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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Inviting people into schools

When schools look at ways to communicate better with parents and community members, their first thought, inevitably, is to send out more newsletters. Or longer ones. Or fancier ones.

While newsletters are a good tool, they should be used in tandem with more “old school” communications — inviting people into your building to talk face-to-face. That applies not just to parents but also to neighbors who live close to the school and to city leaders and senior citizens.

It’s called relationship building, and it’s done best when you meet personally with people and share a smile and a conversation in person.

Relationships build good partnerships, and those partnerships pay great dividends for schools. Partnerships with local businesses bring resources and learning opportunities for students, such as internships or expert speakers. Partnerships with parents and civic groups bring volunteers and fresh ideas for helping students. And when it’s time to pass a bond, relationships and partnerships ensure that voters are knowledgeable about your schools and willing to support them financially.

Relationships are also crucial in times of a public relations crisis. Relationships build a bank of trust and goodwill. When patrons feel good about their district and believe they are well informed about what goes on there, they are more apt to give grace when things go wrong.

Meaningful connections

The majority of community members do not have children in your schools, but they are still called on to vote in elections and offer other support. So, it’s important to cultivate those relationships by connecting on a personal level.

There are many opportunities for inviting community members inside your buildings and classrooms to see first-hand the great things students are learning and doing:

- Send personal invitations to households in your school neighborhood, inviting residents to school concerts or plays. Or better yet, enlist parent or staff volunteers to hand-deliver the invitations.
- At the high school level, offer senior citizens free passes to athletic events and school music and drama productions.
- Go to civic organizations to invite members to volunteer in your school. Don’t just issue a blanket invitation to volunteer — offer some specific jobs that you need help with, such as being a reading buddy to an elementary student or tutoring a high school student after school in math.

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- Invite local businesses to review the curriculum in pertinent classes and offer insight to better prepare students for jobs in their industries. For example, solicit input from a large welding company on specific skills needed at their company.
- Invite patrons to a lunch prepared by your culinary students as a way to show off their skills.
- Host an art show featuring art and photography produced by students and invite the community to come.

Hands-on connections with parents

Connecting with parents can be easier but still requires planning and creativity. Some schools have had success in hosting curriculum nights that not only inform parents about the curriculum but offer them tools to help their children do better in school. For example, teachers might teach parents some math games to play with their children. Or they could offer short workshops on topics of interest to parents, such as how to navigate the district's new report card.

Instead of constantly issuing information to parents, schools find they build better connections when there are two-way conversations. So events at school can be a good time to seek input from parents. Some schools set up different stations in the gym where parents brainstorm about different topics in small groups and then discuss them afterward with school leaders.

At some schools, the principal hosts regular coffee chats with parents. It's a way to meet parents in an informal, comfortable setting and talk about any issues they want to bring up. And often, principals will hear about potential concerns early, so they can problem-solve before they become full-blown issues.

Many kindergarten teachers are finding that meeting parents in their homes can be a good way to build positive relationships with new families and create a warm first impression. At the same time, it gives teachers more insight into their student's home life. Parents usually appreciate the convenience of having the teacher come to them so they don't have to miss work or arrange for childcare. And they often feel more comfortable asking questions when they are within the confines of their own home.

There are many other ways schools can create meaningful connections with parents:

- Provide opportunities for parents to connect with the school through volunteering or participating on school committees.
- Offer occasional parenting classes on topics of interest to parents, such as identifying and helping students with ADHD or providing guidance on how proper nutrition can help student achievement.
- Designate time in staff meetings to write postcards home with positive news about individual students.
- Make an effort to learn the names of all parents and students and welcome them as they come in the door.

Research shows that the more parents — and others — are engaged in their children's education, the better the student performs in school. Time spent on building strong relationships with parents and the community is an investment in better education and a more positive learning environment for every student.