

# Nurturing Parent Involvement

## Two Middle Level Teachers Share Their Secrets

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Much of the parent involvement in middle level schools focuses on extracurricular programs (Valentine et al. 2002). These traditional forms of parent involvement include participation in activities such as raising funds, sponsoring field trips, supplying resources, and attending performances and athletic events. Although these types of parent involvement only indirectly involve parents in children's academic learning, they do provide an essential link between parents and schools. In fact, some parents feel more comfortable participating in extracurricular activities as opposed to volunteering in classrooms (Halsey 2001).

Less than two years ago, a school district in west Texas initiated a program called Volunteer Initiative Program (VIP) to increase community and parent involvement in grades kindergarten through twelve. Through VIP, the district encouraged district teachers and staff to increase their efforts to involve parents in their schools. Carlos Valdez and Mike Hogan, two teachers at Madison Junior High School (MJHS), took the challenge seriously. About 400 students in grades six, seven, and eight attend MJHS, located in a small farming community. Carlos teaches art and serves as the eighth-grade class sponsor. Mike is the school's band director. Administrators, teachers, parents, and even students at the junior high school described Carlos's and Mike's concerted efforts to recruit, enable, and appreciate parent involvement as exemplary. Both of these teachers attributed the success of their programs to parent involvement.

Although both teachers involved parents in numerous activities, Carlos's leadership in recruiting parents to plan and sponsor an end-of-the-year party (an all-night lock-in) for eighth-grade students, and Mike's guidance for parent volunteers who planned a band

trip (including concerts in three towns and a recreational visit to an amusement park) are especially good examples of teachers initiating parent involvement. These two activities were clearly extracurricular and addressed early adolescents' social needs rather than academic needs. However, they were accomplished only through carefully orchestrated parent involvement efforts. The success of these two teachers in initiating and maintaining parent involvement may provide helpful guidance to other teachers who want to increase such involvement in their own schools.

As eighth-grade class sponsor, Carlos was responsible for planning the eighth-grade party. He solicited students' parents to help with the preparations. These parents planned fund raising; gathered door prizes; and organized food, games, and entertainment for the party. Party planning sessions called the Parent Breakfast Club were held in the school cafeteria once every six weeks early in the morning. After spring break, the parent group met once in the evening to coordinate time schedules for the lock-in activities, prepare materials for the games, and pack door prizes. One week before the lock-in, parents met again in the evening and had an informal dinner to celebrate the successful planning of the party. The number of parents attending these meetings fluctuated from seven to twenty. Approximately fifty parents attended the lock-in to help facilitate games, serve food, and monitor students.

Similarly, Mike held meetings with band members' parents to plan the band trip. Mike and five to seven parents met twice before the trip to plan and once after the trip to reflect on the success of their efforts. The band also performed a concert at MJHS after the trip to show appreciation for community support of their program.

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### Recruit Parent Involvement

Carlos and Mike made deliberate efforts to recruit parent involvement in their programs. Carlos initiated parent involvement for the eighth-grade party by carefully planned his contacts with parents using both letters and phone calls. He sent the first invitation for parent volunteers home with the students. To prevent students from censoring the invitation, he drafted a letter that was both the permission slip for students to attend the party and the first invitation for parents to volunteer. It explained the nature of the party to parents, and it also described the Parent Breakfast Club and the various ways in which parent volunteers were needed. Carlos then mailed letters to each of the parents who agreed to volunteer to invite them to the breakfast meetings. Letters always contained updates of the work completed and timelines for the remaining tasks. All eighth-grade parents received an invitation in the spring to join the parent group for the evening meetings.

Carlos wrote the letters hoping to catch parents' attention. He described his letters as zany and interesting but also nurturing and encouraging. He often included humorous anecdotes from previous Breakfast Club meetings, used unusual fonts and small art logos, and printed the letters on brightly colored paper. These efforts prevented parents from thinking they were receiving multiple copies of the same announcement about the party. In his words, his purpose was "not to announce, but to invite." At times, Carlos called particular parents to ask for information necessary for the next meeting (for example, prices for the gym facility) or to remind them to bring particular supplies. Parent volunteers also called other parents to invite them to the Breakfast Club. Carlos stressed that recruitment of parent involvement was a continuous process.

Like Carlos, Mike used personal, continuous contacts with parents to generate interest in the band trip. Mike first sent letters to parents during summer band camp to invite them to the school on the last day of camp to discuss upcoming events for the year such as homecoming, concerts, and the band trip. Before each band activity, Mike sent letters to band members' parents inviting them to attend. In preparation for the trip, he sent letters to every band parent and also personally recruited parent volunteers to promote the band trip at regular band booster meetings. These parents had already shown a commitment to the band program by joining and attending band booster meetings. In contrast to Carlos's efforts to recruit a large number of eighth-grade parents for the lock-in, Mike's efforts for the band trip were more narrowly focused on a much smaller number of parents. This relatively small number of five to seven parents allowed him to make most of his contacts with these parents through phone calls.

