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Dear Haynes Families,

In her book, The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes about the partnership and conversations between parents and teachers, arguing “that families and schools are overlapping spheres of socialization, and that the successful learning and development of children depends, in part, on building productive boundaries between and bridges across them”. A sociologist and professor of education at Harvard University, Lawrence-Lightfoot interviewed parents and teachers in both suburban and urban environments to gather information about this “essential conversation” that occurs multiple times during the year, in both formal and informal contexts – the parent/teacher conference as well as the quick exchange in the hallway before school.

Our administrative team, composed of superintendent, assistant superintendent, other central office staff, principals and assistant principals explored the ideas in this book at one of our fall meetings. We found that our reactions and ideas were informed not only by our experiences as educators but by our experiences as parents as well. I remember my first parent/teacher conference when my daughter was in kindergarten. My husband and I entered the room. The teacher seemed quite young. We sat down, hoping to hear informative things about our child as a learner, and of course, hoping that the news would be “good”. The teacher said, “Well, I don’t have much to say other than she’s doing very well. Do you have any questions?” We left the school, relieved that our daughter seemed to be doing well. But we felt this emptiness. Did the teacher really know our daughter as an individual? Was she doing “well” because her behavior didn’t require undue attention from the teacher? I wanted to learn more about my child’s learning style from another’s perspective. Suggestions for supporting her progress at home would have been helpful.

Lawrence-Lightfoot makes suggestions as to how to build bridges between teacher and parent perspectives to improve the conference experience. First, she speaks to the need to focus conversation on specific information about the child, developing trust from this kind of exact information exchange. She stated, “Several teachers...say that conferences, despite their predictable form, must never become generic. They must speak to the individuality and idiosyncrasies of the child. The best way to keep focus on the child and feature his or her individuality is to use evidence of the child’s work and progress in school”. Examples of work to share might include children’s achievements on assessments, anecdotal information about their activities (academic and social), and records of their written work. Parents who ask specific questions are more likely to get the specific feedback they desire. Prior to a conference, parents may pose questions they’d like to discuss, allowing sufficient time for a teacher to prepare to address issues of particular interest or concern. Similarly, it is important for teachers to listen to information provided by parents. As Lawrence-Lightfoot states in the book, the parent perspective is “an essential complement and counterpoint” to the teacher’s perspective.

Second, Lawrence-Lightfoot speaks to the challenge of the different filters or lenses, and personal experiences each teacher and parent brings to the conference experience. She posits that “Every time parents and teachers come together, their dialogue is to some

extent related to their early childhood experiences, which get rehearsed and replayed in the classrooms of their children...It is as if there are two plays being enacted simultaneously: one in which the adult actors speak rationally and clearly about the young person for whom they are responsible, and a second drama that goes on inside, where adults reenact scenes from their own childhoods". Every parent has been a student. Every teacher has been a student. Our past experiences in schools, positive or negative, influence how we share or hear information about the children in our mutual care. The author talks about the importance of listening carefully to one another, respecting and valuing what the other knows and sees. "Putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and seeing the world from the other person's vantage point" leads to empathic sharing and problem solving. Lawrence-Lightfoot recommends "that teachers and parents...must move beyond their frame of reference, and travel the distance to 'the other'."

The parent/teacher conference can be fraught with worry on behalf of both teachers and parents. Lawrence-Lightfoot interviewed a teacher who described the conference as being the part of teaching that left her feeling raw and vulnerable even though she felt quite confident in her teaching. Confidence in teaching young children does not automatically translate into feeling secure with holding meeting with parents. For teachers, becoming skilled at conferences comes about as a result of strong mentoring, and lots of experience, and hopefully, many supportive parents along the way. The anticipation of a conference can likewise leave parents feeling anxious and fearful. One mother described the apprehension she felt when a teacher called to schedule a routine conference. "It is like if your doctor called and said, I want to see you about the results of the tests that we did last week...and you say, 'I'm free tomorrow...or how about tonight!' You want to rush there as quickly as possible. You can't wait for the news." As a parent, there is nothing that can make you feel more proud, more unsettled, more anxious or more joyful than the information you learn about your child or children throughout the years. And that is why the parent/teacher conference can generate uneasiness for both teachers and parents.

In this book, there is so much interesting discussion about the home-school connection, it is impossible to give each topic just consideration. Perhaps the overriding message conveyed to the reader is a phrase used by one of the interviewed teachers in the last chapter. "*We* is my favorite word." How can *we* work together to help the child to be the best that he or she can be?

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The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn From Each Other, by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Ballantine Books: NY, 2003.