

It's All in the Family

Middle Schools Share the Secrets of Parent Engagement

Middle Ground, Volume 4, Number 3, February 2001



Andreae Downs

There's no shortage of parents in the halls of Sunset Middle School in Longmont, Colorado. They supervise a reception area for students and their families, recruit and train mentors for troubled students, and perform a wide range of volunteer roles, including raising money for school activities and assisting teachers in their classrooms.

"I've been around middle schools for 15 years," notes Michael Graydoz, who started as principal this school year. "This place is absolutely amazing. Parents are here working every day."

At Rogers Middle School in Long Beach, California, parents are actively engaged in reforms tied to academic standards. The school sends home daily agenda planners printed with the rubrics for individual assignments, as well as a school rubric that details the qualities of good writing. In conjunction with teachers, parents post writing samples on the school walls so everyone will understand the qualities of exemplary, average, and just passable essays.

In Louisville, Kentucky, parents have been instrumental in helping Conway Middle School switch to student-led conferences, which ask adolescents to be more responsible for their learning and reporting their progress. During both the 1999-2000 and the current school year, 90 percent of students' parents attended the sessions at the school, where nearly half the students come from low-income families.

At Gunston Middle School in Arlington, Virginia, parents can check out student-created videotapes from the school library. The videos show parents how to help their children develop good science projects, how to get them involved in after-school clubs, and how to make lasagna using a recipe from a home economics class, among other topics.

Each of these middle schools has recognized the crucial role that parents play in student achievement and has taken steps to integrate families into the learning community. Instead of only calling parents when their children are in trouble or asking them to perform peripheral tasks far removed from instruction, these schools have adopted a more inclusive approach that welcomes parents as partners in the education process.

To have an effect on student achievement, parents don't have to be present in the school building or attend school meetings — although research suggests these activities can enrich the school culture and raise the expectations for all children. The strongest correlation to school achievement comes from home-based activities, such as "encouraging reading, caring about what happens in class, keeping track of school progress, and finding children a place to study," Melanie Scott Stein and Ron Thorkildsen write in *Parent Involvement In Education, Insights and Applications from the Research*, (Phi Delta Kappa International, 1999). Eighth-graders who reported having home discussions about their studies almost every day had the highest average reading scores on the 1999 National Assessment of Education Progress.



Yet traditionally, parent involvement plummets in the middle grades. According to research from the National Education Goals Panel, the parents of middle grades students are only half as likely as the parents of elementary students to attend conferences with teachers. And parents' participation in other middle school events drops as well.

The reasons for their more limited contact vary. Parents of young adolescents often misinterpret their children's push for greater independence as a signal to disengage from their schools. Some parents don't speak English well, or they might not have had good experiences themselves in school. And many parents pull back because their children's schools send subtle messages that their participation isn't necessary. After the elementary grades, schools tend to be less open and their staffs more stratified. Educators at the middle and high school level don't always appreciate the insights that parents have about their children's learning. The result is a "veneer of cordiality" that doesn't serve the students or their schools particularly well, says the nonpartisan research group Public Agenda.

"Parents, like teachers, feel somewhat beleaguered," the group wrote in its 1999 report, *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools*. They know education is important to their child, and they say they try to do their best. Indeed, today's parents feel they do much more than their own parents did when they were in school. But they also face a number of competing priorities or cross-pressures. ... Parents are often conflicted about just how far to push their child on the academic front, and the judgments they make on a day-to-day basis may not be the ones that most educators would readily approve of."

That's why many experts suggest educators and parents talk openly and often about their joint contributions to raising student achievement. Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, recommends that schools develop specific and intentional plans to reinforce their relationships with families. "Up until now," she said, "involvement of parents has been mainly a matter of luck and accident. When educators collaborate with parents, she said, students "are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, and of staying in school. Frequent, positive communication with parents helps parents feel more comfortable with the school and more likely to become involved."

Epstein has identified six key areas where schools can help parents become full partners in education: communicating with families about school programs and student progress, assisting families with parenting skills, stressing the importance of volunteering, including parents in school decision-making, showing families how to expand learning activities at home, and collaborating with the community to coordinate resources and services for families. (For examples of how schools can use the six types of involvement, see Epstein's 1997 book, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, or her Web site listed in the Resources.)



Middle schools that have developed strong partnerships with families might add another essential step — asking parents what they need to become more involved in their children's education, then finding ways to help them do so. If traditional methods don't work, schools can seek alternative ways to encourage parents to lend a hand.

For example, Gunston Middle School's staff surveyed parents several years ago and found that 90 percent wanted more information about helping their children in school. Rhonda Clevenson, the school's video journalism teacher, said staff members decided to set up a video lending library to "increase the information that families receive about school."

The videos command greater attention than a brochure or flyer because parents can actually see how a class or an after-school program runs, Clevenson said. The videos also bridge the school's language divide — many Gunston parents are more fluent in Spanish than in English — by providing information visually and verbally. Clevenson said most of the school's families have televisions and video-cassette recorders (the school also has made one available for loan), which makes it easy for them to watch the tapes at home.

Gunston started its Home Visions Program during the 1997-98 school year by buying some video cameras and editing equipment and creating a video journalism course. So far, the school has produced more than 50 different videos, which run 12 to 15 minutes each. In addition to helping parents understand school issues, the videos encourage students to improve upon the work of previous classes. For example, when students see models of past science fair or interdisciplinary-projects, they often try to add new information, increase the level of complexity, or challenge the initial conclusions. They can watch the standards in action and reach past them.

