

26 Ways to Build Involvement

Getting more parents to participate is as easy as A, B, C when you follow this list of best practices.

by Craig Bystrynski

A is for Asking. If you want people to participate, you must ask. The number one reason people cite for not volunteering: "Nobody asked."

B is for Black Hole. People are afraid that if they volunteer, they'll be sucked into a black hole of time commitment from which they can't escape. Let them know up front that your group is not a black hole. Then, make sure you honor their time constraints.

C is for Communication. Use a variety of communication tools to make sure your message gets through. Flyers and e-mails are good for communicating a date and time. Use your newsletter and Web site to let people know about your accomplishments. Invite local media to activities involving kids.

D is for Diversity. Reach out to all parents in your unit, not just the ones who are easy to reach. Sponsor multicultural events. Translate parent group materials, if necessary. Organize transportation for those who need it. Your school, your group, and the kids all will benefit tremendously from broad-based parent involvement.

E is for Examine. Look closely at your activities to decide what's working and what isn't. Don't just do something because "that's what we've always done." New ideas can create new excitement for your group.

F is for Fun—don't forget about it! Some special people will dedicate their time and energy to a group because it's the right thing to do. Many, many more will participate if it's fun. Make sure your group has fun. You'll build involvement and fight burnout, too.

G is for Gradual. Introduce parents to participation in the Unit Committee gradually. Parents who participate in family events are the most likely to become volunteers. Those who volunteer occasionally are the most likely to take on more responsibility, such as organizing an event. And those organizers are the most likely to become

interested in serving as board members. Moving people from step to step takes the stress out of finding future leaders.

H is for Hour, the length to which you should limit meetings. People worry about time commitments. You have better ways for them to spend their volunteer time than at meetings, so don't hold meetings that go on all night. Use your committees to do the detail work. Limit general meetings to one hour, and limit business to finalizing the work of the committees.

I is for Invitation. The best way to get parents involved is to extend a personal invitation. People are most likely to take part in any group when they know someone who already does. Don't just send flyers home, then wonder why nobody "signed up." Create situations in which you can communicate with people one on one.

J is for Just. Don't use this word to describe your group. You are doing important work. You should know it, and others should, too. So don't think of your organization as "just a Unit Committee." If you do, you'll have a much harder time getting others involved.

K is for Kudos. Awards, compliments, a simple thank-you. Always let people know that you appreciate their help, whether they just organized a smashing fundraiser or spent an hour selling tickets at the carnival.

L is for Leadership. Being a leader means looking beyond today. Does your group have long-term goals? How will you get there? If you want to get parents excited, share your vision and give them something to work toward.

M is for Marketing. Sing the praises of your parent group. Make sure people know what you do. When you donate an item to the school, put a plaque or sticker on it that gives you credit. When you raise money, make sure people know what it was able to buy for their kids. A little basic marketing goes a long way toward building your

reputation with parents—and encouraging parent involvement.

N is for New Parents—make a special effort to reach out to them. Parents new to the school need your help. You can provide them with information about the school, teachers, schedules, and more. Reach out to them early—and individually—to give them a positive feeling about the PTO Unit Committee.

O is for Organization. Make sure you have bylaws. Adopt sound financial practices. Obtain an Employer Identification Number from the IRS. Incorporate. Consider applying for tax-exempt status from the IRS. Take your group seriously and others will, too.

P is for Priorities. Make parent involvement, not fundraising, your priority. Run two or three major fundraisers a year. Then concentrate on activities that get parents connected to the school. The kids, teachers and administrators, and the Unit Committee will all benefit.

Q is for Questionnaire. Don't just ask for your volunteers' time; ask for their talents. Use a questionnaire to discover parent interests. You'll find dedicated volunteers more easily if you match skills and talents to the jobs you need done.

R is for Research—share it with parents. Research shows that students with involved parents perform better in school, score better on standardized tests, have fewer behavioural problems, are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, and go to better colleges. Make sure you get the word out!

S is for School Family Nights. These are events that get parents and kids together for a night of fun and, perhaps, learning. These events *are* parent involvement. They get parents connected to the school more successfully than anything else you do. Don't think of family nights as extras, and don't make them fundraisers. Schedule at least two per semester.

T is for Training. Don't give anyone, officers or volunteers, a job they're not ready for. Make sure people know what

is expected of them and have the resources and knowledge to do the job. If you don't, volunteers won't return.

U is for Unite. Whenever possible, seek to unite diverse groups. Work together with teachers and administrators, parents of varying ethnic and economic groups, people with a variety of views. Make the parent group a source of strength for the unit.

V is for Visibility. Be visible at all events. Set up a table at open house, registration, and school activities. Assign a board member to walk around at parent group functions; she should introduce herself and make sure people are having fun. Put a welcoming face on the Unit Committee.

W is for Welcome, the way you should make people feel. Have a greeter at meetings to welcome newcomers and make sure they feel comfortable. Use name tags so people who don't attend often won't feel left out. Make that first experience a positive one, so people will want to come back.

X is for X-factor. The x-factor in building a successful parent group is balance. You can run a good event or fundraiser without it. But to sustain a group over the long term, you must find balance: work and fun, Unit Committee time and personal time, fundraising and involvement events.

Y is for Year. Plan out your activities for the entire year. Use your checkbook to create a budget, so you'll know how much money you need to raise. Balance your activities throughout the year so you won't burn out your volunteers or yourself. Take the pressure off with good planning.

Z is for Zero In—on building parent involvement!