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## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

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## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

### Abstract

This article explores how Back-to-School Nights could be an opportunity for teachers to share who they are and why they love the content they teach with the parents who attend this fall event. It shows how beginning teachers built on an example from a veteran teacher's Back-to School Night presentation and incorporated PowerPoint to introduce themselves and their classroom content and expectations.

### Keywords

Teaching with Love, Teacher Preparation, School-Family Connections

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# Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

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*This article explores how Back-to-School Nights could be an opportunity for teachers to share who they are and why they love the content they teach with the parents who attend this fall event. It shows how beginning teachers built on an example from a veteran teacher's Back-to School Night presentation and incorporated PowerPoint to introduce themselves and their classroom content and expectations.*

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As I entered the high school that September evening I realized it was my final Back-to-School Night; my daughter was a senior. My husband and I checked her class schedule and I resigned myself to enduring the format: 10-12 minute overviews of the curriculum for each of her classes with no time for questions. At least I would know her daily schedule, see each classroom, and be able to put a face to each teacher's name when she told me stories of her school day as the year progressed.

First period was Spanish I. The classroom was part of a cluster of rooms, called porches, and was located on the inside, so it had no windows. But as we entered it felt bright and inviting. The walls were covered in photos as well as scarves of Spanish soccer teams. Her teacher was standing in the front of the room with a big smile on his face. He warmly welcomed us and then shared, "I love teaching Spanish! I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to share this passion with your students." He went on to provide us with a bit of personal information—including where he grew up, Ohio, and where he went to college. He also told a story about traveling in Spain. He made it clear his focus for the class was speaking Spanish. They would not be using a textbook. He then made a point of asking the parents of the four seniors who had decided to take Spanish I to raise their hands. He looked right at us and said, "It's a surprise and a privilege to have your kids in this class. They are great role models for my younger students." And then he told a story of how the seniors had helped with a freshmen

## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

student who was still figuring out classroom expectations. His passion for Spanish and teaching were compelling.

Unfortunately, this first period presentation was the exception not the rule as we made our way to each of the courses on my daughter's class schedule. Although there were other teachers who were welcoming, most appeared to be going through a checklist of information. They did not share much about themselves; I did not feel their passion for their content area or for teaching.

### **Application for New Teachers**

When I had the opportunity to confer with new English Language Arts teachers about how to prepare for a fall Back-to-School Night, I drew on this memory of my daughter's Spanish teacher, as well as my own Back-to-School Night experiences as a former secondary ELA teacher and principal. I wanted new teachers to see this required event as an opportunity to share who they are and their passions and beliefs about teaching and recognize it as a first step in building relationships with parents.

Although secondary schools may vary regarding their format for Back-to-School events, a typical structure involves parents following their child's class schedule, with short presentations by each class period teacher. The goal is to share information about classroom expectations and curriculum content in a succinct format.

But I wanted to add to this goal. I wanted the new teachers with whom I was working to share who they are and why they love the content area they teach. We began our conversation about Back-to-School-Night presentations by thinking about audience. What would parents want/need to know? Before we could answer this question, it was clear we needed to talk about the concerns new teachers expressed regarding this event, which would require talking to a room full of parents. I empathized—sharing my own fears as a teacher and also sharing my stories of being a parent at Back-to-School Night. New teachers who were parents also shared their stories and perspective. We then talked about the importance of building relationships with parents at this beginning of the year event. As school reform researcher and principal Deborah Meier notes, “. . . parents must be given enough opportunities to feel comfortable that the school's and teacher's intentions are good, that staff members rather like their kids and expect a lot of them” (2002, p. 53). I then revisited the specifics of how my daughter's Spanish teacher had modeled this opportunity in his Back-to-School night presentation.

### **Sharing Passion with Parents**

## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

This led to a brainstorming session on how to use this first interaction with parents to share who we are as teachers and our passion for and approach to the content students would be experiencing in our classrooms. We came up with the following categories:

1. ***Who you are as a Teacher:*** Brief introduction about education, number of years teaching, and a fun fact about a hobby or interest.
2. ***Curriculum Content:*** What is the focus of the curriculum? Emphasize the big picture goal of supporting students as readers, writers, and critical thinkers.
3. ***Classroom Community Expectations:*** Frame expectations and routines that create a community of readers, writers, and thinkers.
4. ***Overarching Goal:*** Show parents your confidence, skill, and passion for teaching English Language Arts to adolescents.