Another school that has listened to the ideas and concerns of its families is Portsmouth Middle School in Portland, Oregon. Because 80 percent of the students come from low-income families who traditionally haven't been eager to show up at school, Principal Torn Pickett started looking for different collaborations. Instead of "counting people in the seats at meetings," he said, "I now count the number of times school is mentioned at dinner. Our goal is to give parents the information they need to get that conversation started."

He encourages the staff to communicate regularly with parents about their children's progress in school. For example, Portsmouth stopped using traditional letter grades and, instead, aligned teachers' judgments with the state's academic standards. Now parents receive two report cards at regular intervals. One includes an evaluation of the child's classroom behavior, and the other describes the child's progress in meeting the state's benchmarks.

"We found the information parents wanted was how their child was doing, and in relation to what," Pickett said. "The key piece was getting parents to value teachers' judgments, so they aren't surprised at test time that their kids aren't doing as well as they thought."

Rogers Middle School adopted a similar system to communicate student progress. Teachers use a grading program that enables them to send home progress reports at regular intervals; parents can see which assignments or tests are missing and which need to be revised to attain higher marks.



Because of this system, seventh grade math teacher Sally Deeble said, “parents get very involved. They can say, ‘Oh, here are three papers missing — that’s why your grade is so low.’ Even A students can be lazy about doing their homework.” When parents are concerned about their children’s education, they make “my job easier.”

Teachers and administrators at Rogers have spent a great deal of time in the past few years understanding the goals and applications of the school district’s new academic standards, then meeting with parents to explain them. “The whole thing is communication,” said Principal Linda Moore.

Sunset Middle School Principal Michael Graydoz said the most effective way he has found to reach parents is through neighborhood coffees held in their homes. He said his predecessor, Chris Rugg, realized that Sunset had an unfriendly reputation in the community, so he set up the informal get-togethers to extend the school’s welcome mat. Taking time to build trust with families has paid off in unexpected ways: Sunset’s parents rallied behind the school when state media attacked public schools, and they helped the community pass school bond issues.

“Parents save us from a lot of false perceptions,” said Vice Principal Joe Mehsling.

Graydoz estimates that 15-20 different parents are in the school volunteering most days. In addition to staffing the reception area and recruiting mentors for students, parents also help teachers grade research papers and establish partnerships with the community, such as developing an archeology project with the University of Colorado and a “Mission to Mars” project with an aerospace company in Boulder. Parents also have helped teachers make the transition to standards-based education by supervising after-school activities and clubs.

“As we are having to do more, better, faster, and are getting the professional training to do that, we have less time to coordinate spirit week or special events,” noted Linda Barrier, a veteran language arts teacher. “If it weren’t for our parents, inspiring kids beyond academics would not occur.” For some students, she said, after-school activities motivate them to attend their regular classes. “It’s where they get that one-to-one touch, where the human connection is made.”

Sunset also has hired parents for staff positions. The school’s attendance clerk, for example, is a parent who used to dress up and volunteer as a story time bear in one of the local elementary schools. “Kids still walk by here and say ‘Hello, Mrs. Bear,’” Mehsling said. “She’s not just the secretary, she’s involved with kids in a number of ways.”

These adults help serve as the school’s early warning system, spotting troubled students and assisting them before their difficulties explode into conflicts in the classroom. Combined with the mentoring program — which includes senior citizens and parents — these efforts fill the school with a variety of adults who know and care about children in many contexts.



RESOURCES

School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, by Joyce Epstein et al, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, California, 1997. To order, call 805-499-9734, or go to www.sagepub.com. Free support and information is available to schools, districts, and states looking to increase parent and community involvement. Contact the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, 410-516-8800, or www.csos.jhu.edu/default.htm. Look for TIPS for information about interactive homework assignments and examples of how schools can reach parents. For useful parent involvement tools, such as handouts, videos, and checklists, go to www.publicengagement.com/tools/index.html.

Keys to Re-engaging Families in the Education of Young Adolescents, by Hazel E. Loucks and Jan E. Waggoner, National Middle School Association, 1998. To order, call 800-528-NMSA, or go to www.nmsa.org.

"Family Involvement in Education," ENC Focus (Vol. 5, Issue 3, 1998), Eisenhower National Clearinghouse. The issue is available online at www.enc.org. Look for the link to Family Involvement.

A School-Wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences: A Practitioners Guide, by Patti Kinney, Mary Beth Munroe, and Pam Sessions, National Middle School Association, 2000. To order, call 800-528-NMSA, or go to www.nmsa.org.

"Parent Involvement and Student Achievement at the Middle Level," NMSA Research Summary #18, is available at www.nmsa.org/resources/ressum18.htm.

Parent Involvement in the Schools: Ideas that Work, edited by Maïke Philipsen, Phi Delta Kappa, 1997. Call 812-339-1156.

Family Involvement in Education: Successful Local Approaches, an idea book published by the U.S. Department of Education, is available to read and download at www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/.

For more information about the Home Visions Program at Gunston Middle School, contact Rhonda Clevenson at rclevens@yahoo.com.

Rogers Middle School reaches out to parents through its science department Web site, which outlines the syllabus for each grade level, explains how teachers will assess student work, and suggests ways parents can get involved. Go to www.myschoolonline.com/ca/rogersscience.

The Harvard University Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is an online resource for teacher educators who want to prepare teachers and administrators to work more effectively with families. Go to <http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~hfrp/about/projects/fine.html>.

Andreae Downs writes about education from Waban, Massachusetts.

Original Publication Information:

Downs, A. (2001). *It's all in the family: Middle schools share the secrets of parent engagement. Middle Ground, 4(3), 10-15.*