In a Million Words or Less

A request that parents write about their children in a million words or less, is a simple, sincere gesture that reaches out to the parents of your students.

The enormity of the pressure on teachers regarding standards and annual state tests, plus the responsibility to establish a comfortable learning climate, galvanizes the need to positively connect with parents and students. I use an easy and effective exercise called A Million Words to optimize instruction and forge invaluable understanding between students, families, and the school. I cannot recall who gave me this marvelous tool. I cannot claim it as mine, but I can share what was shared with me.

Nearly 15 years ago, I began to prepare a simple handout that asked parents to do the following: In a million words or less, tell me about your child....I still use it. It goes home with the returnables, the plethora of forms and lists that are handed out on the first day of school, but it can be just as valuable at the beginning of the second semester or any time. It is direct and honest, and it values parents by asking them to help me learn about their child so I can do everything in my power to help him or her adjust to school. The sheet simply says, “In a million words or less, tell us about your child.” Parents do the rest. I learn so much from parents and families—about health issues, social upheaval, and other issues that have helped me to be a better teacher and to connect with students and parents.

Over the years, I have adjusted the exercise to accommodate parents who may not be comfortable writing or who do not speak English as a first language. To put everyone at ease with the “assignment,” I usually make a deliberate error on the handout and ask my students to fix it before they take it home. I explain that although I have been teaching for 20 years and I made this error on my final draft, which is supposed to be perfect. I make it clear that I am only expecting a draft from their parents and drafts have mistakes, so their parents need not worry about perfection. It is their message that is important, not the quality of the writing.

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This philosophy has made it possible for the learning disabled parent of one of my students to share this information with me: “I am a learner disabled parent and need my daughter to vocus (focus). Please help her fine books to read and get an education.” And another to write, “It was me you saw dancing in the street when the bus pulled away; he is gifted, fun, and eager to learn...but he can exhaust us!”

One mother trusted me enough to tell me about a very personal part of her daughter’s life, “She has had therapy, but she still needs extra understanding. She failed first grade because of the molest by the babysitter’s husband when she was in kindergarten.”

Of course, not all replies are heart warming. And although I know the value of these missives from the parents and understand that some parents will not embrace my desire to learn about their children, harsh responses continue to rattle my resolve...just momentarily. One solitary expression of bitterness was sweetened slightly with its closing, “After three years at that school, you think you teachers could get it right, but just in case you are a teacher who cares, our child is smart, opinionated, and bored by old material.”

As a member of the MiddleWeb listserv, I offered this idea in response to teacher inquiries of “does anyone have any good tools to start the new year off in a more effective manner?” The response was incredible. One teacher told of a call from a parent who was angry and upset because he could not read or write and his son had to read the “assignment” to him. The teacher was devastated that he had insulted the parent but buoyed by another conversation with the parent when the father called back and thanked him for taking time to find out about his child and the child’s family.

The teachers opened a line of communication with that family that was nonexistent in former school years. The following excerpts describe how the activity can work.

I tried the “Million Words or Less” idea with my 90+ 8th grade middle school students. Since we have a quite a diverse population, I offered the option that if their parent/guardians did not write in English or simply did not have the time to write, that they could dictate to the student and the student would record their words.

Within one day, I had 60% back already and within one week, 99% were returned. Parents and guardians seemed thrilled to be able to share what was most important about their child with me. I gained invaluable insight into my students and my heart has been won over in one short week. I would never have known most of this information throughout the entire year. This has been enlightening for me, freeing for the parents, and rather fun for the students. Most of my students commented that their parents wanted them to read what they wrote. I even had about a dozen parents who word-processed their responses.

Their stories were priceless. They brought me to tears and heartfelt laughter. They made me realize in a brand new way how much most parents and guardians love their children, how much their hopes and dreams are bound up in these children whom we are entrusted with every day to teach.

Our responsibility is great. Yet, we are not alone in this. This is the great beginning of a partnership with our parents in the education of the whole child. Thank you for sharing this idea with us.

— Barbara
I am pleased to admit that I tried this “assignment” this year. So far, I have received about half from my students’ parents and more will come in on Monday after the parents have had a weekend to write about their students. Out of 70 (8th grade) students, only one came to me and said that his stepmother (that’s the only adult he lives with) works two jobs and doesn’t want to “spend time writing” on the weekend. After listening carefully to this boy, I heard something in his voice that prompted me to say, “How about you writing a paragraph or two about your stepmother? Then, you can give it to her to let her know what you think about her? I’ll take that instead.” The next day, the boy came in and gave me two paragraphs about how much he loves and respects his stepmom—made me cry. He was going to give it to her yesterday, so I’ll see what happens on Monday.

— Sarah

I asked my staff to distribute the million words or less assignment during the first week of school. It was a huge hit. Parents responded thoughtfully and enthusiastically. I’ve read most of them and have asked teams to keep them on file to share with one another. Thanks for the idea!

— Chris Toy, principal

Although the beginning of school has passed, it is never too late to make a family connection. The request might be couched, “I have had your student for one semester, and I would like to learn even more about him or her from you—the person who knows him or her better than anyone else in the world. In a million words or less, tell me about your child.” If only one teacher makes this precious connection, at least 100 families have the opportunity to invest in their children’s education by building a strong home-school relationship.

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