Bridging the Gap
This middle school can serve as a model for those seeking to increase parent involvement in students’ education.

by Samuel Clemons

In an effort to encourage parents to remain involved during their child’s critical transition to and progression through middle school, Lowndes Middle School (LMS) in Valdosta, Georgia, launched an initiative geared toward improving family and community involvement at the school, which has proved quite successful. In fact, it has been so successful that last year the school was presented with the Partnership School Award, which recognizes excellent and sustained programs that foster school, family, and community partnerships.

Overwhelming evidence shows that family involvement both in school and at home has a positive impact on student achievement. However, researchers have found that parental involvement tends to drop off during the transition between elementary and middle school, and this transition also corresponds with the biggest drop in achievement (Bryant and Henderson 2002).

“Trying to convince parents that they still need to be involved once their children get to middle school can be a huge task” (Christenson and Sheridan 2001). Research consistently shows that students with involved families, regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, and racial or ethnic identity, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and to have better attendance and fewer behavior problems.

A Sense of Community
The faculty and staff at LMS are extremely proud of their School, Family, and Community Partnership Initiative, which brings parents into the school not only to be informed about their child’s education, but also to participate in workshops, access resources, and share with one another the challenges of raising adolescents. Here are just a few of the programs and resources that LMS offers:

Parent Action Team. This 24-member team comprises students, teachers, and parents from each grade level; a school facilitator; and an administrator. The Parent Action Team has direct goals and objectives to achieve with regard to offering community- and parent-centered activities.

Parent Resource Room. One of the goals of the Parent Action Team was the creation of a parent resource room in an effort to form a professional learning community with parents in a nonthreatening environment. Designed to resemble a comfortable home setting, the multipurpose room includes a sitting area with couches, work area for roundtable discussions, and an area for workshops with computers and a wide-screen television. All the furnishings were donated by several community partners. Various activities, including parent-teacher conferences and workshops, take place in the parent resource room.

Parent Connect. LMS has an Internet service called Parent Connect, operated by Pearson Educational Technologies. Parent Connect is a free service to parents, which gives them password-protected access not only to their children’s attendance records, schedules, grades, and assignments, but also to school calendars and student health records. The site facilitates e-mail exchanges between parents and teachers, and parents can receive automatic updates on unexplained absences, missing homework, or poor grades. And for those without Internet access at home, parents can log on in the parent resource room.

School Call. This parent hotline is another initiative of the Parent Action Team. School Call is used to contact parents weekly about school activities, homework, and student progress. Parents also are able to leave messages for teachers regarding academic progress. This two-way communication tool has had a major impact on student achievement, and the response
from parents has been phenomenal.

**Parent Assuring Student Success (PASS) Training.** PASS training is held quarterly in the parent resource room. It provides parents with strategies to view their own attitudes on parenting, and how to structure the home environment to help children learn, provide study skills, help with homework and test preparation, and teach reading skills. Through this training, parents are able to partner with educators to close that missing link between home life and school.

**Family Night Workshops.** During Family Night workshops, families sit together to play games, complete student homework, and talk as a family. Family Night is extended to immediate family members, including grandparents, and door prizes are given as incentives to attend. Some topics used during Family Night have included “Catch Them Before They Fall,” “Moving with Math,” and “Getting Fit with Academics.” Teachers, community leaders, and central office personnel conduct these workshops, which draw as many as 400 participants per event.

**Parent-Student Orientation.** At the beginning of this school year, we sponsored an in-depth, parent-student orientation for incoming sixth-grade students. The transition between elementary school and middle school is filled with changes—physical, psychological, and emotional. Often the anticipation causes parents and students alike much anxiety and uncertainty. To make this a positive and productive experience for each student, as well as his or her parents, LMS faculty and staff hosted a reception prepared by the sixth-grade teaching staff, where attendees were introduced to the new curriculum; given information about expectations for middle school and its extracurricular programs, policies and procedures; and taken on a tour of the school. This reception did wonders for reducing the attendees’ anxiety, and they expressed their sincere gratitude for helping to make the transition from elementary to middle school a smooth process for their children.

**Wonderful Wednesdays.** Wonderful Wednesdays is a daytime program that serves as a support group for parents to meet and share their experiences in raising adolescents, discuss the many challenges they face, and receive literature from the school’s guidance department. This initiative is spearheaded by a parent, who invites a guest speaker at each meeting to discuss different issues, such as peer pressure and signs of childhood depression. After the presentation, parents are divided into groups to further discuss issues and to role-play solutions. Other afternoon and evening workshops have covered topics that included creating a conducive study environment at home, helping students with homework, and preparing students for Georgia’s standardized assessments.

**Continual Improvement**

According to the data collected by the Parent Action Team, parental involvement has increased by 15 percent and student achievement has increased by 5 percent, due to such initiatives as the parent resource room, School Call, Parent Connect, and other family-related activities made available to parents. Over the years since the team’s inception, reading, math, and writing scores on Georgia’s tests have improved, and the school’s relationships with local businesses and organizations have blossomed.

LMS continues to seek new and innovative ways to improve student achievement and school success through collaboration with all stakeholders involved in the educational process. Parent involvement is hailed as a crucial factor in achieving this goal—so much so that it is an ongoing strategic objective of LMS’s total school improvement plan. Numerous programs have developed out of a desire to bridge the gap between home and school and create a school climate that is inviting to parents, resulting in the positive and ongoing school, parent, and community connections.

**References**


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