

## **Making Parent Involvement Meaningful**

*Karen Rasmussen*

When Lynn Townsend's daughter was a sophomore at South Laurel High School in London, Ky., she couldn't get into the Latin class she needed to continue her studies from the previous year. Townsend went to the school's open house to learn how to remedy the situation. By the time she left, Townsend had joined the school's committee on restructuring time, which was charged with finding a way to improve teaching and learning at the school.

"I chose the busiest committee in the history of the school," Townsend jokes, explaining that its members—parents, students, community members, and educators—looked at different time restructuring models, visited schools, and listened to speakers explain their options. The committee eventually recommended, and the school council adopted, a four-block school day.

## **Beyond Fundraising and Baking Cookies**

Under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), most schools in the state are required to have a council—made up of two parents, three teachers, and the principal—to make decisions to improve student learning. Councils determine the curriculum, assign students to classes, determine how time is structured, allocate use of school space, and make decisions about instructional practices, discipline and classroom management, and extracurricular programs. Most schools also have committees, which include parents such as Townsend, to investigate topics—including the school budget and curriculum and instruction issues—and inform the council.

"Parents are equal to teachers and the principal" in the decision-making process, explains Charles Edwards, director of the Division of School-Based Decision Making at the Kentucky Department of Education. Because parents have a stake in what

their children learn, they need to have a voice in deciding what is taught and how it is taught, he explains.

Townsend thinks that all parents should have the same kind of opportunity as she to contribute to their children's education. "This type of involvement makes you understand what ownership really means," she says.

South Laurel High School's principal, Roger Marcum agrees, noting that he has observed throughout his career in education that good principals have always been those who value the input of all stakeholders, including parents. In the past, schools relied on parents primarily to raise money for the school and to bake cookies and cupcakes for school parties, he says. Although these activities have value, Marcum works to convince parents that "their input is a valuable resource."

Marcum explains that parents bring a valuable perspective to decision making at the school. "When parents participate in interviews for school personnel," he relates, "they ask, 'Is this the type of person I want my child to spend time with every day? Do they like kids? Would my child enjoy having this person as a teacher?'" Marcum believes that the quality of parent involvement at South Laurel High School is high because parents' viewpoints are valued and their contributions are meaningful. For her part, Townsend notes that, since becoming involved in the school council, "I haven't been asked to bake a single cookie."

## **A Common Goal**

Traditional parent involvement organizations, including PTAs, PTOs, and PTSAs, continue to play important roles in schools. At South Laurel High School, the PTSA organizes school open houses and parent-teacher conferences, and also runs the elections for the school council.

Marcum believes that the PTSA's primary mission is to help parents become involved in school-based decision making. At first, he says, some parents resisted his efforts to encourage them to join the council and committees, because they were used to being in supportive roles, such as helping a teacher

as an aide or performing clerical work in the school office. Marcum says, "Parents would think, 'You're the educator, you should know more about teaching my child than I.'" But Marcum's persistence has paid off: Three years later, most parent PTSA members also belong to a committee.

Creating relationships based on equality between parents and teachers can challenge assumptions and allow faculty members and parents to realize they share common goals for their children's education, those with experience say. Townsend says the most surprising thing to her about becoming involved with the council and committees was meeting "so many dedicated, caring, and sharp teachers." She observed that the teachers, in turn, were surprised that parents took the time to come to the school and become involved, and that they could contribute intelligently to discussions about education. Once parents and teachers realized they were all committed to improving student achievement, she says, making real progress became possible.

## Making Schools Inviting

Establishing two-way communication between educators and parents in schools is one of the biggest challenges—but also one of the most important components—of parent involvement, according to Joyce Epstein, who directs the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at the Johns Hopkins University. Educators need to take the initiative, she asserts. "You can't just say, 'If we had parents involved in the school, we'd have higher student achievement.'" Epstein recommends that, in addition to parent-teacher organizations and councils, schools must make plans for how the school can communicate with families and involve them in a variety of ways.

