Increasing Community Involvement

As we look to the future of our schools, one aspect we cannot lose sight of is the importance of community involvement. Despite the flattening of our world technologically, our children are still growing up in actual communities with friends, families, neighbors, and businesses. The concept of the village is still essential to developing the whole child.

As an experienced administrator of 10 years, I have a resolute rationale for wanting to enhance my school’s community involvement—I have seen it help our students by increasing their motivation, providing connections outside our school walls, and encouraging awareness of a more global perspective.

At my school, we implemented monthly family nights, a series of low-profile and fun evenings with an academic focus. At each event, a local bakery and coffee shop provided refreshments and we gave away books that had been donated by local merchants. We also worked with local service groups such as the Lions, Rotary, and Masons to strengthen our communities. In one instance, we initiated a reading-incentive program that provided bicycles to students.

As a mentor in NAESP’s Peer Assisted Leadership Services (PALS), I prompted my protégé, Derek Cordell, to reflect on community engagement so that he could develop a deeper understanding of the concept and brainstorm with his staff to find ways to incorporate local groups and businesses into the educational scheme of his school.

What does community involvement look like in your school right now?
What are your biggest challenges facing community involvement? Why do they persist and what are ways you might directly approach those challenges?
Do community involvement activities have to occur at school? Why or why not?
Whose responsibility is it to enlist community members and retain their engagement?
What are the benefits of school involvement to businesses, students, schools, and communities?
How have you successfully involved businesses in your school in the past? Why was the initiative successful and can it be replicated?
In what ways will our changing communities (local and global) affect partnerships?

—Pete Hall

New to Principal. This new column features the perspectives of two principals—a mentor and a protégé—as they reflect on how they approached a single school leadership issue.

Community involvement at my school falls within four often overlapping categories: active, silent, financial, and time donors. Active involvement means the community member is recognized, available, and often in attendance during events. Silent partners are those who do not want to be recognized but donate money or materials to the school. Our financial partners send checks or conduct fundraisers at their places of business. Our partners who donate their valuable time help with lunch duty, act as crossing guards, answer phones in the front office, or make copies in the workroom.

When my PALS mentor, Pete Hall, asked me about my experiences with community involvement, I reflected and realized that one of my biggest challenges is informing people that we are doing great things and we can do even greater things with the help of our community.

Newspaper articles about failures in adequate yearly progress seem to always feature prominently, while articles about our many achievements often are obscurely placed. To battle this negative bias and to encourage partnerships, I promote our many accomplishments in a variety of sources. For example, I personally invite a reporter from our local paper to cover our annual Read on the Lawn night. There is an inevitable domino effect that occurs when good news hits the street.

For example, when local businesses, such as Jim’s Hardware Store, hear that the neighborhood fruit stand has donated PE equipment to our school, Jim decides to donate a shed to store the equipment. When the shed supplier delivers the equipment, the deliverymen are inspired to offer their own time to help read one on one with some struggling students. Once the good-news ball gets rolling, it is difficult to slow down the community urge to get involved at school.

Pete’s simple questions about community involvement, especially about reflecting on past partnerships, prompted me to compile a list of community members who had supported us this year. That list of names became a thank-you ad in the newspaper. It’s never too early in the school year to get the community engagement ball rolling.

—Derek Cordell

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For more information about PALS, visit www.naesp.org/pals.