

DRAMA VS. ATHLETICS VS. PARENTS

I had an hour + meeting today with a parent who is upset that her 7th grade son was not cast in the musical (we are doing Seussical...80 kids auditioned, 36 were cast). His audition was adequate, but not stellar. On his audition sheet he wrote that our rehearsals would conflict with swimming and he would have to miss two rehearsals a week through the month of March, which is when we will be learning all the music and blocking the show. I didn't feel I could accept that many absences for obvious reasons, so I didn't cast him.

She is angry that her child can't do both and called this meeting with me and with our assistant principal. She wants this situation "remedied by next fall." She feels Middle School kids shouldn't have to choose between activities and that we should be more accommodating. One of the things I told her I would do was to get advice from all of you on ways you work around athletic schedules. She feels my "inflexibility" is detrimental to the well-being of our students."

Her criticism stings. I'm a little sensitive, I guess, but it hurts to think that parents are critical of my program. I work my tail off, with a stipend that averages out to about \$1.50 an hour, and then I have to deal with stuff like this. I do it for the kids, and then I hear that I'm actually hurting kids, according to her. I am strict with the attendance policy, but I genuinely feel that is what is best for everyone involved. But maybe I'm wrong?

My advice is to hold your ground in this case. I try to accommodate sports conflicts if they're minimal, but this doesn't sound minimal to me. Even then, I insist on NO conflicts the last two weeks-- that's when they're all mine. More to the point, you cast less than half the kids who auditioned-- so there isn't an expectation of being cast. Why should he be cast over other students who also didn't get in, who may have had even fewer conflicts?

If you billed it as a show where everyone who auditions is cast, then she might approach you to try to work out the conflicts... but when there are lots of others who weren't cast, too, this complaint doesn't hold water. I would tell her it's a combination of the conflicts AND the not-so-strong audition. If he had made it into the first cut on the strength of this audition, YOU might have been pursuing him in spite of the conflicts. Make a sports analogy: how would his swimming coach feel about him missing half the practices?

Would a football coach allow a player to miss half the practice time? No way! It's not a RIGHT to do theatre; it's just like trying out for any other activity, and you have to make the grade and commit to the practice times...

She needs to understand that this is life in the theatre-- you may not always be cast, and you may not always get the role you want. It's a lot like REAL LIFE... Also, having to make choices is a lot like real life. If they don't start learning to make choices in middle school, when will they?

When I cast the fall musical, I cast everyone who auditions EXCEPT those whose conflicts are too unworkable. When I cast the Winter Play, I only cast about half who audition, and I look hard at conflicts-- it often makes a difference in a kid being cast or not.

Offer him a crew position-- tell her it's a way for him to be involved in the show without the massive time commitment. He would only have to miss, what, two-three swim practices? :-)

What do your school's coaches have as their attendance policy? Would it be ok for a swimmer to miss two practices a week? Does the sports area accommodate their practices so the kids can be in everything? Does your school have a policy that kids must be allowed to be in everything?

I've been in this position, and I would not let the show suffer for some student's upset parent. Of course, one can (should) be diplomatic in how one

holds the line, but the line MUST be held or the show (and the other kids involved) will suffer.

If a student doesn't make practice in a sport, he or she simply does NOT play. It's the same standard for me. If they can't make rehearsals, they are useless to the whole production. After all, there are many other students who DID show up for rehearsal. Why should those who don't show get special treatment?

Also, this is a great life lesson. We all have schedules to juggle, and many times we have to choose which events we can and cannot attend (It's not like there's a TIVO for rehearsals that you can make up later)! If the kid wants to be in the play so much, why not give up the sports? If he or she wants to do the sport, then that's the other choice. He can't be in two places at the same time!

Stand your ground.

Part of growing up is learning that in life we have to make CHOICES. And no, 7th grade is not too early to start doing that. I wish I had a nickel for every time I had a middle or high-school student audition for me and then tell me that my rehearsals conflicted with dance classes, music lessons or that season's sport, etc. What I tell them is that our production period is approximately 8 weeks long (or whatever it is) and that the opportunity to do this particular show won't come up again. Whereas swimming, dance and whatnot are typically ongoing, if not seasonal activities. Hence, if one really wants to do the show, then one ought to be able to lay out of a season/8-week period of [fill-in-the-blank]. Then, if necessary, I explain what goes into mounting a show and that it is not unlike trying to rehearse a team for the next game. Hard to do when you're missing people. Therefore, my own policy is that if you can't commit to my rehearsal schedule, then doing this show is not for you. That's not to say there's no allowance for illness or emergency, but to say you will have to miss 2 rehearsals per week for [fill-in-the-blank] would be unacceptable in my book. I would encourage you to stand by your decision and don't back down. As to the parent's accusation that your inflexibility is "detrimental to the students"...I would ask her how over-extending any student's daily life by booking every minute of their day so tight that they may or may not have time to do homework...or they may or may not be staying awake in classes...or that they may or may not be giving 100% to any ONE of the multiple extra-curricular events they're involved in.....What kind of service is THAT doing to any student subjected to such nonsense? That parent sounds like someone who would willfully overbook her kid thus causing problems for you, the swimming coach AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, the would-be overwhelmed kid!