At D.R. Hill Middle School in Duncan, S.C., the school will "do what it has to do to engage parents," says principal Gary Burgess. He notes that parent involvement tends to peak while children are in elementary school and begins to decrease once they enter middle school; his goal is to keep parents involved.

To educate parents about what is happening in the school, the school sponsors family nights twice a

year, which focus on different education topics. The school organizes a concurrent dance or other social event for students. In order for the child to attend for free, the child's parents must drop off their child at the dance and attend two of five workshops.

During a recent family night, the school focused on reading and writing. Parents attended sessions run by the school's teachers and library media specialists on reading and writing in science; technology in the school; writing and math; becoming lifetime readers; and encouraging children to choose and learn about a hero. The sessions explained why the school is pursuing certain practices and methodologies and taught parents skills to help their children learn at home.

To broaden its outreach to parents, the school also holds parent-student breakfasts; schedules parent-teacher conferences between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.; has a school improvement council with parent, administrator, teacher, and student members; offers an early morning reading program starting at 6:30 a.m. for students whose parents work early shifts; surveys parents to determine if they believe school faculty members are accessible and the school is providing their children with a good education; and encourages parents to shadow their children for a day at school.

"The school staff need to show parents that they are serious," asserts Burgess. Parents of children at his school include those who have not graduated from high school and those who have earned Ph.D.s. He warns educators not "to paint parents with a broad brush" and believes that all parents want to be involved in their children's education—some just need to know how.

The school needs to ask how it can assist parents to make their involvement possible, says Burgess. "We need to send the message to parents that we want them involved, and then follow through on what we say. Schools must 'walk the talk' when it comes to parent involvement."

## Tips for Fostering Successful School-Parent Partnerships

The parents, teachers, and administrators interviewed for this article agree that educators who want to create a meaningful parent involvement program should do the following:

- Make the school inviting.
- Strategize ways to involve parents in schools—many don't know how to become involved or feel intimidated because they haven't been in school since they were students themselves.
- Make parents equal partners with educators by allowing them a voice in school decisions.
- Avoid education jargon.
- Schedule meetings at times convenient for parents, even if those meetings aren't most convenient for educators.
- Show respect for parents' perspectives.
- Cultivate an open and civil atmosphere in which the principal is a facilitator.
- Keep parents well informed and encourage two-way communication.
- Celebrate parent participation.

## Resources

Parent involvement results in increased student achievement, say experts. Educators agree that the most effective parent involvement efforts involve parents, family, and community members in efforts that are coordinated with the school's overall improvement plan. The following resources can help schools plan, implement, and assess their efforts.

### **The National Network of Partnership-2000**

**Schools** supports the work of schools to involve families and the community. "We prefer to focus on 'school-family-community' involvement, rather than just parents," says Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. She believes that the term "parent involvement" suggests that parents must initiate all contact with the school, and that including all stakeholders in the definition promotes shared responsibility.

Schools, school districts, and states can join the Partnership, which provides a research-based framework describing six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The Partnership encourages schools to form Action Teams to develop, implement, and evaluate the school's partnership program, and offers support through training opportunities and publications.

For more information, contact National Network of Partnership-2000 Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 3003 North Charles St., Ste. 200, Baltimore, MD 21218 USA; 410-516-8818; E-mail: [p2000@csos.jhu.edu](mailto:p2000@csos.jhu.edu); Internet: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/>

### **The National Parent Teacher Association**

(PTA) unveiled its voluntary National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs—which are based on Epstein's six types of parent involvement—earlier this year. "The Standards

assist the efforts of schools in implementing their parent involvement policies by offering them a way to measure if their efforts are working," says Pat Dingsdale, chair of the PTA's Education Commission. The Standards support Goals 2000, which calls for schools to promote partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children.

In the standards document, the PTA outlines and provides quality indicators for seven national standards: communicating; parenting; student learning; volunteering; school decision making and advocacy; and collaborating with the community.

For more information, contact National PTA, 330 N. Wabash Ave., Ste. 2100, Chicago, IL 60611-3690 USA; 312-670-6782; E-mail: [info@pta.org](mailto:info@pta.org); Internet: <http://www.pta.org/>