejection occurs comes because we are attempting to please the wrong party. When that happens, parental disappointment, disenchantment, even rejection, is difficult to overcome. We feel those negative emotions stir inside us because our motive for service is wrong. We are not here to please mommas and daddies. We are here to please God!

As I deal with the myriad of emotions that come in those difficult circumstances, the Lord reminds me of a statement that I first heard as a parent when I attended one of the earliest Parent Informational Meetings, before our school ever started. In that meeting, our first board chairman, Clay Howell, mentioned that our school sees itself as *a* way of education, not necessarily THE way. It is up to the parents to make the decision about where they will send their child to school and it is one of the most important and personal decisions that they will make. That meant a lot to me then as a parent, and even more to me now as a PCS employee.

Our job as a school is to try to communicate the vision and mission that we feel the Lord has given us for PCS and to ask our parents to pray about whether or not they feel called to join us. We have never tried to convince a family to join us here, and have purposely tried to never talk anyone out of leaving when they become convinced that PCS is no longer the place for them. It is their decision and we will support them in making that decision.

Similarly, when there are tough decisions regarding academic issues, discipline situations, attendance questions, or other circumstances that involve administrative or board policy, we ask that parents support those decisions even if they don't necessarily agree with them. If they find that they cannot support the school any longer due to those decisions, perhaps it is in the best interests of everyone involved if they move on elsewhere. Is that cold? It could possibly be interpreted that way, but I happen to think that it is honest and is in line with what we have said from the beginning.

Giving leadership to the education of other people's children can be a difficult strain. It is difficult because we are dealing with the most precious possession that moms and dads could ever entrust us with- their children. But it can be, and should be, the most enjoyable and rewarding experience that one could ever pray for.

Doesn't that sound just like life and raising our own children? Our priorities and our vision should be to keep focused on Whom we serve and work to please Him.

"Happiness comes from God when we pursue righteousness. When we pursue happiness we get neither." Tim Keller