

Take Parents on a Tour

A learning tour takes parents behind the scenes at a middle school, creating engagement

By Shanna R. Speakman-Spickard

Schools thrive when parents are engaged, producing better overall achievement, attendance, and test scores, as well as higher graduation rates and other benefits. No matter how many attempts we make to increase participation in events and meetings, however, attendance tends to suffer at the middle school level.

I'm thrilled if more than one parent attends my Parent Advisory Group (PAG) meetings, which are scheduled for the third Thursday of every month. I wait after school until 7 p.m., but most months, no one attends. Our parents are the first to make donations, chaperone trips, and attend conferences, but meetings are not at the top of their lists.

At Milan Middle School, teachers send out weekly newsletters, update online planners every week, and post updates on the web. We use a student management system that gives parents access to school messages and grades, and many teachers share access to the learning management systems they use.

As administrators, the assistant principal and I send out monthly newsletters and post on social media. We share important information and parent engagement tips at sporting events and performances, where we have a captive audience. But it is a challenge to get participation at our meetings, where we want parents to serve as a feedback loop for



the programming, academics, and social-emotional well-being of our students. So I started thinking outside of the box.

A Tour Is Born

I was speaking recently with Kimberly Gillow, the 3–5 elementary principal in my district and my NAESP protégé, about parent engagement practices, and she mentioned a practice she had success with: a learning tour. This is an approach in which parents see how students learn, and also learn about the practices in place at the building.

I took Gillow's idea and created the MMS Learning Tour. We invited parents on our email list and advertised the event on social media. We had 12 parents RSVP, and seven came to the event. This may not seem like many, but it was a perfect number for the morning's activities—and the turnout was higher than any of our parent meetings had attracted for two years.

We started with coffee, pastries, and conversation. We asked parents to use “metaphor charms” to define what learning means to them. The icebreaker helped us to familiarize ourselves with parents' learning expectations. Next, we shared a presentation on the school's improvement goals, instructional practices, and initiatives for the year, previewing what parents would see in the classrooms.

The AP and I then split the parents into two groups and visited classrooms where children including their own were learning. Our teachers and classrooms are used to visitors from our

own professional development efforts, as well as visitors from other districts.

Parents observed CHAMPS classroom management protocols, the new StudySync ELA program, our Power Teaching Math framework, the use of Chromebooks, and more. Most importantly, they were able to see the kind of care teachers put into teaching every day, including innovative, collaborative approaches for student-centered instruction.

The feedback from participating parents was outstanding; we plan to do another MMS tour this year, and one every quarter of next year. If we can attract five to 10 new parents each time, we will increase parent engagement by 900 percent! More immediately, we already have half a dozen ambassadors who can share their experiences and encourage others to participate.

“Thank you for providing this opportunity,” a mother who took the tour said. “I now have more insight to my kids' learning experiences.”

Parent engagement is a difficult but important goal for schools, and especially middle-level buildings. Learning tours can not only help engage parents, but can also eliminate some of the mystery surrounding what happens at school. Parents appreciate knowing much more than the “nothing” response they typically hear from their kids when asking what happened at school. 

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