Back to School: A Fresh Start for Parent Involvement

As the school year begins, now is the time to set the stage and get a running start for the best parent support you have ever had at your school.

A recent study by Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey and Howard M. Sandler (2005) of Vanderbilt University provides useful step-by-step descriptions of what it takes to get and keep parents involved in the education of their children. The process starts by making sure parents feel welcome and genuinely invited to be meaningfully involved. To accomplish this, the parents must be motivated to get involved, feel that their involvement is appropriate, and believe that they have adequate knowledge and skills.

Here are some best practices supported by the study’s findings that can help you develop a solid foundation for parent involvement as the school year begins:

- Send parents genuine invitations to attend back-to-school events. It’s easy to spot the difference between a genuine invitation and just a polite one. An impersonal, crumpled note in a child’s backpack may not get a parent’s attention, but an invitation in an envelope personalized with the parent’s name and signed by the principal, the teacher, or even the parent’s child, certainly will. Phone calls to hard-to-reach parents also work wonders.

- Begin a positive relationship with parents and students before they arrive at school. Clip the new births section in your local newspaper and send new parents a congratulatory note with a children’s book for them to read to their child, parenting tips for newborns, and an offer to contact you if you can be helpful in any way. Veteran Massachusetts principal Ed Jerome says this pays big dividends for his school by establishing a relationship long before the child and parents arrive.

- Send home an information packet to all families before school starts. It should include a parent handbook, a list of all family events for the year, lunch forms, opportunities for parents to volunteer, registration for family literacy classes, and more. Ask students to bring the packet to school on the first day of the new school year. Massachusetts principal Patricia Mariano uses this practice and reports great attendance at her school’s “Welcome Back to School Pizza Party,” where parents are surveyed about issues and items they would like the school to focus on during upcoming PTO meetings.

- Try making some home visits to parents of students in your school, either before or just after school begins. Teachers and principals at hundreds of schools report that everyone involved will benefit from such visits—principals, teachers, families, and students.

- Aggressively recruit and engage parents in school activities as early in the school year as possible.

- Have parent volunteers invite other parents in their neighborhood. This practice, together with frequent phone calls, invitations sent with children or mailed with report cards, and information distributed personally at the parent pick-up area in the morning and afternoon, are among many successful ideas suggested by Leticia Martinez, parental involvement coordinator of the Weslaco Independent School District in Texas.

- Organize small “study circles” for parents. A useful practice for engaging hard-to-reach parents is structured small-group “kitchen table” conversations on a wide variety of topics. This practice has been very successful at Weller Road Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, according to principal Linda Warren and John Landesman, Study Circles program director for the Montgomery County Public Schools.

Although the principal alone cannot build parent support at any school, it is the principal who must be the parent involvement champion. By taking some simple steps now to welcome parents and make sure they feel genuinely invited to work with your school to build student achievement, you can look forward to unprecedented parent support this school year.

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Reference

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