



Addressing the Decline of Parent Involvement in Middle School

Parent involvement greatly declines as children complete elementary school (Zill & Nord, 1994; Epstein, 1990), and in speaking with middle school teachers and principals about how to get parents more involved I found there are no easy solutions. I also found that there has been little written about ways to increase parent involvement in middle school. So I decided to interview middle school principals across the state of Illinois to find out more about what's being done and what more can be done.

Why Involvement Decreases

Many of the middle school principals I spoke with attributed the dramatic decrease in parent involvement from elementary school to middle school to many things:

- Most principals reported that parents think their children don't want them involved during the middle school years. However, this seems to be a misconception. "We've done anonymous surveys and kids have said that they wish their parents would ask more questions and be involved," one principal said. "We tell parents that kids are complaining [about their involvement] because of peer pressure and not to take it personally."
- Parents who had negative experiences when they were in school may feel alienated by the school system and authority figures. Part of getting parents more involved is getting them over this "fear factor."

- The curriculum in today's middle school is becoming more and more accelerated, leaving some parents feeling unprepared to help their child with schoolwork. Therefore, schools must make sure parents have resources, such as a Web site or a homework hotline, where they can get the support they need to help their child with schoolwork.
- Parents have so many commitments and responsibilities nowadays that their time is very limited, which impacts their involvement in their child's education.

Reaching Out to Parents

Although most middle schools continue to struggle with parent involvement, there are several things that can be done to increase it. Here are some recommendations from middle school principals who have successful parent involvement programs:

Make sure there are clearly defined avenues for parents to get involved. Spread the word through newsletters, school Web sites, school meetings, and parent organizations. Many principals have found it helpful to ask very involved parents to lead committees and personally recruit parent volunteers.

Make a concerted effort to involve fathers. Offer events on Saturday mornings and at other times that are directed at fathers. One principal reported that on Father's Day the school invited dads to play dodgeball with the kids in the gym during lunch. It was one of the school's best-attended events.

Offer special evening or weekend events that provide hands-on application of what students are learning. For example, one district invites students and parents to explore geography by using global positioning systems to locate hidden treasures or trinkets. Opportunities such as this help parents and children apply classroom learning to real life. They also help children and parents enjoy learning together.

Use community resources to attract parents and address their special needs. Many districts offer regular seminars or workshops to deal with issues related to positive parenting. Also, speakers from the community can be recruited to address parent concerns.

Provide opportunities for parents to be involved throughout the day. Evening events are often more accessible to working parents than events held during the day. Some districts even offer morning coffees to attract parents before the workday.

Offer monthly or quarterly awards or recognition assemblies designed to attract parents. For example, one school holds a "Breakfast of Champions" to celebrate student achievements. Parents are invited to attend the breakfast and each student's picture is displayed in a trophy case.

Capitalize on events that are well-attended. Most principals reported that open-house events were the best attended of any of their parent outreach activities. This is a great opportunity to let parents know how they can become further


involved in their child's school. In addition, new parents can be assigned parent buddies to help them learn about the school and become active members of the school community.

Find out who the inactive parents are and call them. Personal contact is important. Some parents want to get involved but don't know how. Many principals have found that a personal invitation can help them get inactive parents involved.

Address transportation issues that impact parent involvement. Some districts make arrangements with the local bus system to provide rides for parents with no other way to get to school. One principal reported that since many parents don't have transportation to the school, the school brings activities and programs to them.

Finding a Healthy Balance

Parents need to stay involved with their child's education beyond elementary school. However, striking a healthy balance can be tricky. One principal summed up what many other principals have learned over their careers: "It's natural for parents to think that as their child gets older they should be less involved. However, that's not correct. Parents think because they spent a lot of time with their child in the elementary years, they can spend less time during middle school."

There is a natural progression of less day-to-day involvement for parents as their child ages. However, time spent at school events during the middle school years should stay the same or even increase. This is a time when children need their parents more than ever! 

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