Getting Started on the Right Foot With Parents

There’s nothing like the magic of a new school year and the opportunity it brings to make a fresh start! Students, parents, teachers—even principals—get a clean slate, a new beginning, and the hope that this can be their best school year yet.

Parental involvement research confirms that in order to get parents to support their children’s education, it is imperative that schools make parents feel both welcome at school and invited to get involved with their children’s education. The best time to encourage parent participation is right now—at the beginning of the year. I asked more than 13,000 elementary and middle school principals and key staff members to share successful ideas they have used to get started on the right foot with parents. Here are some of the best:

Try a “Boo Hoo Breakfast” for kindergarten parents. Parents arrive with their children on the first day of school and stay with them in their classrooms for 15 minutes, explains Martha Warren, principal of North Hancock Elementary School in Lewisport, Kentucky. “Then, we make an announcement that breakfast is starting and ask the parents to come to the cafeteria. And we don’t let them go back” to their children’s classrooms, explains family resource center coordinator Pam Allard. The breakfast is advertised in advance by mail and in the local newspaper. “It is a great public relations event,” Warren says. “It relieves parent anxiety and helps them get to know the key people in the building and how things function.”

Start with an information day. Ardeen Hoke, principal of Northeast Elementary School in Evergreen Park, Illinois, starts the year with an information day. “It is a day where our parents stop at various stations, receive materials, and get the class assignments,” she explains. “I take care of the assignment station myself, so I get the chance to welcome the students and their parents back to school. The parents are always amazed when I know their child’s name, and it truly helps parents know that I care about them.”

Add new twists to your open house. The most successful open house programs are well publicized and feature events that provide an informal opportunity to get acquainted. Activities such as a school picnic, barbecue or potluck dinner, dessert bar, and ice cream social attract parents and families. Some schools combine a carnival event with an opportunity to meet teachers while other schools offer supervised playground games for children while parents have a Q&A session with school staff.

Declare a “First Day” holiday. Kennerly Elementary School counselor Zabelle Vartanian says the school’s parent organization helps with their First Day holiday, which “is a celebration of school with games and refreshments for the students.” During First Day, “parents are invited to come and spend part of the day or all day. Specialists provide presentations in the building, explaining what they do,” says Vartanian. Started in 1997 with a few schools in Vermont, First Day holidays are now held by thousands of schools nationwide.

Make a welcoming phone call. Elementary and middle school principals and counselors mentioned the surprising effectiveness of principals, teachers, and counselors calling or writing parents before school starts to say they look forward to teaching their children.

While parent and family involvement programs are important throughout the year, the beginning of the school year is the prime time to get started on the right foot with parents.

More good ideas:
- Host a parent-volunteer orientation to lay the foundation for involvement throughout the year;
- Arrange a separate open house for the parent resource center;
- Partner new families with families familiar with the school to share information and encourage good relationships;
- Suggest room mothers meet at a parent’s home;
- Organize ESL parent meetings with translators in each school community to review school procedures and talk about how to help their children with reading. Offering door prizes and sandwiches makes it easy for families to come right after work; and
- Distribute a survey asking parents about their child and their expectations for him or her in the coming year.

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