NAIS Article on the Dual Role of Faculty Parent, Diane Dillon, Annete Raphel, 2011

Here's a riddle: In independent schools, when is your greatest gift your greatest challenge? Answer: When your child is also a student in your school.

One of the most coveted benefits of teaching in an independent school is that, in many schools, your child can attend tuition-free or at a significant discount. But as any educator who has taken advantage of this benefit knows, having dual roles in a school — that of school administrator or teacher *and* parent of a student attending the school — has its challenges, too.

Both of us have worked in schools in which our children have been students. For me (Annette) there was the added layer of being a division head and parent. Oftentimes, the tension between the two roles would surface. When, for instance, my son said to me one day, "What do you mean I can't dye my hair green? Lots of kids in my class are doing it," I wanted to respond, "Yeah, but lots of kids don't have a mother who happens to be a division head in the same school." When I held fast against green locks, my son's raging about rights and individuality went on interminably. On one level, I actually didn't care. Dying his hair would be a more or less harmless act. On another level, however, I cared deeply about the symbolic message that granting my son his wish would send to the school community. Not only that, I really didn't want to invite any questioning from colleagues or other parents about *my* parenting skills; being a division head was predicated, at least in part, on the confidence that other parents saw in my ability to help raise their children. The more invisible my child was in the school, except for obvious successes, the better things would go for me.

Was this fair? Not exactly, but I rationalized that the small, as I calibrated them, sacrifices my son would make were more than compensated for by the enormous privilege of attending a great school — one, by the way, that he never would have access to if I weren't working there.

If you are a teacher or administrator with a child in your school, this no doubt sounds familiar. The dual role is a complex mix of one's public and private lives — the professional and the personal. And we've both seen how this can play out badly in schools:

• A sixth grade teacher has a parent meeting with a colleague who has a daughter in the class. The daughter is struggling academically and socially and the mother/colleague reacts to the troubling report with an unusual outburst of emotion — ranging from frustration to embarrassment to anger — and then rushes out of the school in tears. She had been scheduled to lead a large faculty meeting later that day.

• A teacher who has a child in the school is put on probation for poor performance. He responds angrily about what he perceives to be an unfair evaluation process. When the dean of faculty and head stand firm on the probation, the teacher announces that he is contemplating legal action against the school. It turns out, however, that what worries him most is his son's future education. Absent this concern, the probation would have been a more routine personnel issue.

• A new teacher comes in the middle of a school year to replace a teacher on medical leave. A faculty child in this new teacher's class struggles with an assignment that both the student and

his parents perceive as too stringent, and one that exceeded the expectations of the teacher on leave. The faculty member/parent of the child, it turns out, has inside information about the course as it had been taught. Combining this knowledge with a few inappropriate phone calls to other parents in the class generated a perfect storm of backlash against the substitute teacher.

This is just a small sampling of the complexity of being a parent and a faculty member at the same school. Normally, parents are not in the school or the classroom during the school day, nor do they have access to their child or their child's teachers during the school day. Generally, parents are not privy to confidential information about the inner workings of a school or the faculty or about other students and their families. Usually, parents are not approached for professional advice when they are off work — say, while picking up or dropping off their child at a play date. However, when parents are teachers at a school, the usual boundaries and norms or tacit rules of behavior about who can do what and when is less clear.

This can — and often does — create many awkward and distressing situations as parents and colleagues struggle to navigate the clouded boundaries. It can also raise issues around power and authority. If you have a child in your school, and he or she is in a class taught by a teacher that you supervise, it takes real clarity of understanding to keep your two roles separate from each other.

One administrator we know has a special, custom-made baseball cap. On the back it reads, "Mom," and when she attends her daughter's games, she spins the cap around backwards so the "Mom" label is displayed prominently in front. Her daughter's friends' parents got the message: no school business on the playing field. Any colleagues attending the games also get the message: she is off work now. This is certainly an effective solution. What we've come to see, however, is that the schools that are proactive in supporting teachers and administrators who are parents of children in the school are also the schools where there are fewer incidents of messy boundary crossing. One school we know even has an affinity group for faculty who have children enrolled at the school. In the privacy of the group, under the guidance of the school psychologist, faculty parents have ongoing, thoughtful conversations about strong feelings, successes and failures, challenges, anecdotes, and worries.

Despite the fact that most independent schools enroll some of the children of their faculty and/or staff, there is little that has been written about how best to manage these dual roles. To that end, we offer these preliminary guidelines.

Suggestions for School Administrators

When faculty members choose to have their children attend the same school at which they work, the school administration should welcome the children and share with the faculty members some of the benefits and challenges that they should consider. Specifically, a school administrator might do the following for the faculty member/parent:

• Outline the typical attitudes and issues of parents, teachers, and administrators at the school on this topic;

• Have faculty members with children in the school complete a brief survey on the anticipated benefits, challenges, and concerns about having one's child in the school;

• Offer the parent/faculty members peer contacts so they have someone to speak with about their experiences;

• Develop guidelines and suggestions about how to optimally navigate both roles in the school;

• Support the formation of an affinity group for faculty members who have children in the school. The group should be facilitated by a psychologist or another thoughtful colleague *(i.e.*, a counselor or experienced faculty member);

• Let faculty members with children in the school know that you welcome further discussion about the complexities of these dual roles at any time; and

• Express appreciation for the extra wisdom and loyalty that faculty parents often bring to the school community.

