

PREFACE

Several decades and numerous jobs in education have sped by since I was hired for my first teaching assignment, a fifth-grade classroom at an elementary school in a western suburb of Chicago. There were many highlights and some memorable lowlights during that year. There were 35 students in the class that included 5 rambunctious boys who seemingly met after school to craft plans for how to disrupt instruction the next day. My teammate in the classroom next door specialized in off-color jokes and celebrated the holidays with an aborted attempt to kiss me under the fake mistletoe. I couldn't swear that he hadn't sipped some spiked punch.

I handled the crowded classroom and the lecherous old man next door with very little difficulty. The rambunctious boys were handily dealt with when I petitioned the principal to gather all of the available parents (mothers and fathers) together for an evening meeting and requested that she attend and back me up on my "discipline plan." She agreed and we moved forward to lower the boom on this merry band of bad boys. God bless my principal for standing up for me. Every family was represented, and none of the parents who attended the evening meeting were angry. They were grateful that someone was actually doing something to rein in their naughty children and promised to back up my plan, which required that during the first week there would always be someone available to pick up their son at school if he crossed the line I had drawn in the sand.

I didn't run into my first truly angry parent until the November parent-teacher conferences. I can still replay that conference in my brain complete with surround sound and Technicolor. The surround sound was provided by an irate father incensed that I gave his son a C in math. He accused me of standing in the way of this charming child getting into dental school. The Technicolor vividly displayed both his explosively red face and the blotchy blush of humiliation and embarrassment that spread over my face and ears and down my neck. I barely got through that conference with my dignity intact. I think I remained calm and offered some suggestions for how Jake could bring his grade up for the next marking period. I think I suggested that we have a parent-teacher-student conference and bring Jake in on whatever plan we thought might work. I also made a note to myself to carefully monitor Jake's assignment completion, and if he was failing to hand in just one assignment or got less than an A- on his math tests to notify his parents immediately. I didn't have the nerve to tell Jake's dad that his work habits and unwillingness

to do homework would be more likely to keep him out of dental school than would a C in math when he was 10 years old. After that day, I vowed to purchase a dozen turtlenecks to wear in advance of parent conferences. The turtlenecks would also come in handy when my teammate launched into another round of bad jokes. Thankfully I have outgrown both my blushes and blotches.

In the years that followed my encounter with Jake's dad, my meetings with parents who were angry, troubled, afraid, or just plain crazy would become commonplace. I no longer developed sweaty palms, a racing heart, and blotchy skin. I became a confident teacher and eventually a "prepared for any eventuality" administrator who had acquired the skills to calm the angriest and to counsel the most troubled. In the pages ahead, I'll share the strategies that have helped me deal with out-of-control parents and introduce you to a variety of experienced contributing teachers who will share their own experiences and advice. You will learn how to emerge unscathed from those "close encounters of the parental kind," and even find yourself enjoying the satisfaction that comes from finding solutions to difficult parental problems.

IMPORTANT WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS

The title of this book is an intriguing one that resonates for teachers. There are some rare objections to the term *crazy* that have come from individuals who both work in mental health fields *and* have never been classroom teachers. The mental health professionals were concerned, and rightly so, with the stigma attached to the word *crazy* when applied to individuals with mental illness. However, the term never fails to attract the attention of educators who have been verbally or even physically assaulted by parents who were totally out of control.

Let me hasten to explain that my use of the term *crazy* is somewhat tongue in cheek; it specifically refers to irrational and often explosive behavior that is upsetting to others—whatever the cause. Parents can of course be angry, troubled, and afraid without being irrational. In fact, there are dozens of situations that demand a strong dose of righteous indignation. However, when parent behavior crosses the line from being assertive and appropriate to being dangerous, hostile, demeaning, threatening, manipulative, or aggressive, it not only becomes "crazy" but also tends to make educators a little "crazy" themselves.

I wish to be sensitive to my colleagues, friends, and family members who are dealing with depression and anxiety and any other disorders of which I am not aware, and I intend no offense or prejudice. While writing this book, I have come to prefer the term

dysfunctional. There are many things that can be described as dysfunctional—families, bodily systems, and interpersonal relationships. Dysfunctional parents as described in this book can and do fall into all of the categories set forth in the book’s title. What these various types of dysfunctional parents have in common is this: the inability to function in somewhat normal and predictable ways. Their own needs, insecurities, quirky personalities, and mental health diagnoses make forming positive relationships with them almost impossible in some cases. Recent teacher surveys conducted by Corwin have indicated an intense interest by newer teachers in how they can more effectively deal with difficult parents. However, there are many audiences who will benefit from the advice and strategies found in the book.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

I have written this book for the following audiences:

- Newer teachers for whom traditional teacher training has provided little background information or practical strategies for dealing with difficult parents
- Prospective teachers who are in preservice programs
- Experienced classroom teachers who struggle with developing the personal confidence and appropriate interpersonal strategies they need to become well-rounded teachers who can deal with difficult parents
- All teachers who need more specialized information as preparation for attending and participating in IEP meetings and annual reviews with parents
- Principals and teacher mentors who need resources to support novice teachers as they face difficult conferences and interactions with parents
- College and university instructors of teacher-training courses who wish to introduce prospective teachers to the challenges of interacting positively with diverse parent communities

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Chapter 1 describes the five facets of today’s education landscape that can interact in potentially explosive ways to create an epidemic of angry parents: (1) the increasing

variety of today's family units; (2) the needs, issues, and problems of today's students; (3) a continuum of types of schools ranging from those that are highly effective to those that are low performing and close to failing; (4) the all-too-human but totally inappropriate things that teachers do that irritate and inflame parents; and (5) nearly a dozen categories of parental types, all of whom can become angry and distressed at a moment's notice.

Chapter 2 contains more than two dozen tips to implement proactively. They will help you get out ahead of parent problems. Implementing just one or two of the tips and consistently following through with them from the beginning of the school year to the end will make an amazing difference in your relationships with parents.

As proactive as you may be, however, there will always be parents who defy all of your efforts and break all of the rules. For these parents, you need something more substantive. Chapter 3 contains a variety of responsive strategies for defusing parents who are angry, troubled, afraid, or just seem crazy. This chapter will help you to ease the fears, calm the troubled spirits, and shut down the angry outbursts of parents so that you can move to exploring what the problem is and coming up with an action plan to solve it in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 explains numerous helpful exploratory and action strategies, including a seven-step problem-solving process to help ensure quick solutions to the problems that worry and trouble parents.

In Chapter 5 some experienced educators describe their most memorable angry-parent encounters and then ask and answer the question you should always ask yourself after a traumatic meeting with a parent: *What can I learn from this experience?*

Chapter 6 contains a set of tools and tips to guide you in putting your best self forward as you deal with a variety of types of challenging parents. It will remind you of the importance of continuing to grow and develop your best self.

The Conclusion summarizes the book and enumerates 10 goals that, when achieved, will guarantee your success as a highly effective teacher who can handle every parent problem with a calm, caring approach.