

A Mutually Effective Relationship With Your PTO

A strong partnership between a principal and the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) is a crucial component in developing and sustaining a successful school community. An effective principal must work hard to build a symbiotic relationship of support, confidence, loyalty, and trust with members of the organization. By investing time and effort into the relationship, the PTO will, in turn, be eager to give back to the school in countless meaningful ways. There are several ways to build and sustain this important relationship.

Communicate Often

Communicating with the PTO, both informally and formally, should be a priority for a principal. I meet informally with my PTO executive board members on an ongoing basis. Since they are so involved with the school, they are often in the building volunteering, picking up PTO materials, or organizing events. I make sure to check in with them whenever I see them, even if it is just to say hello and thank them for being there.

I have monthly formal meetings with the executive board. These meetings serve as the foundation of communication between the larger PTO group and the teaching staff. I start each meeting with a thorough update on things happening at school—staff news and legislative updates, for example. Then, the board has the opportunity to ask me any questions.

These conversations can be incredibly insightful for both parties. They provide valuable, straightforward information for the parents, and provide me with insight into what issues may be at the forefront of parents' minds. Best of all, it is my opportunity to present the school's perspective on decisions and policies—information that inevitably will be shared informally within the community.

Be Involved

The principal must be involved in discussions when the PTO makes deci-

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sions that impact students and staff. Often, PTO officers don't necessarily have the knowledge or information necessary to make the most appropriate decisions. For example, our PTO recently updated our bylaws. I was invited to take part in the discussion because I had a better picture of the PTO's history and why the bylaws had originally been written as they had. Together, we were able to talk through our motivations and the implications of any changes.

Additionally, principals should invite themselves to be a part of smaller subcommittees within the larger PTO. The principal may be able to offer insight to these groups, and may know when to advise the committee to proceed with caution when making a decision about the larger organization. This ensures consistency. Subcommittee groups tend to change often, which leads to entirely new members who may have little or no knowledge as to how things have worked in the past. The principal can serve as the person who advises and guides the work of these smaller groups.

Consider building even stronger relationships with individual PTO members by occasionally inviting them to meet at a local restaurant for dinner or appetizers after a PTO meeting. Use the time to get to know one another on a personal level.

Don't Micromanage

The PTO should be empowered to handle minor issues on its own. I am grateful to my PTO because the members do the majority of their work without input or support from me. They ask me about important decisions, but otherwise they just take action.

Our schoolwide events, community outreach, fundraising, and volunteer programs are all organized and managed by my PTO, often with nothing asked from me. Given how much I have on my plate, I am eternally grateful when my PTO recognizes what matters—what is important enough for my involvement and what is not.

Clarify Needs

“What do you need?” should be asked consistently and often—from both the principal and the PTO. When the principal asks this question, the PTO feels valued, appreciated, and supported.

The simple question, “What do you need from me to be an effective PTO?” enables the PTO to ask for help and know they will be heard.

Similarly, the principal should pleasantly, but assertively, request that the PTO make it a standing agenda item at meetings to ask the principal, "What do you need and how can the PTO help you get it?" The principal should communicate needs openly and honestly—whether it's financial support for the building, campaigning for a levy, or more volunteers for a certain event. Often, PTO groups think they are doing exactly what is needed, but may be unaware of other powerful ways they could help the school community.

Gain and Give Loyalty and Support

There is always a small but vocal group of parents and staff who will be opinionated and critical, no matter how perfectly decisions are made or how smoothly events are executed. This is where loyalty and support are necessary.

If someone criticizes the PTO's work, the principal must instantly respond with a fully supportive answer. When this happens, I always defend the time, effort, and thoughtfulness of PTO members, and invite the complainer to become involved with the PTO so he or she can have a positive impact.

Conversely, I am confident my PTO executive board defends my decisions to other members of the organization. I often hear about how they defend me when I am criticized, and I am deeply appreciative of this. I am more effective as a principal knowing I have unwavering support from members of the PTO.

The relationship between the PTO and the principal must be a positive one made up of mutual support, confidence, loyalty, and trust. Following these simple tips will help build and maintain a mutually effective relationship. In the end, the people who matter most will be rewarded: students. ■

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