Grrrrr...sorry to rant, but parents like that make me see RED. Not only are they NOT thinking of what is truly best for their child, they have no understanding of your requirements as teacher/director, or the total requirement involved in mounting a production. In my view and experience, at least 50% of our challenge as theatre instructor/directors, is to educate the PARENTS as well as the students. They are often way more clueless than the students themselves.

Stand your ground. You made the right call.

Like everyone else has said, students need to learn what commitment means. I heard a saying one time that fits this. It compared a chicken and a pig. A chicken is involved in the laying of an egg, but the pig gives his life to provide bacon. Do the kids want to be chickens or pigs?

I'm sorry to hear about this conflict. I can relate. I went through something similar with the casting and policies of my spring musical this year. I am a first year Drama teacher. I went to my administration before implementing any attendance rules. I asked for the sports guidelines and used the exact form that all of our athletic teams use. At our school, students may have up to three absences (excused or unexcused) during a season.

After that they are dismissed from the team (or cast, in our case). Our school is very strict about this rule and has supported me in enforcing it - I have already lost several kids due to absences in the first month.

When rehearsals first started, I had a big conflict with parents who were upset that my rehearsals (on Mondays and Wednesdays after school) conflicted with other activities (NJHS, Student Council, etc.) and they wanted me to "be flexible" by changing my schedule. Well, there are activities every single day after school - I simply couldn't change to any other schedule without upsetting someone. So I stuck to it and, in a kind/diplomatic way said that life is about choices and that the students would need to look at the requirements for all activities they were involved in and make a choice. I felt very strongly that it wouldn't be fair to any of my super-committed kids to let some overscheduled student be there occasionally. The whole thing got a bit sticky for a week or two and then died down. My admin supported me and the kids are better off in the long run.

Bottom line: stand your ground. You are doing the right thing. Go with the attendance policies of sports and other after school activities. As for conflicting schedules, my kids can do any other activity or sport they want - as long as they don't miss any more than 3 rehearsals. Just like we can't be two places at once, neither can they. This parent has an unrealistic expectation. I'm sorry your feelings are hurt by this. I'm sure you are doing a great job, and your policy is the best for everyone involved.

Would you have cast this student if he had not been involved in swimming? If not, there is no problem here other than a mother who's child didn't get the part. A familiar problem at that.

If you would have cast him, then I say that you explain to his mother that, in high school and college, students with conflicts don't get cast. At some point, these kids have to start making choices. If we are to prepare our middle school kids for what is ahead, we can't keep making concessions for them.

You work hard to make your program what it is and you (and the program) deserve the proper amount of respect and dedication from those involved.

Don't let this mother make you doubt yourself. In the long run, you are teaching these kids about life. There will always be choices to be made. Commitments will need to be made and adhered to. You're teaching the students about dedication and discipline.

We have parents who think we are too strict at our children's theatre. Some (very few, though) will actually not bring their child back. But the other 99% of the kids who have stayed have learned a LOT about, not only good theatre, but about life. They are learning discipline ... which, I'm sorry, many do not seem to be getting enough training in at home. Even the little 7-year-olds are learning about discipline and commitment ... and most of them seem to enjoy learning it.

At the private school where I am currently assistant directing, the kids are not allowed to do winter sports if they choose to do the musical. Those who are dedicated to the theatre program will choose fall and spring sports and will dedicate themselves 100% to musical ... no exceptions. This includes students from 7th grade through 12th.

You may be forced to make adjustments depending on your administration, however, in NO WAY should you let her complaints and accusations make you feel that you are being detrimental to the students.

