



Being Proactive is the Best Way to Deal with Parent Pushback

July 31, 2021 by Educator Barnes

“Should we teach about the Civil War anymore?” This was a question I was asked from a concerned teacher who feared potential pushback from parents. Teachers should not have to live in fear of being attacked by parents or community members about what is going on in their classrooms, but it is wise for teachers to be prepared to answer questions about what they are teaching as concerns are being raised across the country about what is happening in classrooms.

I can relate. Recently, I have had push back from Purple from Parents and No Left Turn. Individuals from these groups have raised concerns about my advocacy work, in particular, my teacher and school leader coaching and my work with students. Although it is not pleasant to have unfounded accusations hurled at you, I believe it is okay to question what is happening in schools, to expect answers, and to have changes made if that is necessary. Instead of being reactive, teachers and school leaders should be proactive.

For example, the MSD of Washington Township, where my children attend school, took this approach. On July 21, 2021, the district released a statement about critical race theory and offered an explanation about the foundation of Elevate, the teaching and learning framework of the district. In complete transparency, I am part of the Washington Township Community Coalition which is one of the groups that supports this statement and our representative signed the document. This step is helpful because it makes clear what is and is not taking place in the district.

As a parent who has raised concerns about assignments, I believe parents have this right. Teachers should not be scared to talk to parents about what is taking place in their classrooms. They are the experts on their content and should be able to confidently and clearly explain what is happening and address concerns. As long as the assignments are rooted in academic standards, there should not be any issues. If there are, they can be addressed.

During my first year in the classroom, my teacher mentor suggested I use the novel "Tears of a Tiger" by Sharon Draper. I had a parent request her daughter read another novel because the main character, a high school student and basketball player, was involved in drinking and driving which led to the death of his friend. The parent had concerns about her daughter being exposed to this particular incident in the story. I explained the standards I was using the novel to teach and shared resources I was using with the lesson. Ultimately, I assigned the student a different novel. It was definitely a lot of work, especially being a first year teacher, but it gave me my first opportunity to work through parent pushback.

Changing an assignment is not always the route to take. That same year, I received pushback about having students read about the National Day of Mourning which is what some Indigenous people acknowledge on the day of Thanksgiving instead of participating in Thanksgiving activities. I also had students read "The Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta (Frank B.) James, Wampanoag." James was supposed to give a speech at the 350 year anniversary of the pilgrims coming to America, but the organizers did not approve of his speech. He chose not to participate after he was informed that he could not share his speech at the event. We

also read about the President pardoning a turkey for Thanksgiving and the activities the pardoned turkey gets to participate in. We also read about how Thanksgiving is typically celebrated.

The parent accused me of trying to warp the thinking of students to convince them that Thanksgiving was bad. I invited the parent to attend the class to see how I conducted class discussion and to see the various reading and writing standards I used with the content. I informed the parent I had no intention of making changes and directed the parent to follow up with the English department chair or school administration with further concerns. The parent declined my invitation to sit in my class and did not follow up with anyone I had recommended. I was confident that I was providing a well-rounded perspective and ensuring students were learning and mastering academic standards in the process. If teachers completely change their lessons every time parents have concerns because of fear, students could miss out on important learning opportunities.

What I did not do is tell the parent to complain at a board meeting. People have the right to voice concerns at board meetings, but going to a board meeting is not the best way to have concerns addressed and addressed quickly. Starting with the teacher and school administration is the best approach. In fourth grade, students study Indiana history. Typically students complete a famous Hoosier project. I did this assignment when I was in fourth grade, and my twin sons completed the assignment when they were in fourth grade last school year. My sons were given a list of 65 Hoosiers to choose from. On the list, one person was Native American, eight were Black, and the rest, 56 people, were white. Only ten people were female. As a parent of two Black males, I wanted them to have a more diverse list to choose from. As an educator, I wanted my sons' classmates, whether they were Black or not Black to learn that there are many Hoosiers that exude excellence, and they are not always white males.

I raised the concern with their teacher, and I sent in a list of additions. The list was shared by the teacher to the entire 4th grade team and the teachers said they would update the list for the upcoming school year. I was also given the option to have my sons choose a person not on the list. They had chosen to research Mark Honeywell and Orville Redenbacher. My husband and I ultimately chose to have them stick with the men they had chosen because they were interested in their accomplishments. We exposed them to other famous Hoosiers on our own time.

As a parent, my purpose was to seek understanding and work with the teacher and not attack. Unfortunately, some parents will be in attack mode because they do not understand equity work, social-emotional learning, critical race theory, and culturally responsive teaching. Teachers need to have a clear understanding of those concepts in case they need to explain them to parents. Resources have already been developed to support parents in voicing concerns. The Millstone, which is a blog that focuses mostly on Hamilton Southeastern Schools in Fishers, Indiana, has provided a template for parents to use to send a letter to their children's teachers. One request this letter includes is, "please provide a lesson plan for my review if there will be class content, discussion, or assignments related to: race, gender, gender identity, or LGBT issues, sexuality, equity." This is where school administration needs to be proactive.

School administrators need to make it clear how concerns of this nature will be addressed and how the school administrators will support teachers when concerns are raised. There is nothing worse than having parent pushback and no principal support when pushback occurs.

It is a shame that equity, ensuring every child gets what they need, has come under attack. It is a shame that social-emotional learning is being challenged when there is a pandemic and teachers and students need strategies to cope. It is a shame that some parents are concerned about racism and race being talked about in the classroom while learning academic standards. It does not hurt for all children to learn about the difficulties people of all races have faced as well as their triumphs and successes. In his book "Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know," author W. James Popham states, "The more tolerant and accepting students are towards members of other ethnic, gender, national, racial, or religious groups, the more likely those students will behave properly towards such individuals in the future." Teachers should not be penalized for wanting this outcome for all students. Having a more inclusive education while covering standards allows students to better understand history, relate to others who are different than them, and hopefully grow up into adults who will make a great impact in our world.

Parent pushback is not new. It just has gotten more intense right now. As long as teachers and school administrators are proactive, teachers should not worry about what they are teaching as long as they are covering the skills in the academic standards.