



## Meaningful Parental Involvement

Communicating standards to parents can lead to increased parent involvement.

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by Jan Borelli

The research tells us unequivocally that parent involvement is essential to successful schooling, yet it's one of the most difficult challenges educators face.

As principals, we all have our parent challenges. Some may have to deal with demanding parents who think they know what principals ought to be doing and how to do it, while others may struggle to get any parental involvement at all. My first PTA meeting at my school was two years ago. Only 11 parents showed up, and they didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish. There were some angry parents who didn't like it that the school would no longer accept their children before school started—the whole event was rather messy. Somehow we got through the meeting and I began thinking about how we would change this situation.

### Building the Relationship

First, I realized that parents had to trust me. They only would do that after they found that I would love and care for their children. The most important thing to any parent is that their children are well cared for at school. So I started on the most important campaign of my career and began to build relationships with my parents.

I got together with my faculty and began talking with them about what we needed to do to get parents to the school. Our first parent meetings turned into meet-and-eats. Food and prizes were donated and signs in both English and Spanish invited parents to come to the school for bingo. More than 50 parents showed up. Pretty soon it became a school goal to see just how high parent attendance could become.

We started finding ways for the kids to sing and dance and do things at parent events, and more parents came. I smiled and nodded a lot and got lots of interpreters to the school for the events. We started giving away books to parents.

The parents were hooked, so the school started offering classes in English, computers, and anything else the parents said they wanted. One of the bilingual teachers became my PTA liaison and we encouraged parents to be PTA officers. Our PTA meetings focused on how to help their children do their homework and how to get information from school. We wrote grants to get money to equip a parent resource room and hired a part-time parent liaison.

### Meaningful Involvement

All these things brought the parents in, but did not meaningfully involve them in their children's education. Thus began a crusade by the teachers to get parents to help with their children's education. This was very hard to do. Our school, which had been on the state low-performing list for five years, had students who could not read, write, or problem-solve, but you would never have known it from their cumulative records. Our parents did not know there was a problem.

Teachers needed to grade the students on grade-level standards. It was fine to reach and teach the children at the level they were, but we had to be honest about where the children really were. It was heartbreaking to some of my teachers and I had to make more than one of them to go back and change report cards to reflect actual achievement.

#### Parent Involvement Activities

**Have students draw a map to their house.** If the teacher can follow it, he or she will come to the student's house and offer a prize. The teacher gets to meet the parents and develop a positive rapport.

**Host literacy nights showing parents how to work with their children.** Parents bring their children (even siblings) for

That's when the school got meaningful parental involvement. Parents were horrified and they wanted to know what was going on. They could not believe that their children, who had received nothing but glowing marks, were now being graded poorly. The parents came to see me and we had parent meetings to help them. We asked for help and the parents helped us. They began ensuring their children came for tutoring and did their homework. The teachers began to routinely communicate student achievement. They began to work with the parents to help the children get up to grade-level expectations.

And a wonderful, marvelous thing happened. We went from five years on the state's low-performing list to the top quarter of elementary schools in our large district. We believe that next year the school is going to pull away from the pack and be the top elementary school in the district. This is possible since we are working side by side with parents to make sure we find ways to reach and teach every child.

Meaningful parental involvement begins when the teachers make school an inviting place for parents and truly happens when the parents stay to help the school improve the education of their children.

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instruction in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere. Always make sure to have translators as well.

**Start a "breakfast in the classroom" program.**

Invite parents to come to their children's classroom to help supervise breakfast. The teachers love this and the parents do, too, because it gives them a position in the school.

**On the Same Page**

Here are suggested questions related to this article that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are some of the most significant challenges we face in working with parents?
2. What are the strategies we currently use to build relationships with families and gain their trust?
3. To what degree do we design school activities (that are more than social events) to engage parents in helping with the education of their children?
4. What are some of the approaches we might use to get parents to help with the education of their children?
5. To what extent do we use performance standards and rubrics to assess student achievement and as a vehicle for parent involvement?
6. What new knowledge or skills do we need to learn in order to better involve parents in the education of their children?

—Created by **Stephen Gould**, a consultant and leadership coach with more than 30 years experience as an elementary school principal and assistant superintendent.