I'm hearing two concerns: time and talent. Bottom line - if the student didn't make the cut because his audition wasn't at par with the other students who made the cast, enough said. I have frequently made the same case with high school parents as well as community auditioners. There is a bar every auditioner must reach - at least musically. Why should you make an exception? Musical direction requires even more "ball juggling". Trying to re-teach choreography and music for each missed rehearsal would put your production even further behind - not to mention creating even greater stress for you and a few gray hairs you hadn't planned on. Even if you think the child could, with work, get up to speed, when would he find the time? His schedule sounds pretty full to me.

I don't know too many of us who haven't worked around a multitude of student activities just so our kiddos can experience the arts. I'll give you a heads up on the scheduling issue (been there, done that). You can't work around athletic scheduling (or anything else) without a conversation with all stakeholders - not just the principal. More importantly, the need to balance arts and athletics must be something everyone values and all parties feel is important enough to change the status quo. I've banged my head against the wall too many times in an attempt to work collaboratively with others, only to discover that coaches, ADs, parents and sometimes students expect the arts to be the one to "bend" and be "flexible". Grrrrrr...

I think you made a sound decision based on your program and show needs. Stick to 'it!

I'm going to chime in with everyone else - stick to your guns. They have to make a decision sometimes. Some shows and because of the rehearsal schedules - I can be a little more flexible - but my contract states - they must list their conflicts on the contract form and bring that back to auditions. The contract also states if there are too many conflicts - they may not get a role - or may even get a support role. Any other requests to be absent from a rehearsal must be presented in writing - ahead of time and I will "think" about it depending on the rehearsal schedule. The group I have right now - is probably the worst group I've had in several years for lack of commitment. I am having to constantly remind them, they cannot miss if it was not on their conflict schedule. I have two students right now - who are in the "hot" seat - and if they miss another rehearsal not on their conflict schedule and not an emergency type then they will be removed from the cast. The problem with this sometimes - There is no one who can take their place at such a "short" notice. Unfortunately the contract does not always work because the students and parents do not care. They say - go ahead remove me. Sometimes I can - sometimes I can't. As for sports - I support sports but I am just like them and have to have everyone who is supposed to be at a rehearsal at a rehearsal. I will try to work around sports if they put it down on their conflict schedule and we work out - they can come to rehearsals on certain nights consistently - so if I really want a student then the rehearsal schedule can reflect that - but no one really knows that's what I did - because the final rehearsal schedule isn't given out until after auditions - the tentative is given to parents and students. I hope I wasn't hearing some of us saying that student shouldn't have been in your play only because of his talent. I don't care if he is the best actor - if he can't meet the rehearsal schedule - he's out. -Now -one night - flex - maybe - but two every week - no way. Again - stick to it - and take a look at some of our contracts in the files section. I believe we have over the past few years put several contracts in the files.

Why not just double cast every role? Sure it takes more of your time to rehearse the show, but you no longer have students or their parents attempting to extort you, because the role will be covered. Student actors are less likely to try to pull anything when they know that they are history if they even try. Do not worry if the quality of the show might suffer; student actors are usually up to the task of pulling success out of certain disaster, and even if they aren't, the product being built by the school is the student, not the show. You could also attempt to negotiate a reciprocal agreement with the sports coaches to NOT let a student choose who he or she is going to flake out on - if the student attempts to violate the show OR sports time commitment, he or she is removed from BOTH. We should not allow students to play teachers against each other any more than parents should allow themselves to be played against each other by their kids.

I also teach at a middle school don't cast students who are involved in school sports. Middle school seems to be that hard transition time between "I'm in elementary school and can do everything" and "I'm in high school and I concentrate on a few things." Luckily, in my nine years I have never (knock on wood) had a student or a parent complain about my policy. It's just not possible to be at two places at once. It's neither fair to the team your involved in nor the cast you want to be a part of to be partly committed to both. Sometimes the kids, like adults, have to choose.

Since we're all pretty much in agreement on the issue of missing rehearsals (and I don't care if it's for sports, a job, or a family trip--the problem is the same), I thought I'd add one other nugget: Get used to being abused when you go out of your way for people. It's not "right," but boy, it sure is the life of a teacher! There is actually an acronym for the concept of being abused because you did someone a favor: BOHICA. (Bend Over, Here It Comes Again). : -D The world is full of ingrates--I consider it part of my responsibility as a teacher (and human being) to let them know when they are being stupidly ungrateful. Fight the good fight!

I truly can sympathize with your situation. I have found (and I may have just been lucky so far) that if I work out a deal with the coach, many of them are willing to share rehearsal/practice time. I've only had two coaches be stubborn about some compromise and both were (and still are) swim coaches. Of course, I've also had run ins with choral teachers as well.

