

Parental Grievances

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In all my years as a Protestant Reformed school teacher I have occasionally been disappointed in one area of my teaching experience. That is the area of parental grievances. I have seen firsthand the abuse or ignorance regarding this issue. That is why most Protestant Reformed schools have policies guiding and directing this important avenue of communication among parents, teachers, administrator, and the school board. The proper steps to follow are outlined and mandated as the proper way to handle concerns, difficulties, and problems that will and do arise even in a Christian school. Yet, I have seen these policies ignored or bypassed.

The policies follow one basic pattern and that is to take the concern, difficulty, or problem to the teacher, *preferably in person*, to resolve the issue. If this does not resolve the issue then the next step is to inform the teacher of the intent to go to the administrator. The matter is then brought to the attention of the administrator, *preferably in person*, again for the purpose of resolving the issue. If this step does not resolve the issue, the administrator is informed by the concerned parent that he will be taking up the matter with the school board.

So why are we given the policy of “teacher first”? Why not go directly to the school board and get the matter resolved? After all, the school board is the final authority.

Three things come to mind when looking at this process of teacher first. The first thing is the principle *in loco parentis*. A teacher stands in the place of the parent. This idea is expounded in many books by many authors.

When a parent sends a child to the school, that parent is asking the teacher to stand in his place, to act *in loco parentis*.¹

It is an integral part of the covenantal conception of school to view the

¹ Norman DeJong, *Education in the Truth*, 2003. P&R Publishing Co., 137.

teacher as standing in the place of the parent... this defines the authority of the teacher with regard to the students: it is nothing less than the authority of the parent...²

This is a daunting thing for a teacher. The values and morals of the teacher inevitably are on display. The teacher's love for and discipline of the students are the same as the parents. Any concerns of a parent should go directly to the one who stands in their place. And teachers need to be open and receptive to parents who come to them with concerns.

A second thing that comes to mind is the issue of how we deal with the brother. This process is outlined in Matthew 18:15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." This is the example given by Christ of how to deal in love with one another, and therefore dealing in love for the resolution of conflict between teacher and parent starts with communication at that level. Conflict resolution is not done in the way of bypassing the teacher.

The guideline for parental grievances is based upon the love we have for each other in Christ and the love for the covenant children placed in our care. And isn't our first priority the resolution of that concern or difficulty? An administrator should never have to deal with a parental grievance. Teachers and parents, as members of the same body of Christ, need to direct all efforts at sorting out their differences in humility. Unfortunately, we all have the old man of sin within us and we maintain our foolish pride.

The third thing is that we must always act in decency and good order. I Corinthians 14:40 says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." This means going to our teachers first because that is orderly. They are first in front of our children and have such a great impact in their young lives. It is also decent that teachers hear the complaint first as they are presumably the cause of that complaint. The way to find a solution is to go to them, not complain about them to someone else.

What kind of order is there when a parent brings a grievance to the administrator or the school board? Where is the decency toward the brother when a complaint against a teacher is made public to the school board? Is this walking in love one with another?

2 David J. Engelsma. *Reformed Education*, 2000. Reformed Free Publishing Association, 62.

I am not only an administrator; I am also a teacher. I try to make sure that the line of communication between myself and the parents is always open. But I know I am a sinner, in need of the Savior, and I also know the barriers that sin can create. No one likes to have his weaknesses pointed out or his mistakes magnified. Do I like having real or imagined concerns about myself brought to my attention? Of course not! Therein is my sinful pride. Do I respond appropriately when I am brought before my problems? Ruefully and with shamed face I must confess "sometimes no." Is that an excuse not to come to me with parental concerns? Absolutely not. Matthew 18:15b says, "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained a brother."

There is not an exception to Matthew 18. Matthew 18 does not add that if someone is difficult to approach then by all means go to someone else about him. There is not a phrase that states, "Go, but only if he is willing to repent." I like to apply this to the brotherly love we show each other in our communication of parent and teacher. It is not just a matter of going to the teacher first—but only if you feel comfortable with that teacher. Maybe you feel more comfortable with your administrator and very uncomfortable with the teacher. That is no excuse.