Suggestions for Teachers

When dealing with a colleague who has a child in the school, make sure that you're clear about your relationship in any given situation. Sometimes, you are a professional colleague, sometimes the teacher of the colleague's child, and sometimes a friend. Generally you should do the following:

• Review the boundaries of your roles. When you are approached by a colleague with a child in school who wants to discuss either his or her child or another child in the school, consider which "hat" you have on at the moment (colleague, friend, or teacher). If the conversation involves the colleague's child regarding his or her experience in your class, it's often best to request that the colleague make an appointment — so you both understand your formal role in this conversation.

• Remember that parenting is one of the most difficult jobs in the world. Even when one knows what to do, it is often difficult to implement. Be patient and compassionate with your colleague when he or she struggles with a parenting issue. Remember, too, that colleagues with children in the school feel an additional level of pressure to be good parents.

• When talking with your colleague about his or her child in your classroom, always state first what you are pleased with and what is going well. Your opinion matters a great deal to your colleague. Even a self-assured colleague needs reminders about what is going well for his or her child.

• If your colleague tries to discuss other children or parents with you in the context of a parent meeting about his or her child, make it clear that you can't do so in this context. You can say, "Let's focus on how I can help you and your child today."

• When a colleague approaches you at an inopportune time *(i.e.*, at drop off, in the elevator, the cafeteria, or the hall) to discuss an issue with his or her child, say, "I'm sorry. Now is not a good time. I'm glad to talk when I can give you my full attention. Can we make an appointment to discuss this?" This same rule holds true for any parent or colleague, by the way.

• Acknowledge to yourself — and to colleagues with children in the school — that all children are individuals — and any challenges or problems a child might face in the course of a school year are not a reflection of your colleague's parenting skills.

• Seek advice from your head if you are unclear about how to proceed in the most effective and compassionate manner when you have an issue with a colleague with a child in the school.

Suggestions for Teachers with Children in the School

Teaching is challenging enough. To teach in a school in which your own child is also a student adds another layer of complexity. In addition to being patient with yourself, consider doing the following:

• Before entering into a conversation with a colleague, ask yourself, "If I didn't work here, would I be doing or saying this?" If the answer is "no," reconsider what you are doing.

• Review the boundaries of your roles. Which "hat" do you have on at the moment? Should you make an appointment with a colleague to discuss your child's experience in your colleague's classroom? In general, is there an appropriate process that you should be following — in the best interest of your child and the school?

• If you work at a school, you should know that your opinion about school-related matters often carries more weight than the opinion of a parent who doesn't work there. For this reason, think twice before you say anything disparaging about the school to other parents. Of course, you are entitled to your feelings, but it is better to share your views with school personnel who can improve a situation than to contribute to negative discussions that don't resolve an issue.

• If parents try to discuss other children with you, clearly and kindly state, "I'm sorry, but I can't discuss other students with you. I'm glad to talk more with you about your child." Say to a parent who insists on talking about the school, "Great point. Have you shared that with the principal? I know she's always eager to hear from parents."

• It's unnecessary to feel guilty or worry too much about knowing another teacher's weaknesses — all teachers have strengths and weaknesses. When a parent who has a child in the same class as your child wants to talk with you about the performance of their teacher, encourage that parent to speak directly to the teacher or the head. Make it clear that it's not appropriate to discuss colleagues with parents.

• Know that, over the course of your child's educational experience, he or she will experience a range of teaching styles, with varying strengths and weaknesses. If your child is struggling with a particular teacher, help your child as best you can, but never denigrate a colleague. If you feel

you need to speak with the colleague about your child's experience in his or her class, do so with respect and understanding.

• State clearly to other parents who want to talk with you about the school, "I appreciate your interest in the school and in my opinion, but I'd rather not discuss the school while I'm in my Mom/Dad role. I'm glad to make an appointment with you to discuss this during school hours."

• When meeting with your child's teacher, always state what you are pleased with and what is going well first. Your opinion matters a great deal to your colleagues — be kind!

• When you have issues with either parents or one of your child's teachers in the school, and you are unclear about how to proceed in the most effective and compassionate manner, seek advice from your head.

The bottom line for administrators, teachers, and teachers with children in the school is that it always helps to be proactive in an appropriate, calm manner. Remember that no school or teacher or parent — and that includes you — is perfect. There are always challenges at schools. When they rise to the surface, the goal is to be discreet and respectful at all times. Practice the respect and kindness you teach your children. At the end of the day, remember that everyone involved wants the same thing: what is best for the child.

The reality is that being a faculty parent, along with challenges, is an exceptional opportunity. There is the obvious privilege of an outstanding education for your child. There are also quiet privileges that you enjoy, like understanding the larger context of the school and its mission, and understanding that the latest crisis may be more of a developmental normality than an aberration. For the school, the loyalty and perspective of faculty parents is welcome. The key is to understand the complexity of these dual roles and be out in front of it, communicating the delight and potential challenges while also providing strategies to enhance one's experience in the dual roles of faculty member and parent.