Despite all of this, I'm known as a great compromiser in my school. I support all athletics, not monetarily or time wise, but I do take an active interest in how the students are doing and ask coaches how things are going. They understand that I am at my school just slightly less than administrators (and may match them starting next year, I'll post the reason why in another bulletin) and they appreciate my respect for them.

NOW, one thing I do not do is play the athletics vs. arts card. In Indiana, as I'm sure it is in many states, it is battle that you stand little to no chance of winning. That is why I compromise and work with athletics. I've been rewarded with getting first choice of dates for shows and getting props and costume items from the A.D. whenever I need them. Yes, you are going to encounter coaches that are jerks, but there are drama coaches like that too.

Anyway, keep plugging away.

Was the mother willing to allow her son to miss any swimming lessons for rehearsals? There has to be give and take. I deal with this sort of thing all the time, and what many parents of athletes don't understand is that it takes the same amount of time, discipline, team work and practice to put on a good show and to teach the students the skill of performance as it does a sport. Setting a standard is necessary. Flexibility comes in both directions, and if one isn't willing to bend, then it isn't fair to expect the other to bend either. Sometimes I have talked with coaches and negotiated "shared practice time" "I'll take him for this hour and you take him for the second hour. Or "I need him today, you can have him tomorrow" Hopefully your administration will support you, especially if they are serious about having a "real" theatre program. I understand your hurt at the mother's unfair accusation concerning your commitment to teaching the children. In the world, no one can always do everything they want, and it's unrealistic to tell them that they can. That mother is just annoyed because she's not getting her way. Keep your chin up!

In a school with only 120 middle schoolers (total), you have to be a compromiser or you have no-one in your program. I always took the other activities into consideration for major roles, but I only once had to tell a student that I couldn't use them at all because of their schedule.

I bent over backwards (and did my fair share of ranting to my husband and best friends about it!) to accommodate athletics, and with one notable exception, the coaches were usually pretty good to work with me. Did it make it harder on me? Oh, yeah. It was a pain in the...it was a pain. But

did it foster good will and make me look good? Oh yeah. So when I had a real problem I could go in and say, "Hey...I bust my chops to work with others, and I need a little reciprocation here," and it usually worked. Although I don't agree with the parent's strong-arm tactics (and I fought my share of those, too), I do agree with the philosophy that says that middle school is the place where kids should get to try as much as they can/want to. I hate the idea that 11-14 year olds should be asked to specialize when they don't have to. But that's just me. In my experience, my program flourished and was highly successful because I was willing to co-operate with athletics.

Could you consider a revision of your policy for next year to allow a little more flexibility with schedules? I know it is irksome to think of that, especially in light of how said mommy acted, but perhaps it could be beneficial to the kids, even if she is out of line.

As for the parent, I'm impressed with your handling of her. She sounds like a "helicopter" mom, and you showed a level head in how you dealt with her. I would focus on the fact that her child's audition didn't place him in the ranks to be considered for a major role, and that other students were more available, so you cast according to what was best for the show. Since it wasn't a "come one, come all, be a cast member" audition, there's no reason for you to justify to her your full reasons for casting. You are the director and it is up to your discretion to cast as you feel will most benefit the show.

I know how that kind of criticism can sting, but recognize that her concern is for one child, and yours is for all of them. You will NEVER make everyone happy. Focus on the good you are doing with the kids, and don't let her spoil your year!

What a frustrating position to be in! It sounds like your rules and expectations were very clear. Don't let this parent intimidate you! She just doesn't like your rules because they don't work for her! Parents like this have a hard time being reasonable: don't try to convince her that you are right, just be calm and hold your ground and acknowledge her feelings:

- "I can see that this is frustrating for you."
- "This must be difficult for you."
- "It's hard for everyone to do everything that they want to do."
- "I'm confident that my standards support my students."
- "Choices can be difficult."

You ARE right. You've thought carefully about what you want and need for your program. You do not have to engage with this bully of a parent. Hold your ground!

I run both the high school and middle school after school drama programs. The high school does one large scale musical and one straight play a year; the middle school does one large scale musical. At the middle school, if I do have an issue, it is ALWAYS the parents who think that it's okay to miss "one or two" rehearsals a week--the kids get it. I find the follow through the most difficult thing to stay on top of...my stage manager (a student) keeps the attendance list, but I have to make the calls if a kid misses or is late.

In addition to listing the agreement or contract on the audition form, the form has to be signed by parents-- indicating that the contract is understood by all involved. Sounds like this is pretty standard for everyone on this list. We can't all be "too strict with impossibly high standards!!!"