Or, maybe you feel that the teacher does not listen anyway and will only scoff at or ignore your concerns. This then is an issue of trust. Perhaps there is a lack of trust which certainly makes it easier to bypass the teacher altogether. But don't. Your lack of trust should not lead to your lack of decency and good order. A lack of trust is not a stipulation in Matthew 18 so that we may detour around the brother. All this does is to foster bad feelings and a further closing down of communication.

As a teacher I try very hard to make myself available and approachable. I cannot speak for every teacher but I would generalize and say this is true with most teachers whether at the grade school or high school level. We all realize the human tendency to make mistakes and that we are accountable for our mistakes. Yet that old man of sin is never far away. We need to pray and need parents to pray for us as well. Don't bypass us teachers because we are inherently sinful.

I am not only a teacher; I am a parent. I have had the opportunity to speak with teachers about concerns I have had. "Yes," you say, "but you are also a colleague and an administrator. As such you are on better terms and/or even in a position of authority." True, but I speak of the context outside of this when I was neither teacher nor administrator. It is, indeed, very difficult to take a real concern to a teacher. And, if I might add, it is just as difficult as a colleague and

administrator.

I have come to the conclusion that even as the teacher must be humble and must put away pride so must I, as a parent, come in the spirit of love. It must be my desire to work out a solution to the conflict and not to focus upon the teacher and his shortcomings. Philippians 2:3 states, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."

I know that it happens that parents go above the teacher to solve some grievance. This goes against every fiber of my being. Rodney King said after his beating by Los Angeles policemen, "Why can't we all just get along." Succinct to say the least, but it does not even begin to cover the life of Christ we have as fellow believers. For us it is more than just "getting along." We must bear one another's burdens and "look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. 2:4).

When parents go beyond the teacher they are neglecting the one they place in their own position. They do not follow the Christian teaching of love as outlined in Matthew 18. They do not follow school policy and act in decency and good order. And how does that show respect for the authority of the teacher, authority that is conferred by the parent, employed by the school board, and bestowed by God?

I have seen in other Protestant Reformed school policies and as stated in LPRCS's rules and regulations to contact the teacher "preferably in person." Go to the brother and speak with him face to face. If the concern is real then an e-mail or phone call is not enough. Now some may argue the phrase "preferably in person" to mean "if I prefer to meet in person," standing, once again, on foolish pride. I see "preferably in person" to mean "it is better to meet in person." In order to bring a concern I would call or e-mail to set up a time to meet face to face. This mode of communication gives the teacher an opportunity to self-evaluate and to prepare to talk openly with a parent about a parent's concern. If the teacher is not prepared he ends up becoming defensive and short. It is far better to meet face to face where civility and manners can be controlled and accusations and anger be tempered with politeness and respect.

Sometimes proper procedure is not followed. Sometimes the teacher is not given the benefit of speaking with parents about their concern. Maybe the teacher has a gruff and taciturn type of personality. Maybe he is unapproachable. Maybe he is emotional and never wrong. There may be a thousand reasons for not going

directly to the teacher. So we bypass him and go directly to the administrator or the school board.

Sometimes this way is easier for the administrator or school board to handle. I know that sometimes it is done out of a desire to help the teacher. The possibilities are myriad. The administrator can stand as a buffer between disgruntled parents and irritable teacher. The scope or magnitude of the concern might appear significant enough to go directly to the school board, or the parent might be a school board member. There may be very real, very legitimate reasons for going beyond the teacher first but if there is a policy in place, it is set as the standard, the canon, the rule, and it should always be followed.

When parents come to me about a teacher (or teachers about a parent), I ask them if they have contacted the teacher (or parent). This is not a cop-out, a shirking of my duty. This is not a method of avoiding difficult situations. This is required of me by the standard, the canon, the rule, the written policy that is put in place governing parental grievances. Go, in love, to the brother and communicate. Let your light shine even if your brother hides his light under a bushel. "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not: charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Even though it sometimes happens that concerns or grievances are brought that inappropriately bypass the correct route, it is more often done correctly. These are the times I never hear about and shouldn't. These are the instances that shows the wisdom of Christ when he says, "Go to the brother in love." This is proper. I struggle to maintain this approach as parent, teacher, and administrator. So should we all.