

Building Better Principal-Parent Partnerships

A multifaceted approach taps technology, involves students, and gives parents flexibility

By Courtney Goodman

Parental involvement is crucial to a child's education. "No matter their income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school," says the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education.

Many principals, however, struggle to develop partnerships with parents that can lead to greater involvement and, therefore, better outcomes. At Middleton Elementary School in Skokie, Illinois, we wanted to focus on improving parent involvement to improve student achievement. We took a multifaceted approach, and here's how you can do the same:

1. Use Tech to Your Advantage

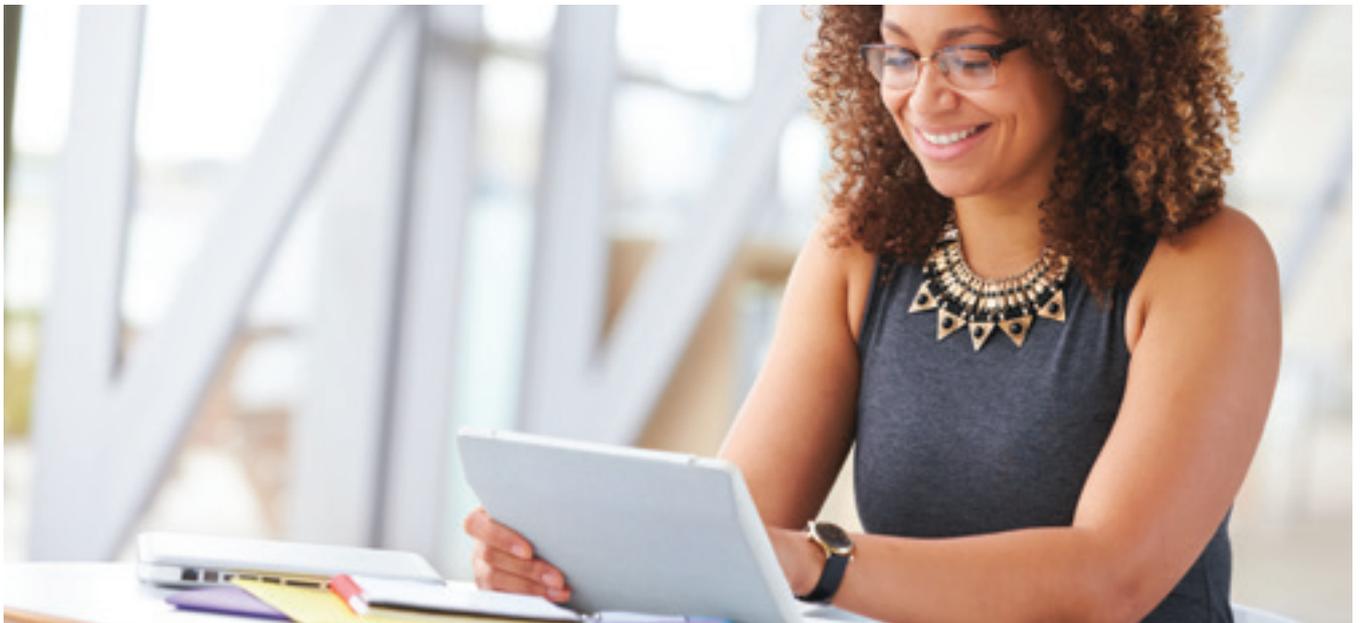
Smartphones are everywhere. Parents are connected, and we use this fact to increase two-way communication. Teachers use mobile apps such as SeeSaw and Class Dojo to share information about what students are learning, upcoming assignments, in-class behavior, and pictures of students during the school day. Students also post videos and audio recordings explaining their learning.

As principal, I can view an online dashboard that shows how many parents have logged in and liked, commented, or visited various posts. Another benefit? Teachers report that parents are more likely to send a quick personal message to them via an app than send an email.

2. Have Students Get Involved

Parents typically respond more quickly if their child's teacher personally invites them to an event—and they definitely respond sooner if their child is involved or invites them. We try to include students in as many parent events as we can, not only because it increases parent involvement, but also because it is more authentic and engaging for families.

Our annual end-of-the-year open house, "Round Up," is a good example. At the event, students take their parents on a tour of learning spaces to share, teach, and demonstrate their learning. Some grade levels display projects and books that students have created or read in class, while other grade levels offer experiments for students to help their parents complete during the event. This night is always well attended!



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3. Host Pop-In Meetings

Parents are busy. In our community, many families have two working parents or are single-parent households. Some parents work second or third shifts. In the last few years, we've hosted parent meetings at either 9 a.m. or 6 p.m. These meetings were intended to be partnership meetings between the principal and parents—a place to ask questions and share ideas. But we hosted the meetings at times that didn't work for many parents, and they morphed into hourlong sessions focused on fundraising.

We changed these meetings to be “pop-in” style, in the morning before school starts and in the evening, right before other events. In advertising these meetings, we stressed that parents can simply pop in and stay for a few minutes (or longer). We hope that a more casual meeting, held at times that work better for parents, will create stronger parent-principal partnerships.

4. Plan Low-Pressure Community Events

Parents have many obligations, so asking them to host or volunteer at school events can be tricky. Last year, we hosted a variety of low-pressure, high-interest school community events in an effort to increase parent partnerships without asking for many—or any—volunteers.

In the fall, we hosted a before-school event aligned to Walk to School Wednesday, at which parents and their children could participate in fitness activities and

enjoy a complimentary breakfast. We also hosted a Fall Fest on a Saturday with free games, prizes, and crafts. In January, we hosted a Family Paint Night at which parents and their children were invited to the school to paint a rock that became part of a pathway in our school's courtyard. We also hosted several family movie nights, providing free popcorn, lemonade, and a movie at the school.

So far, the multifaceted approach has proved successful. Parents say they feel more comfortable in our school and more involved. Students enjoy having their parents involved in their education, and teachers are able to connect with families to build positive partnerships. 

Courtney Goodman is principal of Middleton Elementary School in Skokie, Illinois.



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