

How schools *build trust*



“Thank you for your help. Our daughter had an amazing time at your school. She is coming back with mixed feelings, sad about leaving school but happy about returning home”. Our Admissions department received this message from a Mexican mother after her daughter spent a year in our boarding school in the UK. Messages like that are rewarding. The acknowledgement that both parents and students had a great experience, academically and personally, is a goal that any school should pursue.

It has been said, “companies do not sell a product, they sell trust”. The more I think about that statement, the more I agree with it and recognise its importance to the international school where I work. While education functions as a legitimate business, it is also special because it deals with precious human beings: your children, our students.

When you think about any consumer brand that you prefer, regardless of the industry, you continue to buy that brand because it has won your loyalty by earning your trust. This is especially true in the education industry, where the relationship between the customers – the parents – and the school relies fundamentally on parents trusting the school with their children. The messages that a school receives from

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parents saying thank you and recognising work done well reflects that confidence.

However, that trust is not earned overnight, it takes time. Usually, prospective parents already have an indication that they can rely on a school when they con-



tact Admissions and decide to visit. But that perception should be continually reinforced from their first contact with the school until their children graduate or move on. A good school works on the trust offered to its community 24 hours a day, every single day.

The learning journey of the student – the most important element of this relationship – is more likely to start on the right foot and continue successfully if a school establishes a partnership of trust with both the parents and the students. There are a few key aspects to look for:

1. The school listens. As in any relationship, the first encounter between a family and a school is crucial. While a school will quite rightly use this time to explain the quality of its programs and facilities and how they benefit the students, two-way communication is the key. Asking about a family’s background: where they are from, their child’s previous educational experiences and what their expectations are will help to establish an understanding of whether the school is a good fit for their child.

2. Transparency. A school never wants to have a conversation with a parent that starts with them saying, “but you told me...” schools should be transparent from

the beginning of the relationship, putting on the table all the elements the parents need to know about the culture of the school, the total cost, the profile of the school community etc. No information should be hidden in this relationship, and it is important that all of the family's questions are answered.

3. Honesty. The establishment of an honest relationship with parents is the most crucial element upon which the connection between parents and a school is built. A child's education plays a large role in determining his or her future and there may be moments when parents need to make a strong decision about their child's educational journey. They should be able to rely on the school to support them by providing honest information and advice.

4. Delivering the promise. Parents definitely trust a school when their expectations are met. To ensure that those expectations are realistic, it is the job of the school to present an educational journey that truly reflects the experience the students will have.

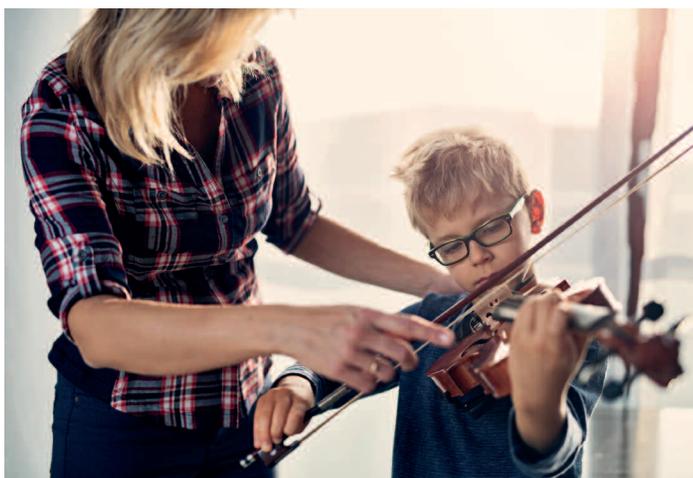
5. The extra mile. Customer service applies, of course, to schools as much as any other business, and sometimes the little details count. When a school goes the extra mile for a parent, it is always a win-win situation and provides a positive impact on the trust within the relationship. For example, a boarding student's parents called to say they were having difficulty buying flowers for their daughter's birthday as they live on another continent. Of course I helped – a small detail – but one that showed sympathy with their situation. As a parent myself, I can understand how hard it is to be away from your child.

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Trust is a living element, one that needs to be constantly nurtured by the school. International school communities often display an innate empathy for families within their community, with relationships made all the more important by distance from home. This is of paramount impor-

tance when a child boards at school, but also applies to day students.

Because of the way our society is structured now, with parents often working long hours and students participating in after-school clubs and activities, during term time our children spend more waking hours at school with the teachers than with their parents at home. This fact alone underlines the importance of establishing a partnership of trust between parents and schools as we work together to ensure that children flourish, not only academically but also as principled, open-minded and compassionate members of the global community our world has become.



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