

Ep #349: How to Handle Parent Emotions Around Classroom Placements



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 349.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Well, hello, my Empowered Principals. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. Hey, I am actually recording this in place of another podcast episode I had because this came up in a conversation with a client and I wanted it to go on the podcast immediately in real time because this is a topic that comes up for almost every school leader at the beginning of the year. So we're going to put it here in 349 beginning of September and the topic is this class assignment requests.

So some of you have already started school and you've already been through this but some of you have not or some of you are in the middle of it right now and I want to ensure that you have some tools and strategies for the moment and the situation in which a parent or a family member comes and says, hey, I would like to select my class. I would like my child to have X teacher. I would like you to move my child out of this classroom and into that classroom, you know what I'm talking about. Parents who want to request their child's class assignment.

This typically happens in elementary school, but I suppose, I have not taught middle and high school, I do suppose it happens there from time to time when a student comes home and says, I don't like my teacher, or I want a different math teacher, or I don't like this, you know, whatever. I don't like this teacher, I want a different teacher. So it can happen probably at any level. So most likely you're going to experience this at some point if you haven't already. So let's talk about it.

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Let's say a parent requests a certain teacher or asks for their child to be reassigned to a different teacher. Now the first thing that's going to happen in your brain is you're going to have thoughts and opinions about the request. And sometimes your brain is like, you know what, that's a valid request. They stated what they wanted, why they wanted the impact of the request, why they think it's reasonable and you're on board. That might happen. Most of the time not, but it might happen. If it does, that's amazing. It's a win-win right off the bat.

Most of the time, principals feel somewhat offended by the request or annoyed by the request. Two, they're going to have to have a conversation. Three, it impacts a lot of people. Four, there's a lot of moving parts. And five, you might feel personally offended. I was talking with a client, and she said, hey, I don't feel respected. I don't feel that they're respecting my authority, my professionalism, my expertise. I'm doing the best I can. There's no perfect placements. They're just trying to get their way. They're telling me how to do the job. They think they know what's best.

Those are very common feelings. Those are very common thoughts, I should say. They generate emotion. If you're thinking you're not respected, you might be a little offended or that they're not appreciating your professional opinion. You might just be annoyed if you think they're trying to get their way, they're trying to bully you, they're trying to tell you how to do your job. Maybe it makes you feel a little incompetent or a little indignant that they think you are incompetent. You might feel defensive, right? Notice this.

When a parent or a family member asks for a request to reassign their child or to put them in a particular teacher's room, you might have some personal opinion about that. That's your right as a human on the planet. You're going to have thoughts. It's okay. But the key here is to not react to those thoughts without being aware of those thoughts. So when somebody asks you for a class assignment change, you need to check in with yourself first.

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Now, obviously, if it's happening in real time, if they like approach you, they're at the Lemonade Social looking at the class list and they're like, I want my class change. They're going to do that. You're going to breathe deeply. You might want to have a plan ahead of time to say like, we're not going to change anything in this moment. If you'd like to send me an email or make an appointment with the secretary, get on my calendar, we'll have a conversation. don't feel pressured.

In real time, when they're coming to you and you do have the time, you can take a deep breath and you can sit with them and just hear them out and say, hey, I'm willing to hear you out. Tell me everything. What's coming up for you? How are you feeling? What is your concern? What is your worry? Why are you feeling this way? You're just going to ask them a bunch of questions to gain information. You want to get into their steer cycle. You want to understand What are they thinking? What are their emotions? What is it they're worried about? What are their fears? what is the outcome that they're trying to create. You just take it all in, okay? But first of all, you want to notice your thoughts.

So if you have the opportunity to self-coach before you meet with this person, this is ideal. If not, you're just going to take the information in and tell them you're going to contemplate it and you're going to get back to them within 24 hours. You thank them for sharing everything with you. You need to look at numbers. You need to think about how this impacts, there's a lot of moving parts, and you'll get back to them in 24 hours. You do that to give yourself time and space to process your own thoughts and feelings about it, okay?

So when somebody's asking you this and you're feeling offended or defensive, it's probably because it's feeling like some form of attack on your character or your professional opinion or an attack on your level of knowledge or expertise or even your positional authority. So it's okay if you feel resistant, just notice that. We don't want to use that energy to retaliate or to react to that parent.

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What you want to do is notice how you're feeling. Notice the urge to want to dig your heels in. This is the way it's going to be because I said so. Kind of authoritative or authoritarian, whatever it's called. The strict kind of like because I'm the boss and that's how it goes and because I said so. Notice if you're feeling that way.

Now, you probably aren't not going to want to give in. You're going to want to prove your authority or your expert position or opinion on this. But if you make decisions and communicate to the parent, to the family, from this mindset and energy, oftentimes what happens is now we're in a tug of war. We've gone into battle. They don't get what they want. They're going to go to the superintendent and they're going to work their way up so that they can get what they want because you've locked in with them. you've engaged in battle.