### **Making Yourself “Visual”**

I then suggested that if we wove these categories into PowerPoint presentations, we could incorporate visual support. I am not always a fan of PowerPoint presentations, but given the limited time of most Back-to-School Night formats, being able to use words and pictures could be helpful.

Creating my own PowerPoint as a model to share with the beginning teachers allowed me to share my process as well as what not to do. My first draft Power Point was too long—too many slides and too much reading on each slide. I had to rethink my approach. I found it helpful to go back to the brainstormed list of categories we had created, but I changed the order.

### **Overarching Goal**

Starting with a slide depicting the overarching goal for the course worked well for me and for the beginning teachers. Debbie, a middle school teacher, chose to focus on “Use Your Words.” She showed how words were the center of her classroom community.

## In Our Classroom Community

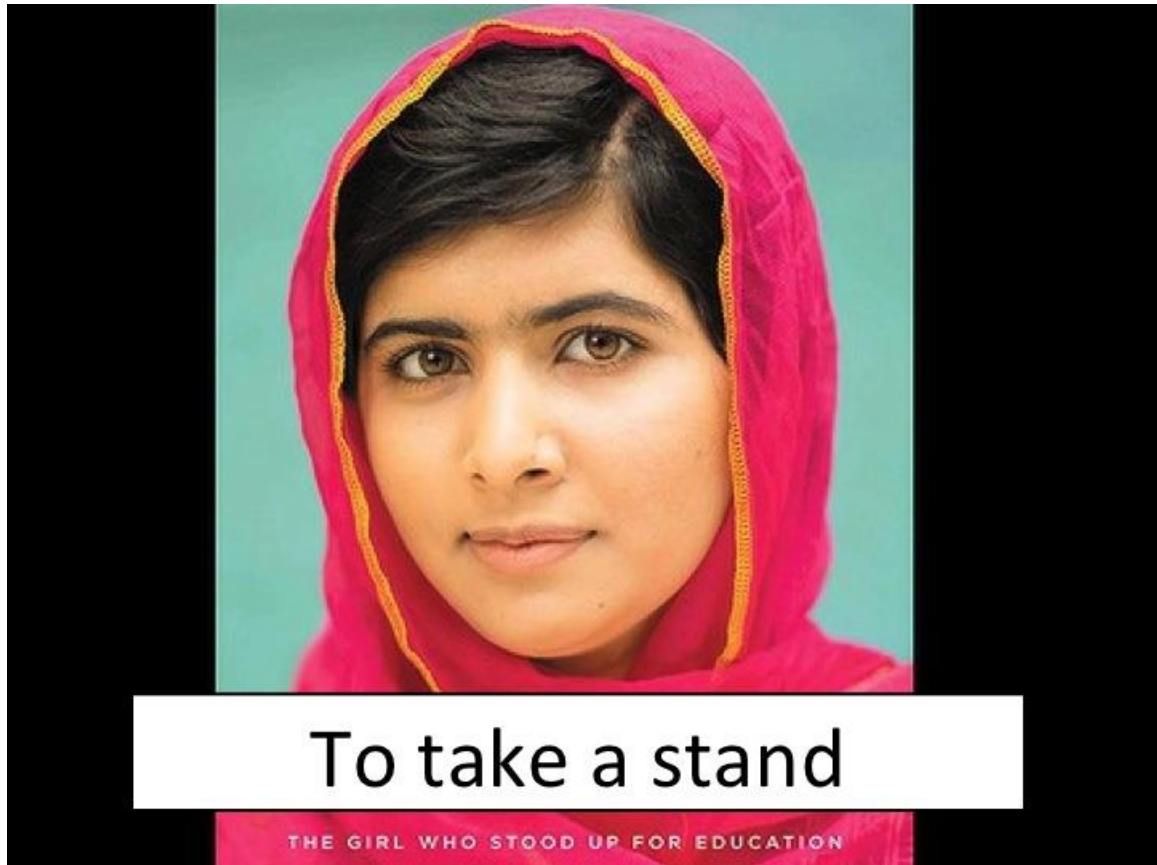
We will explore the power of words

We will practice powerful communication

Communicate = Write + Read + Listen + Speak

She then wove a series of photos to illustrate the power of using our words. For example:

## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

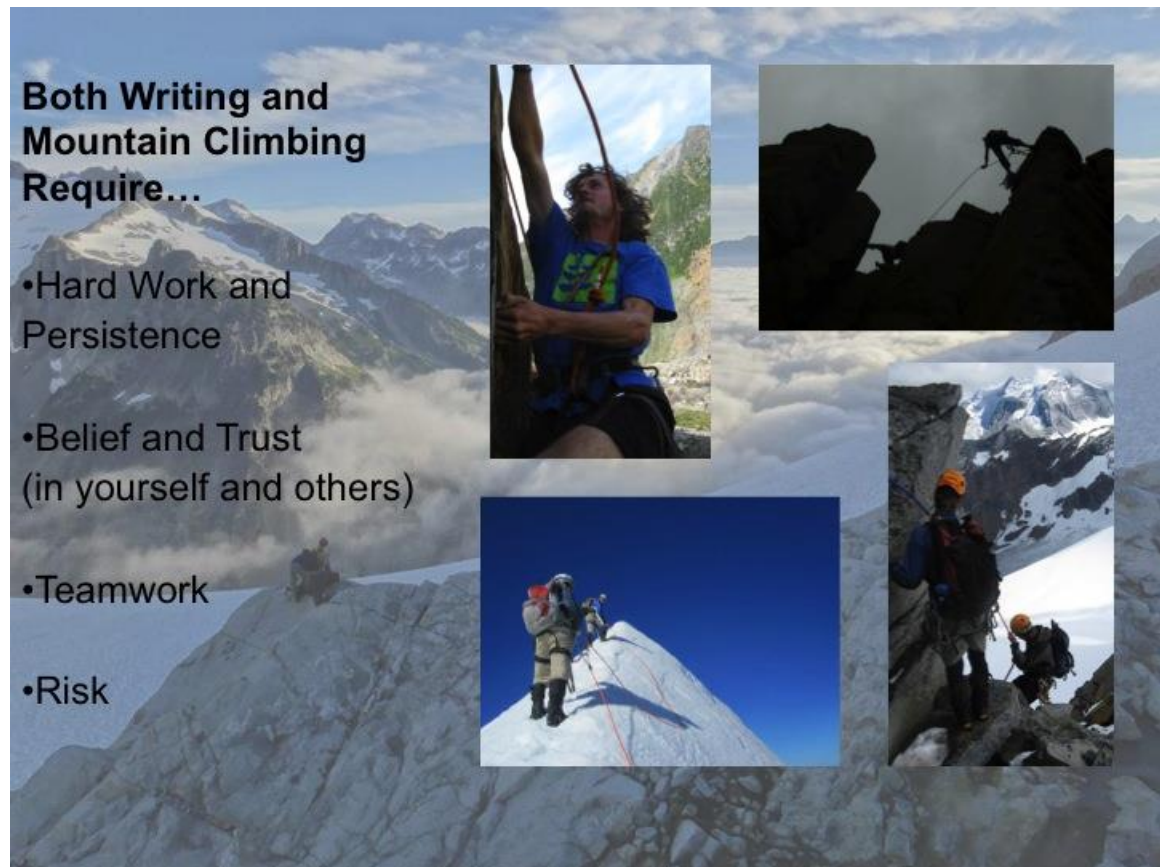


### Who you are as a Teacher

Taking time to share with parents who we are provides a foundation on which we can build relationships. Beginning teachers knew the importance of building relationships with their students, but this idea of sharing personal information with parents was new for most. This sharing was not part of the Back-to-School presentations I had experienced as a teacher or parent. It took experiencing this in my daughter's Spanish I class to understand why it is so important. Mr. C was not just my daughter's Spanish teacher, he was a kid who grew up in Ohio; he went to a large state University; he traveled to Spain to further develop his language skills; these trips also fostered his love of soccer. So, when he talked about expectations for students and his belief in focusing on speaking Spanish, I trusted him to support my daughter in meeting these expectations.

## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

Sam, a beginning high school teacher, chose to focus on his love of mountain climbing to share about his personal background and his expectations about Writing Workshop in his classroom.



