

John Walker / The Fresno Bee

Tou Herr is the coordinator of the Fresno County Office of Education's Parent Services Center to help parents with questions they may have.

Center aims to help parents navigate school system

Information on transfers, health, college classes is provided free.

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

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Larry Powell believes schools often can be frustrating bureaucracies for parents.

MORE INFORMATION

Details

To reach the Fresno County Office of Education's Parent Services Center, call (559) 497-3865.

Navigating through a school system can pose challenges, whether it's seeking information for a transfer request, health and dental services or signing up for a community college class while still attending high school.

Powell vowed that if he ever were in a position to ease that experience for parents, he would. So as Fresno County schools superintendent, he created the Parents Services Center.

The center, which operates as part of the county Office of Education, has been in existence since December.

"Education can be such a confusing bureaucracy and we want to make it friendly for families," Powell said.

He calls the center a "guide on the side." Parents sometimes don't know where to go with questions or they often feel that they are merely passed off from person to person at schools. That increases their frustration, he said.

"The issue they came in for is not the one that gets them angry. It's because they couldn't get to somebody who could give them an answer," Powell said.

The idea is for the schools to be as open as possible to parents so their children settle into a school and an atmosphere where the family is comfortable, Powell said.

He said when a student attends elementary, middle and high schools through the same school system, that child is far more likely to keep pace academically.

"It's the transiency that kills us," Powell said.

Powell said another of the center's goals is to help parents find the right school or program for their children.

"If the parent feels good about the school, the child does well," he said.

Powell believes academic success stories exist on every campus. Still, traditional public schools sometimes aren't the right fit for some students. That is the reason the parents center also offers information on charter and private schools, he said.

"The public schools should not be afraid of competition," Powell said. "We can learn from them and they can learn from us."

Powell said the center's mission is to help parents and students with an array of questions and problems. For example, the center also can help a family with information on Advanced Placement classes or intervene when a dispute between a family and a school arises, giving parents somewhere to turn.

Center coordinator Tou Herr and his family learned how confusing and intimidating schools can be, especially when the family's language isn't the same one spoken in the classroom.

Herr, his parents and siblings came to the United States from Laos when he was 12 after a three-year stay in Thailand. They eventually settled in Fresno his freshman year at Hoover High School.

As often is the case, immigrant parents and children go through a "role reversal," as Herr calls it. The oldest of the family's seven siblings, Herr learned English in school and served as the translator and link to the outside world, including schools, for his parents during his childhood.

Now part of Herr's role as coordinator at the center is to break down school barriers for families.

Powell said Herr is a good fit for the job because he is well connected to the Southeast Asian community, speaks Hmong, Lao, Thai, some French and some Chinese and is taking Spanish lessons.

Herr, 39, and his wife, Maiya Yang, who is a lawyer, have three children.