It becomes a win-lose or a lose-win. Somebody's going to win, somebody's going to lose. It becomes a competition versus trying to see the land of and. What they're trying to do when they don't feel heard or they don't feel seen or they don't feel validated or acknowledged is that they're going to try and get those feelings from somebody. If it's not you, they're going to go up the chain. They're going to go to the superintendent. They're going to want to talk to your boss. They're going to want to get what they want even deeper than before.

They're going to make a bigger scene. They're going to go to the school board, the local paper, the blogs, whatever, Facebook. They're going to find their validation somewhere else if they don't feel validated from you. I'm saying this ahead of time if you haven't had this experience yet because the goal here is to understand the emotion, the energy fueling the request. It's not as much about the request as it is about what's fueling the request. The fuel may be valid. It might not be appropriate. We don't know yet until we have a conversation with them.

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But what you need to know is when somebody comes to you and says, I want a classroom change, I want assignment change, there's a reason that that parent is requesting this. Your goal is to neutralize what you're making it mean about you and sit down and ask them so you can understand how to approach them. We don't know how to approach them, and we don't want to assume that we know, oh, they're just trying to get their way, or they're just trying to tell me how to do my job, or they think they know better than me, or they just listen to gossip and hear that teacher, and then all of a sudden nobody wants the teacher.

Well, now we have a teacher's feelings involved here, too. There's a student, there's a family, there's a teacher, there's you. And it also impacts, if you're moving numbers around, now it's impacting the whole grade level or the whole department depending on what level you're leading, okay?

So what happens is when people's emotions don't get validated, not the request but the emotions, they will seek out a way to get those feelings acknowledged, validated, vented out. It oftentimes can turn into a very big problem. People will turn little problems into big problems because their emotional regulation has not been reconciled.

Now I get it. In a perfect world, adults would learn and know, because we would have taught them in schools, how to emotionally regulate and how to tune into their emotions and understand what they're asking for and why and where it's coming from and the fuel and is this a projection of themselves? Of course, we would want every human to be in their personal power, in personal development, getting this. But because we don't teach it in our schools, you coming here to this podcast, I'm teaching it to you now as an adult.

So our job is to first regulate ourselves emotionally and neutralize the situation by looking at what are we making this mean about ourselves? What are we making the request mean about them? What are we making it mean about the teachers that are involved here, about the student? You got

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to clarify, what am I making this mean? How am I interpreting this request? Is it firing me up? Does it not bother me at all? Am I curious as to what's going on with the family? Do I understand already? Do I have some perspective? Do I need to talk to the teachers about what's going on?

What are you making this situation mean about you, about them, about the greater good here? You've got to clarify your own thoughts and opinions first. Why do you think they're asking for this? Notice what comes up for you. And then you want to think about, let's look at this from the perspective of the student, the teacher, and the parent. Why might they be asking? If we put our emotions aside just for a minute, what's going on for this parent? Why do we think they're asking? Or does the teacher have any information? Or what's going on with the student?

Maybe the student has a 504 or an IEP and there is a specific conversation that needs to be had in one of those meetings. There is always a reason a parent is asking. Our first step can be to get curious and explore with that parent why the request. And when they meet with you, they're going to feel very, very validated as to their reasons. Their reasons feel very true for them and it seems like the only response. You can let them have that opinion for a while as you're taking it all in.

But I also want you to think about the idea that this isn't a reflection on you as a leader. It's a conversation to get curious about what's coming up for them, what's coming up for their student. And if it is feedback about your leadership, now we're getting into a conversation around receiving feedback. And if maybe we did oversight something, maybe we agreed at the end of the year, this child wasn't going to be placed with that child, but we missed that. And they're together in the same class and we need to rectify it. No problem. It doesn't mean you're a bad leader. It means you're a human who just had an oversight, not a problem.

Maybe we agreed that this child needs a particular style of teacher, or we had agreed this child was going to be in that teacher's class. And

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sometimes it just happens. We can't remember every little detail, every conversation we had last year. So it might be valid. The request might be simple. But when you're coming from the place of they're thinking X about me, or they're judging me, they're criticizing me, what happens is you do the flip. You also get into judgment and criticism.

You want to dig your heels in because you think they're digging their heels in. Notice the energy, okay? So instead of responding with reaction, emotional burst of energy, you want to respond with intention. We want to look for the win-win, win-win here. Because oftentimes it feels like it's an all or none. Either you have to hold firm or you have to give in. It feels like just give in, let them have what they want, make my life easier, they get what they want, but now everybody's going to demand that, and I can't possibly get everybody's requests in, or I have to hold firm and then weather the storm and it escalates up.

It feels like those are the only two options. The empowered principle approach here is where is the win-win? Where might this be a win-win? We have to find out what they want, why they want it, what's the emotion, how are they feeling, what is their concern? and consider the request from the lens of the parent. What might they be thinking? What might they be feeling? What do they want below the surface of the request? It's basically they want to feel certainty. They want to be assured. They want to feel like they're a good parent. They want to feel like they're in the best placement possible for their child. They're advocating for their child.

