Building on Respect, Humility, and Partnership

As the school year comes to a close, and you reflect on your successes and disappointments in involving parents, it’s time to consider ideas for improvement in the coming year. As you do so, plan to build on three prerequisites for good parent involvement programs:

**Respect.** Effective programs require mutual respect of parents and educators. If you see parents and other significant caregivers—grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, guardians, and family friends—as ill-informed and incapable, your parent involvement programs will be patronizing and uninspiring. Likewise, if parents see educators and school staff—principals, teachers, secretaries, custodians, food service staff, and bus drivers—as self-centered instead of child-centered, they will perceive parent involvement programs as bureaucratic efforts to keep parents in their “place.”

**Humility.** Raising and educating children is an awesome job. Educators and parents must acknowledge that neither has the wisdom or ability to succeed without the active help of the other.

**Partnership.** When educators and parents respect one another, understand the responsibility they share, and recognize their strengths and limitations, a phenomenal partnership is possible.

**Ideas that Work**

With these prerequisites in place, you’re ready to give your parent involvement programs an infusion of creativity. In a recent Parents & Schools column I shared some of my favorite parent involvement ideas and invited readers to do the same through an online survey. The following are some of the promising contributions we received:

**Start the year with a unique open house.** Have a committee of teachers (or teachers and parents) create a special presentation to attract parents, including a motivational speaker or student exhibition. Post sign-up sheets for all kinds of volunteers, including classroom helpers, event organizers, chaperones, and lunchroom aides. Provide take-home information about steps parents can take to help their children succeed in school, such as supervising homework time and limiting television.

**Have a regular “Coffee Hour with the Principal,”** a weekly or biweekly forum in which you can chat informally with parents and community members in a relaxed setting.

**Give parents “bingo cards” labeled with school functions, study-time tasks, and other parent-child activities.** When parents complete a card, reward them with a children’s book and a chance to win exciting, end-of-year prizes.

**Meet with teachers before school starts** to emphasize the importance of good parental relations. Explain how parent newsletters, classroom volunteers, and hall displays of student work strengthen parent involvement. Encourage them to call parents with good news, not just concerns.

**Keep a list of volunteer positions handy** for teachers when they communicate with parents. In that way, they will be prepared to respond when parents ask what they can do.

**Offer after-school and evening activities** that allow parents and children to work together. These might include reading, practicing study techniques, or building technology skills.

**Consider early-morning continental breakfasts** for parents, grandparents, and guardians. Showcase one grade’s accomplishments each month.

**Model personal contact with parents.** Emphasize your “open door” policy for parents’ visits. Arrange transportation for them if necessary.

**Offer workshops that showcase parents’ abilities.** Consider “make it and take it” programs in which parents and their children use school facilities and supplies to make craft items, bookmarks, or flashcards they can take home. Include food and prizes for parents and students who attend.

**Provide a friendly place for parents.** Set aside space in an easily-accessible location and furnish it with tables, comfortable chairs, or even a couch. Stock it with materials on building parent skills and helping students with homework, information about school rules and policies, copies of the school calendar, and perhaps a box for parents’ questions and comments.

**Don’t forget the “Three Fs.”** Food, Families, and Fun are a magical formula that always attracts a crowd at school events.

Respect, humility, partnership, and creativity are an unbeatable combination for an effective parent involvement program—and now is the time to start planning.

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