



Did You Know???

Family School Linkages Project: Building Better Relationships Between School Personnel & Families of their Students

From a Presentation by John H. Wherry, President of The Parent Institute

10 Things Any School Can Do to Build Parent Involvement.... Plus 5 Great Ways to Fail!

1. Help parents understand why they are so important to their children's school success. Point out to parents how much time children spend at home vs. at school (birth to H.S. graduation 15% at school, 85% home and other). Remind parents that they are their children's first and most influential teachers. Remind parents how well children mimic them, even when parents don't want them to. Help parents understand how to model the behaviors they want. Discuss in parent meetings, newsletters: How soon children start learning. How children copy parents. How parents can set an example. How to make use of "bits and pieces" of time with children. Why parents really are children's first and most influential teachers

2. Give parents specific things they can do to help their children. Parents say they don't know what to do. Parents say they don't have time. Specific suggestions help. Provide specific ideas in many ways: Tell parents face to face. Give them handouts. Show them videos. Demonstrate ideas at meetings. Parents have as many learning styles as their children. When we specifically target what we want, we often get it!

Practical Strategies: Class by class, or school wide, decide on 3 to 5 specific things you would like parents to do at home: 1) Read to their child every day. 2) Ask about schoolwork every day. 3) Tell their child 'I love you' every day. 4) Talk with their child and listen to what she has to say every day.

3. Work to win parents' endorsement of your school's educational program. Parents and educators share a common interest in the well-being of the children. Educators should respect parents' expertise, and can build respect for school expertise. Parents and schools each bring unique strengths to the education of children. We are a TEAM. We each have strengths, weaknesses-neither of us can do the job alone. Respect must be the basis of our relationship.

Practical Strategies: Discuss each other's strengths at parent and staff meetings. Discuss how we can support each other. Share the school's educational goals-and how you plan to accomplish them.

4. Give parents the specific information they want. Do you know parents' top concerns? How can you find out? How can you stay up to date with parents' concerns? How would parents at your school rank the following topics as issues of concern or importance: Discipline? Peer pressure? Motivation? Self-esteem? Inclusion? ADD or ADHD? Do parents want to know: What is being taught? How it is being taught? How school funds are spent? How school policies are formed?

5. Know how to get parents to READ what you send home. One sheet of paper is best. Use 4th to 6th grade reading level. Know the 30-3-30 Rule: 80% of the people will spend just 30 seconds reading what you send home; 19% will spend just 3 minutes; 1% will spend 30 minutes. Use the dollar bill test: A dollar bill, placed any direction, should touch some graphic element-such as: a bullet, rule, picture, screen, boldface type, underline, different color, etc.

Practical Strategies: Learn what parents want to know. Provide it very briefly. Provide it frequently. Remember-you are not talking to an audience, but a parade!

6. Provide staff training and support for parent involvement. Most educators have had no such training. Many fear parents and avoid them. Training and support build understanding-which overcomes fear.

Staff Training and Support: Share research findings. Jointly develop ideas implement. Provide a steady drip of parent involvement information. Spotlight successful staff practice. Provide non-threatening social activities so staff can meet parents. More Strategies: Ask staff with successful experience to talk with others. Invite speakers to staff meetings. Hold school workshops. Make telephones and note cards available to staff.

7. Provide training and support for parents. Most parents have had no involvement in training. Many fear educators and avoid them. Training and support build understanding-which overcomes fear. Share research findings-parents are interested, too. Help parents share ideas with each other (network). Jointly develop a list of important topics. Provide non-threatening social activities so parents and staff can meet. Stress the importance of what parents do every day at home.

8. Recognize and Reward Exemplary Parent Involvement Practice. Most parents and staff are starved for recognition and encouragement. A little makes a big difference! Recognize exemplary practice of staff: The most parent phone calls. The most home visits. The most notes to parents. The best idea to involve parents. The most parent visits to class. The most parent group members.

Recognize Exemplary Practice of Parents: The most books read aloud. The most improved grades. The most class visits. The most help to teachers. The best idea to help their child. The most help to your parent group.

9. Ensure Your Success by Making a Plan. Specifically, how will you get staff involved? Specifically, what will you ask parents to do? Having a plan does not guarantee success. Not having a plan does guarantee failure!

10. Adapt Ideas That Have Worked for Others. Why try to reinvent the wheel? There are lots of proven ideas ready for you to use: Remember the 3 Fs for success: 1) Food, 2) Families, 3) Fun. Establish a friendly contact early in the year. In time of peace, remember to stress two-way communication.

Five Great Ways to Fail!

1. Think of yourself as the main parent involvement person at your school.

School Survey Results: "Can you give me the names of any people you know who work at the school?" 1) School Secretary, 2) Custodian, 3) Food Service/Bus Driver, 4) A Veteran Teacher, 5) A Music Teacher, 6) Nurse/Coach 7) The Principal

2. Think of parent involvement as something that only happens when parents are in your school building. By far, the most important involvement happens at home! Reading to children. Being seen reading. Setting an example (for better or worse). Showing interest in schoolwork. And MUCH more!

3. Try to build positive attitudes among parents by just using newsletters, memos, newspaper articles, TV, other mass media. Mass media is best for providing information. All mass media-radio, TV, signs, bumper stickers-can do is reinforce attitudes that already exist! Use face-to-face contact for creating and changing attitudes: Conferences. Workshops. Home visits. Class visits. Open House. Even phone calls.

4. Keep on thinking that children from 'broken' or 'disadvantaged' homes do not have the benefit of parent involvement. The 'Extended Family' these children often have is amazing. Mother/Father, Grandparents, Neighbors, Sisters, Aunts, Uncles, Friends. We need to enlist their support! Children often have many people who can and will help if we will invite them to get involved-and help them know what to do.

5. Write parents off as apathetic and uninterested after you repeatedly provide programs for them and invite them to come to school, but they don't show up! The vast majority of parents want to

help their children. We need to 'walk a mile' in their shoes. Respect what they now do to help their children. Issue 'genuine invitations.'

In Conclusion . . . Getting parents involved in their children's education is not just a 'nice idea' We can't DO OUR JOB without parents' help! We know how to make parent involvement work: In ANY school . . . With very LITTLE MONEY . . . Using PROVEN, TESTED IDEAS. The fact is . . . A New Day is Dawning! It is the day of parent involvement. It will help every child, in every school, everywhere . . . and we are exactly the ones who can make it happen!

—This information was prepared by Dr. John H. Wherry, President, The Parent Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474, 1-800-756-5525. The Parent Institute publishes parent involvement materials for schools, including the Educators' Notebook on Family Involvement newsletter for staff, the Parents make the difference!, Parents STILL make the difference!, Helping Children Learn, Helping Students Learn and Building Readers newsletters for schools to distribute to parents, as well as informative booklets, pamphlets and videotapes for schools to distribute to parents. Permission is granted for noncommercial professional reproduction of this summary if this credit message is included.

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