You want to consider what else the request might mean. Can you separate yourself from the request completely? If the request had nothing to do with you, what else would be going on for these people? And is there a win-win here? Sometimes, the best decision to make is to do the change and to have a rationale as to why. Other times, the easiest thing to do is to say, hey, let's try this. Let's try it for 30 days, and if it doesn't work out, we'll discuss a change of placement.

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If it's truly not working out, this teacher truly isn't providing the service your child needs, if you're truly unsatisfied, if the child's distressed, at any time in these 30 days, we're going to try it for 30 days. I'm going to observe. We're going to check in each week, see how it's going, and after 30 days, if it's still not a fit, let's talk about a placement change.

Oftentimes what happens, people are anxious because they hear rumors. about a teacher, or they're like, I've heard that teacher's mean, or that teacher's no good, or I had a conflict with that teacher, that teacher's terrible at, you know, parent communication. They'll hear something from one person and extract that to mean it's going to be a horrible year for them, for the kid, for everybody. And so they come to you in a panic.

When we give it a go, if there's no valid reason, if there's nothing you can really ground yourself in, and you have strong parameters about a not-appropriate request for a change in placement. You can say, let's give it 30 days. Let's try it. I'll check in with your kiddo. I'll be in there observing. If I see anything, I'm going to let you know. Let's do a weekly check-in. If something comes up, you call me. We will be in touch. I want you to be reassured. I'm hearing you.

And we also want to give students an opportunity to try a new environment. Let's see how it goes. we'll do it with support, and we will give your student every opportunity to be successful, because the goal is for your child to be successful in any environment, to know how to understand and adapt and advocate, and if there truly is anything harmful going on in a classroom, I want to know as soon as possible. I will be in there monitoring. Let's check on it for 30 days. Can we give it 30 days? How would that feel for you? What would you need to feel reassured that your student's in good hands?

I want this to be a win-win. I want your student to be happy. I want you to be reassured that they're safe, that they're going to learn, that it's going to be a great year. What will help you with that? Can we allow 30 days and see what they say? This question is typically so much deeper than what

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you see on the surface. It's more about a parent's insecurities, a parent's fears, a parent's anxiety, a parent's worry. A lot of times it's playground talk between the parents or now Facebook talk. They're talking coffee shop talk, talking about teachers, but we want to be respectful of the teacher, the student, and give that child the opportunity to be successful, that teacher to be successful.

What would it look like if it was an amazing fit? What if this is the best fit for your child? We won't know unless we give it 30 days to try it out. How are you feeling about that? So a conversation with a parent about a classroom placement change doesn't have to be contentious. It doesn't have to be anxiety-ridden. It doesn't have to mean anything about you as a school leader, your capacity to lead, your ability to make decisions. It's not about your expertise or professionalism. It's about a parent who's worried about having the best of the best for their kiddo.

When we can talk from human to human, especially if you're a parent, you can relate as a parent advocating for your child, wanting the best for them. But what the parent wants in most cases is reassurance. I want to be reassured that this is the best place, the right place, and they want to know that they have some kind of an out if it truly is not a good environment for their student. And that's where the win-win comes in. Let's give it a try. Let's assume and give positive intention and give this child an opportunity to thrive. Give the teacher the opportunity to be successful. And if we need to have a conversation with the teacher or with the student or all together, let's do it as a team. Let's make this decision as a team. How does that feel for you? Can you get on board with that?

So again, when you're working with a parent, you want to look below the surface. You want to focus on how they're feeling and how they want to feel. You want to give the teacher and the student an opportunity for success. We can't know unless we try, but the parent needs to be reassured they're going to be okay, they have a voice, they're validated, it's acknowledged, we're hearing you, and let's give this a go. Or you might just

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decide not to. You have to work with individuals, which is why it's important to have parameters.

But in the end, you want to look for the win-win for them, for you, for the greater good of the student, the teacher, and your school at large. This is about a policy, this is about having a plan and a practice in place, but treating students and teachers and parents as individuals and having a conversation on an individual basis, it's not a flat one-size-fits-all because there's different reasons, there's different emotions, there's different fears, different outcomes and expectations. You want to get into that individual conversation to see what the next best move is.

So I wish you an amazing start to the new year. Happy New Year! Happy September! And if you're brand new to the podcast, welcome to the podcast and congratulations! on your school leadership experience. I hope you find this podcast to be extremely helpful. If you do, give us five-star rating, give us a little comment. The more we get five-star ratings, the more we get comments, the more the algorithm allows more people to find us. I'm here to serve you in any way that I can. And as these topics come up, it is my honor, my pleasure to give you as much free coaching as you can.

And of course, you're always invited into the Empowered Principal Collaborative. Have an amazing week. Happy New Year. I'll talk to you soon. Take good care. Bye.

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