

We the Media

What Matters Most to Parents

I predicted that parents' engagement would grow as the pandemic waned, and it has. The most vocal have hit on issues that became politically charged, like critical race theory in the classroom or the appropriateness of available literature. I see most of these headline-grabbing instances of engagement as a distraction from what most educators, families, and policymakers want to focus on: helping all students recover academically, socially, and emotionally.

This fall, my eldest daughter started second grade. After over a year of virtual school, returning to in-person learning was a welcome change. She was happy to see friends and excited about learning. I was confident everything would be okay. Then came our first parent-teacher conference. She is below grade level in reading and struggling in math. There are days when she struggles socially and emotionally. Catching her up and ensuring she has the supports she needs to thrive are my utmost concerns, and I am not alone.

NASBE has always encouraged state boards of education to engage stakeholders, including parents. How can that be done constructively?

Offer Guides. State boards can help parents play an active role in accelerating their children's learning and development with evidence-based, accessible resources. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, for example, offers "Literacy at Home," which provides activities aligned with state grade-level standards for pre-K through grade 5. The Illinois state board takes a whole-child approach in its video series on reading and math development and social-emotional learning (SEL). According to the American

School Counselor Association and ACT, nearly all school counselors say it is moderately to very important to involve parents in developing students' SEL skills, but 78 percent find it difficult to do. Resources such as those Illinois offers can break down barriers between educators and caregivers.

Cut through Jargon. Almost every time I'm with extended family, I get asked about the hot-button education issues at hand: CRT, culturally responsive teaching, accelerated learning. Many parents are hearing and using these and other terms but may not have a firm grasp of them. As state boards, you can educate the public on how these terms apply or don't and on the supporting evidence. Cutting through jargon is hard but can help reduce misinformation and confusion, which produces unfounded fears.

Listen to Students and Teachers. In news stories about controversial education issues, student and teacher perspectives are often absent, even though the matters at hand affect them directly. I urge state boards to ask them how they are feeling about current events and what they are experiencing or find of highest value in the classroom. What do they want out of their education and teaching experience, what do they fear, and what do they need to be successful?

For my daughter, it turns out that a game called Prodigy, which involves magical math quests with wizards and dragons, was the ticket to her recent progress in math. I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact she also loves a fantasy chapter book series called *Dragon Masters*, which her teachers and I discussed during our meeting! ■



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