

Good parental liaison is an essential basis for fundraising and PR.

I was recently talking with colleagues in an urban primary school, and it became clear within the conversation that they had a problem with a small number of parents.

This was not, I hasten to add, because of exam results or an inspectors' report, but rather it was because these parents felt that the school was doing too much.

During the term several trips had been organised, for which of course a fee was charged. There had been a non-uniform day for which £1 was requested as a charity donation. There was the school fete, with all its stalls (traditionally the big fund-raiser of the year), and finally there was the end-of-term concert for which parents were being asked for a further £1 entrance fee.

I should add that the school is in a solid middle-class part of the city, and there will be few, if any, parents who were stretched by these requests for payment. The complaints, in fact, are coming from some of the parents who can most afford the payments.

At the heart of the dispute is the fact that "there's too much going on", and "the children are getting too tired." There's also pressure being put on teachers as part of the complaints. Some have said that because of a school trip being organised the day before the concert their children will be unable to go on the trip or to attend school the day after the concert.

Such complaints are of course mostly nonsense. The school fete, for example, was organised on a Saturday afternoon. The entry fee was 50p for adults and 10p for children, and the stalls were packed with cheap goods. Members of the PTA committee, teachers and some local firms gave of their time voluntarily. Even Starbucks turned up to sell coffee, and gave all the proceeds to the school fund. Over £1000 was raised for the school in one afternoon. It was all good stuff, and, after all, no one had to come.

In such a situation the complaints from a voluble group of parents are dispiriting in the extreme.

However they can be avoided, with a little extra planning.

Most schools send out a letter (and many reproduce it on the school website) to all the parents at the start of each term, giving all the dates in the calendar and all the costs of the events.

But what such letters often don't do (but in my opinion should do) is include a reference to the unstinting work of the teachers, managers and administrators in the school and to the benefits of the activities to the school and the children.

When you tell parents that the staff give up huge amounts of their time free of charge to support the school, it rather puts into perspective the issue of complaining about a £1 donation. By emphasising the benefit that the children get from school trips and from performing in a concert, the parental threats are put into a better context. And by talking about the amount of money raised last year and how it was spent, complaints about “another disruption to our planned weekend” are shown for what they really are.

What then can happen is that if any such moaning from parents resurfaces at any time the school can immediately refer the parents to the termly notice of events, with its commentary about teacher selflessness and educational benefits. In such a way it becomes clear that the school has done everything to make this an excellent school, and that the parents are just carping. Complaints about not knowing in advance are dismissed (because the news went out via letter and by email - and ideally is posted on the internet too) and the complaining parents are marginalised.

Better still, those parents who are never part of the noisy complaining minority are reminded of the terrific work going on and are more likely to throw their support into the school's work even more completely.

Through such simple actions no extra money is raised, but the perception of the school is enhanced considerably, and this, in my view, lays the groundwork for further PR at a later date.

I did not leave the school feeling that it was infested with parents who were particularly ungrateful – rather I felt that there were a few who liked the sound of their own voice and whose own self-importance figured more significantly in their lives than the broader well-being of their children. Sadly, most schools have parents like this, and it is always worth dealing with them in advance.

Tony Attwood