### Curriculum Content (& Essential Questions)

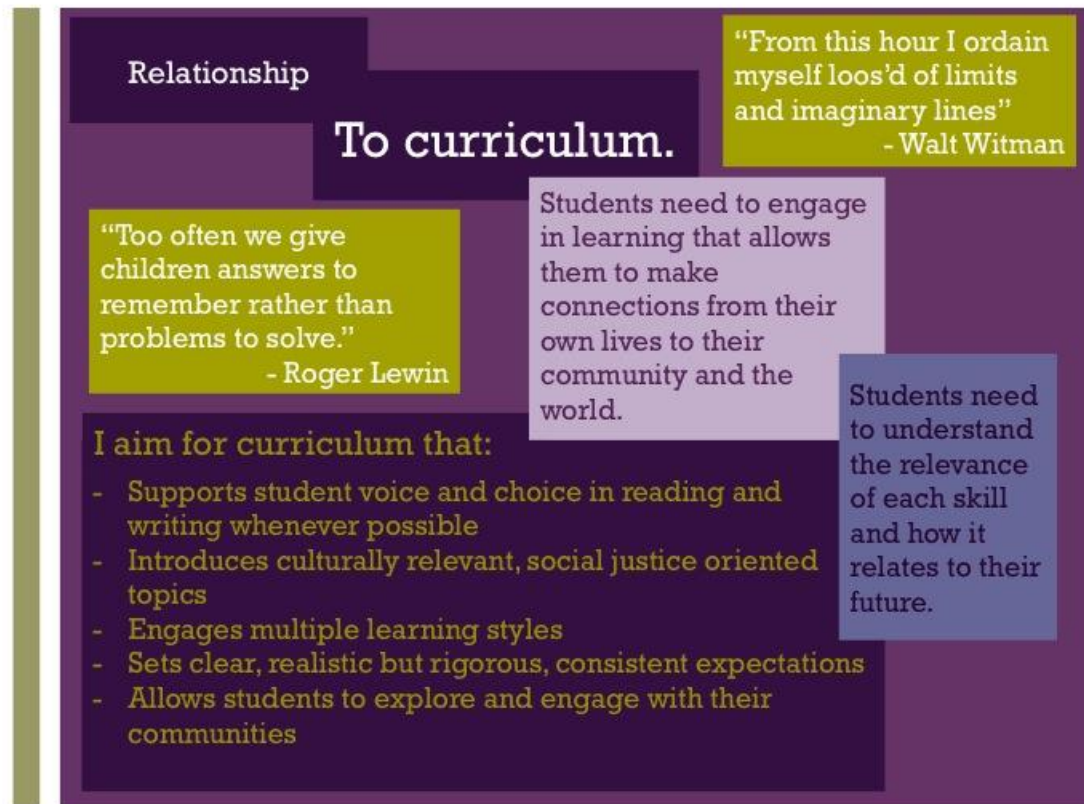
As we worked to develop our presentations, we talked about how to convey the curriculum so that parents would have an overview of what their children would learn. Some of the beginning teachers chose to share Essential Questions that would frame the classroom content for the year:

- What does it mean to be an American? How does literature reflect this?
- Why read? Why write?
- What is the role of story in our lives? In the lives of others?

Others, like Sam in the example above, chose to reference their use of a workshop model in support of reading and writing. And some included lists of texts or genres of writing they would be exploring. Molly drew on her love of Pinterest to illustrate her curriculum expectations:



## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love



### Classroom/Community Expectations

We also recognized that these presentations provided an opportunity to express our expectations about behavior in support of a learning community. Nicholas used Asimov's three laws of robotics—with robot graphics for each law—to illustrate classroom expectations.

First Law of Robotics: A robot must never harm a human being, or through inaction, allow a human to come to harm. Nicholas connected this to the classroom as follows:

- All humans have a right to learn in a safe environment: Respect each other.
- Be yourself and reach out to others: Listen to each other.
- Bullying will not be tolerated: Intervene if you see humans being bullied.

