Your Best Parent Involvement Year Ever

In the first Samuel G. Sava Distinguished Lecture at the recent NAESP national convention, I reviewed decades of research, publications, and personal experience to identify the most important “truths” about parent involvement that every principal needs to know—some very practical and others more philosophical. I focus here on three of those truths that can make this your best parent involvement year ever:

The purpose of parent involvement is to improve student achievement. That may sound obvious and simplistic, but success in any endeavor requires a clear focus on what you’re trying to achieve. While parent involvement offers many benefits to parents, students, and schools, the most important purpose must always be improving student achievement.

The purpose of maintaining good relationships with parents must be to encourage them to become and stay directly involved in helping their children learn.

Many common activities, like getting parent volunteers to help in the classroom, serve as field trip chaperones, or spearhead fundraising activities are only remotely related to building student achievement. Their impact pales in comparison to helping parents:

- Understand what their children are learning and doing in class and reinforce those things at home;
- Participate in family math, science, and reading nights at school; and
- Use materials to help motivate their children to study more effectively or to learn how to tap into children’s interests to find things they will want to read.

Beyond the Bake Sale reveals that “Engaging families in children’s learning has a positive effect on student achievement [and] … the more a program is expressly designed to improve student achievement, the more impact it will have.”

Active outreach by teachers to parents can have a dramatic improvement on student achievement. A 2001 longitudinal study of standards-based reform practices conducted by Westat and Policy Studies Associates for the U.S. Department of Education tracked reading and mathematics achievement among students in 71 elementary schools as they progressed from third to fifth grade. The study used sophisticated methods to analyze the relationship between student test scores and experimental practices such as visibility of standards and assessments, basic versus advanced teaching techniques, teacher preparation and skills in math instruction, and outreach to parents.

The study found that in schools where teachers reported high levels of outreach to parents of low-achieving students, reading test scores grew at a rate 50 percent higher and math test scores at a rate 40 percent higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach.

Successful outreach was defined simply as teachers being especially active in meeting face to face with parents, sending parents materials on ways to help their child at home, and contacting parents routinely and when their child was having problems.

Principals must overcome barriers that prevent parents from getting involved. Parent Institute studies find that the most frequent barriers include:

- Schools that do not provide practical advice to parents about what they can do to help children learn;
- Schools that fail to alert parents as soon as children begin to have problems;
- Lack of true, two-way, respectful partnership communication between parents and school personnel; and
- Parents who feel intimidated by and don’t trust the school.

Make this your best parent involvement year ever by remembering three central principles:

- The overriding purpose for parent involvement is to improve student achievement;
- Simple things teachers can do to improve their outreach to parents can have a dramatic improvement on student achievement; and
- Now is the best time of the year to develop plans at your school to overcome the common barriers that prevent parents from getting involved.

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