

7 Steps for Building an Engaged Community

A perennial question for school councils is “How can we get more parents involved at school?” While it is the things that parents do at home that have the biggest impact on student success, parental involvement in school events and activities can help foster a sense of community and build strong relationships between parents and school staff. Here are some tips for building a strong school community:

1. You have to want it!

Think of the advantages of having an engaged community. You will have a larger number of resources to draw from and a sense of community can also create a sense of responsibility/ownership in the school.

2. Make the School a Welcoming Place

Starting at the front door, make sure that the school is saying “you are welcome here.” Multilingual welcome signs, friendly smiles and greetings from staff and volunteers, a volunteer room or drop-in program—all go a long way to making the school feel friendly and welcoming.

3. Community Building 101

To truly engage people, they have to feel like they are a part of the community. People need opportunities to get to know each other in a social setting before they will ever come out to a meeting. Family events don’t always have to be educational or focused on making money. Hold events like movie nights, pot luck dinners, and multicultural celebrations. Do some things just for fun!

4. Make Connections Early and Often

This is a job for both staff and school council members. Make sure that staff members have access to information for parents, including contact information for the school council and other parent supports available. The school council can set up information tables at all school events, including kindergarten registration, parent-teacher interviews, and school concerts. Another great idea is to recruit ‘old’ parents to act as mentors for ‘new’ parents.

5. Invite, Invite, and Invite again!

It is never enough to put a little notice in a newsletter about a meeting and say “everyone welcome.” Different parents like to use different methods of communication, so use as many methods as possible... websites, emails, posters, individual notices, phone trees or automatic phone messaging. One of the most effective, but often overlooked, ways to connect is face-to-face. People feel more comfortable getting involved if they have already made a connection with someone.

6. Make Meetings Friendly and Inviting

Make sure parents know they don’t have to be on the school council to attend meetings, and try to keep meetings friendly and informal. Bring in interesting speakers and real programs for kids (not just babysitting). Make meetings accessible—if distance or time is an issue, try tele-conferencing, so people can participate from home. Welcome new people enthusiastically and introduce everyone at every meeting. Explain how the meeting runs, how people can participate, how decisions are made, etc. Stop frequently and ask if people have any questions. Thank everyone for coming, and make sure to follow up with new people—find out if they have any questions, ask for their feedback about how the meeting went.

7. Lower Expectations and Be Patient

Acknowledge all parent contributions and their value. Remember that it takes time to build relationships. Do not judge other parents based on how often they ‘show up.’ It is not necessarily a bad thing if there are only a few active school council members, as long as there are opportunities for all parents to have input. Use a variety of tools like dotmocracy, surveys, website, email, phone, and provide lots of time for responses before making a final decision. Make sure there are opportunities for involvement beyond the school council.

The Payoff?

An active, engaged parent body ready to support their school and help create a rich learning environment for all students.

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