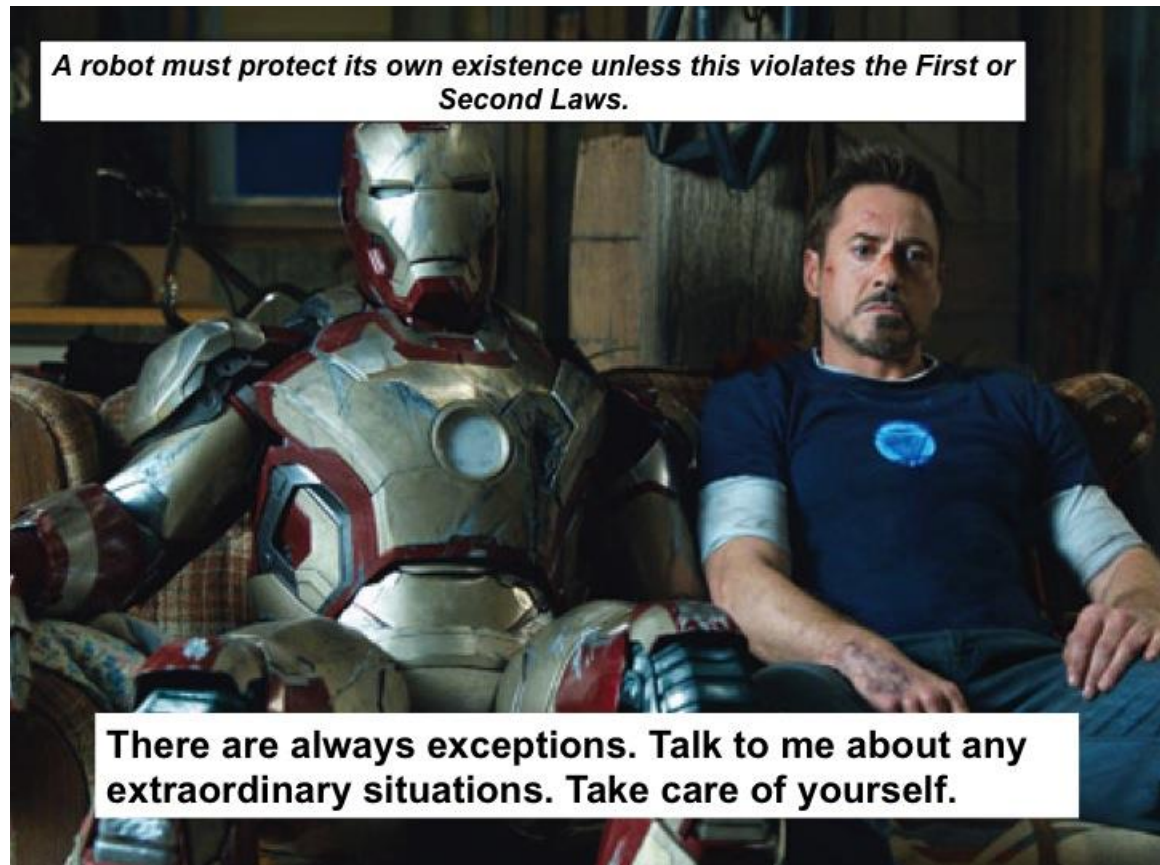
Second Law of Robotics: A robot must obey orders, except if they violate the First Law.

- Sometimes you must obey.

