

Engagement Ideas for Disengaged Parents

If you find yourself thinking it's harder than ever to get parents engaged in their children's education today, you're right. In fact, it's harder to get anyone's attention today than it was five years ago—or just last year—even on important and serious topics.

Principals tell me that parents are increasingly difficult to reach, with evidence that many are now ignoring school communications and even avoiding meetings and conferences about their own children to avoid stress and to protect what little free time they still have. Here are some practical and effective ideas that are working to engage parents today. The ideas are based on the latest Parent Institute national survey of more than 17,000 school leaders like you and a search of the institute's files for solutions that have never failed over the years.

Use Proven Ways to Get Parents to Meetings

Free food, child care for preschoolers, and fewer, but high-quality, family events lead the list of attendance-boosting techniques survey respondents say are working best. They also report that brief student or top-notch local group performances are effective in getting parents to attend school meetings, as are literacy, math, and science nights. Candid discussions on topics of interest to parents—and don't overlook grandparents—are also working.

Leaders surveyed also say gatherings at varied times of the day, including breakfasts and lunches, and at places other than the school are well attended. And they reveal that the most important secret to all well-attended meetings continues to be direct, individual, personal invitations. It's more trouble than generic announcements; the difference is that personal invitations work.

Evaluate Parent Involvement Correctly

Stop trying to measure parent involvement just by the time parents spend in your building. Sure, it's easy to count the number of parents who show up at school and to log volunteer hours month by month. But no matter how hard you work at it, those hours are dwarfed by the hours parents spend with their children at home day after day. Don't



dismiss time at home as ineffective just because you don't think you can influence it.

As harassed and distracted as parents might be, nearly all want the best for their children—including the best education they can figure out how to provide. Studies have proved the most

effective way to channel parents to help children learn is to tell them specifically what they can do at home to boost student achievement. Explain to parents how and when they can read to their children during time they don't realize they have, how to find books and other reading materials kids will want to read, how to make basic math concepts come alive with games and everyday objects at home, how to use routines to help children learn self-discipline, and how to build responsibility by giving them responsibility. Simple ideas you

and your teachers can readily share with parents personally, on your Web site, and in brief handouts can produce benefits you never thought possible. Take a look at NAESP's *Report to Parents* archive at www.naesp.org/publications.aspx, which supplies dozens of handouts on numerous topics you can pass along to your parents.

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Invite Parents to Be Part of the Student Achievement Team

Most people today know there are learning standards schools must meet and parents have a good idea about how hard your school is working to make adequate yearly progress. Yet most schools don't take seriously parents' efforts to build student achievement.

The No. 1 response to a question inquiring about “the most important issues to you in your job” in the Parent Institute's national survey of school leaders was “improving student achievement.” “Getting parents to help build student achievement” ranked ninth and “getting staff to encourage parent support” ranked 19th.

A promising idea that we see working today and mentioned by an elementary principal on the survey is to have a parent session “where the parents are given the state standards and materials to work with their children at home, creating a partnership with parents.”

Parents are unquestionably harder to reach now, but there are proven ideas that are working and you can use them in your school to involve parents and to improve student achievement. **P**

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