

# Reading Between the Lines: Leadership and the School/Family Partnership in Day Schools

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[This is the third article in our [series](#) on day school leadership from the Leadership Commons of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS. In this series, alumni of our leadership institutes share their visions of effective day school leadership, reflecting on their aspirations for the field and describing paths toward those goals.]

*By Thabatta Mizrahi*

It was a last-minute school tour set up by my assistant. I welcomed the father and he immediately began to speak in Spanish, telling me that his wife did not even come to tour because they had already decided on another school and program. The only reason he was here, he explained, was because people had told him that he needs to at least take a tour. I gestured for him to take a seat and poured him a glass of water. He took the glass and as he sipped, suddenly said, “Oh, my goodness, do you speak Spanish?” I nodded, we laughed, and as he sighed, his entire body appeared to relax. I explained that we would just tour, and if for nothing else, maybe one day he will have the words to describe our school to another family that needs it.

Throughout the tour he appeared comfortable, making jokes and asking insightful questions. The more thoughtful answers provided, the more excited he seemed and the more questions he asked. This proceeded for 45 minutes. As the end of the tour approached, he looked pensive and almost worried. I asked, “Is there something wrong?” He responded, “Yes. I have no idea how I am going to explain to my wife that she has to come take a tour and we might lose our deposit at the other school. Can we come back and actually talk about my son? I think I am ready.”

These relationships begin with a tour, where we attempt to highlight all that we do in a school, in less than an hour. The key is to read what the parent is saying between the lines. When the school is a special education environment, there are additional layers to read and understand. Patience is key as we embark on this partnership. While it is partially about the evaluation results and academic history of the child, it is primarily about what the parent shares and chooses to leave out. It is about the body language: the sparkle in their eye when you interpret their intentions and describe something that sounds familiar; a look of relief and the release of tension in their shoulders when you explain your school’s vision on a particular topic; the smirk around the side of the mouth when you answer a question they posed on purpose but crossed their fingers under the table hoping you had the answer they hoped for as well. It is filling the space in the air with words because if you don’t, they may either cry or punch their partner in frustration. It is about being silent, allowing the pause to speak louder and the quiet to comfort. It is about presenting a smile, offering an answer, posing a question, or providing a hug. It is about offering hope and knowing when to console with the absolute answer, even if it is difficult to hear and support with a plan of next steps.

For eight hours each day, we engage in the humbling responsibility and inspiring opportunity of expanding the minds, hearts, and souls of children, knowing full well that the ripple effects of this interaction expand to our staff, the student population, the community, their homes, and yours. In between those pages of a student's medical and academic documentation lie mounds of hopeful uncertainty, life-changing moments, decisions that had ripple effects, emotional investments far more expensive than any invoice detail, delivery of truths, sleepless nights, and exchanges of trust. Those files are heavy. They feel heavy because they now weigh on you as well. That is why it is critical we forge a partnership with our families.

Every family begins their journey at a different start line and progresses through the journey at a different pace. Even though it is about their child, it is very uniquely the entire family's journey. It is incumbent upon us as educators or leaders in education to understand and read between the lines when we speak to parents. It is so much more than an exchange of words. It is a dance. It is a dance where the pauses are as crucial to the choreography and synchronicity between the partners as the movements. The exchange doesn't only happen when words are spoken. It happens when the eyes meet, when the tissues are passed, when the hand is held, when the sighs are exhaled together, when the smiles fill the room. It happens even when the anger is allowed to come out and is met with no resistance.

In fact, there is more said in those moments than any words that can ever be chosen. It is in those moments – and all the others in between – that the partnership between educator and parent, school and family, begins and continues to strengthen. Only with that strength can we partner on decisions, find solutions, and learn lessons together. The dance is long and can at times grow tiresome; the partnership can go out of sync. That is when the power of trust, sincerity, and transparency makes all the difference. It is and will always be a messy entanglement of emotions, egos, ideals, ideas, hopes, history, dedication, and determination. Pretending it is anything else is self-defeating, and trying to copy-paste from past experiences without an open mind to change is a setup for failure.

It is a journey we embark upon knowing full well we may have all the tools and none at all, that we have all the will and still err, and that we may see it all unfold and still feel blind. It is scary, it is arduous, and it is also inspiring and worthwhile. While we may be key players in this journey, we may remain completely invisible, because ultimately we are participants in someone else's journey. We must never forget how vulnerable the parents feel when they engage in this dance with us. We must never forget that the process shapes them – and us – just as much as it shapes their child. We must always and forever be humbled by this daily so that we can enter and remain in this conversation with the correct poise and state of mind.

*Thabatta Mizrahi is the associate head of school at Keshar LD, a Jewish day school for special needs children in North Miami Beach, FL. Thabatta is a member of Cohort 10 the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI), a program of the Leadership Commons of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS.*