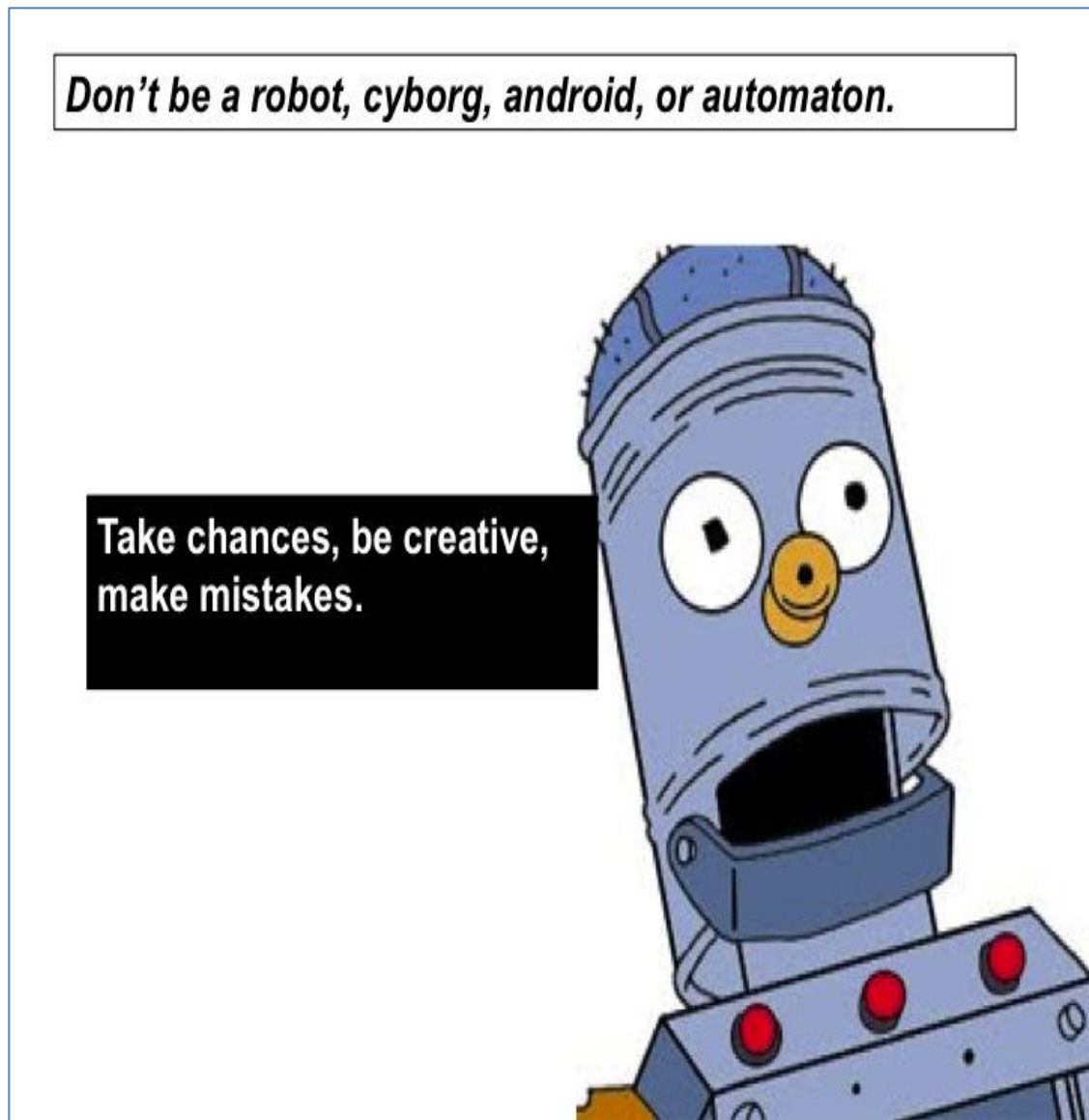
## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

- Raise your hand if you have something to contribute.
- Come to class prepared and on time.

Third Law of Robotics: A robot must protect its own existence unless it violates the First and Second Law. But there are always exceptions to this rule:



Nicholas then added his own fourth rule. Mr. G's Law:



### **Building Community**

In addition to supporting Back-to-School night presentations, these PowerPoints worked well for new teachers in talking with parents as the year progressed, for example at parent conferences when talking about a student's classroom performance. Beginning teachers also found they could share their Power Point presentation with their secondary students to introduce classroom community in the fall as well as to reinforce expectations when needed, such as after holiday breaks or at the change of semester with new classes or a continuing

## Back-to-School Night: The Focus Could Be Love

class with new students added. It is even helpful to revisit as a way to maintain community, even if the group of students has not changed.

This PowerPoint format focused our attention on audience. The visual component of each slide required us to be succinct but provided us the opportunity to use color, photos, and graphics to show who we are and to connect content with classroom community expectations. New teachers also noted that because they had spent time creating and practicing with the PowerPoint (each beginning teacher shared their PowerPoint with the group) they felt less nervous when they faced a room full of parents. These presentations are also easy to revise and use the following year—a fall tradition to revisit.

This group of beginning teachers later reported that their PowerPoint presentations were well received and helped set a positive tone for their ongoing relationship with parents. It did not eliminate future hard conversation with parents, but at least these conversations started from a place of the parent knowing about the teacher and classroom expectations. As one beginning teacher shared, “I realized I did not need to be fearful of parents and/or see them as my enemy. We had the potential to be allies in support of their child.” These Back-to-School Night presentations were an opportunity to convey good intentions and start to build trust.

### Starting with Love

It’s been eight years since my daughter was a high school student. But the impact of the passionate, committed teacher who taught her to speak Spanish is still being felt in her life and mine. We often talk about how he modeled the importance of doing work we love. What if this was the focus of our fall Back-to-School Night? What if parents heard from each of their child’s teachers what I heard from the Spanish I teacher. It might sound something like this, “I am so excited to be sharing my love of (fill in the content area) with your children. I know that if we work together, your child will thrive. Let me tell you a little bit more about myself, what led me to this work, and the content and my expectations for the learning your child will experience in my classroom this year.”

### References

Meier, D. (2002). *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.