#### Keys to Nurturing Parent Involvement

- Use varied types of personal contacts repeatedly to invite parents' participation.
- Provide direction for parents by clearly outlining what they can do to help, when they can do it, and how they can do it.
- Promote ownership and pride in the involvement by including parents in the planning and decision-making processes.
- Take time to reflect on parents' progress and adjust their efforts accordingly.
- Acknowledge parents' contributions through personal expressions of appreciation.

### Enable Parent Involvement

Once parents were successfully recruited, Carlos and Mike provided guidance for parents in each of the activities in which they participated. These efforts included sharing expectations and providing resources for the parents to accomplish their goals. For example, Mike shared a spiral bound packet of information about the band trip with parent sponsors. The packet included materials such as itineraries, maps, student dress codes, contact names, and instructions for sponsors. Two weeks before the trip, Mike met with the parents to discuss the packet and answer their questions. One day before the trip, Mike again met with the parents again to assign each a small group of students for whom they would be responsible. Mike consciously prepared parents for specific responsibilities they were expected to assume, and each of the parents was given checklists for their assigned duties. Mike shared: "If we let them know what they can do, when they can do it, and how they can do it, they'll move with much more confidence."

Likewise, Carlos provided parent volunteers with resources, such as a list of donors from the two previous years, a list of facilities and reservation information, books about games, and a carnival supply catalog, to help them plan the lock-in. To assist them in soliciting funds, he also gave parents a letter from the school describing the lock-in. This letter helped potential donors realize parents were legitimately collecting money on behalf of the students. Meetings were held at different times of the day and days of the week to help accommodate parents' schedules. Tasks were varied so that parents could choose a commitment appropriate to the amount of time and effort they had to offer. Parents were always encouraged to "do what you can, when you can." The resources both of these teachers offered were simple to provide but gave specific direction for parent participation and helped them develop a sense of ownership in the activities.

Perhaps the most important way Carlos and Mike promoted a sense of ownership among the parents was the value they placed on shared goal setting and a democratic decision-making process. For both teachers, the first meetings with parents provided an opportunity to set goals for each of their respective activities. Parents were an integral part of the planning process; the teachers did not merely hand them a predetermined plan. For example, the eighth-grade parents made most of the decisions for the lock-in during the Breakfast Club meetings. Likewise, band parents suggested and planned the activities for each stop on the band trip. In addition, both teachers encouraged parents to reflect on their progress and adjust their efforts accordingly. This reflective component was taken a step further when Mike met with the band parents after their trip. This group had an opportunity to discuss the problems they encountered in being effective sponsors. During this time, Mike took notes inside a copy of the sponsor's packet. In recording their suggestions, Mike valued the input parents provided and then changed the packet to address these problems in the planning of future trips.

### Appreciate Parent Involvement

In addition to ownership, Carlos and Mike wanted parents to take pride in their service to the students and the school. Carlos often spoke of successes when he addressed what he called "good things happening so far" in Breakfast Club meetings. Both teachers strongly advocated finding specific ways to praise parents and deliberately created opportunities to show parents that their efforts were appreciated. All parent involvement was acknowledged during the activities themselves. These acknowledgements were more than simple announcements, and they allowed students to become a part of the acknowledgment. Personal letters and cards were always sent after an event; Mike used a handwritten note of thanks because it is more "personal, specific, and doesn't look like another form letter from the school." The school newsletter and sometimes the city newspaper also printed acknowledgements of community and parent contributions. Both teachers emphasized the importance of expressing appreciation for parents. Carlos shared: "Letting parents know you

appreciate them is more than polite manners. It goes a long way in saying that you needed them and they came through for you."

Both Carlos and Mike valued building relationships with parents. The contrast between the sometimes distant, professional relationship that many teachers have with parents and the more personal relationship they purposefully cultivated with parents showed how far a little extra effort can go. Speaking about parent-teacher relationships, Carlos said: "As long as it remains professional, we keep it cold and distant. But it's not only a professional relationship; we are family here. You are building a relationship and a relationship is an effort. . . . We have to actually reach out and build those friendships."

### Conclusion

Although Carlos Valdez and Mike Hogan taught extracurricular classes at MJHS, they believed parent involvement was important to create effective programs and to promote school-family connections. More important, they were examples of teachers who strove to align their beliefs and attitudes about parent involvement with their practices. Both of these teachers valued building relationships with parents and felt it was their responsibility to not only initiate but also maintain parent involvement. They extended their communication with parents using repeated and personal contacts. They provided direction for parent involvement, promoted ownership and pride in their involvement, and acknowledged parents' contributions with expressions of appreciation. Their efforts to recruit and nurture parent involvement were intentional and purposeful and may serve as helpful examples for teachers in other middle level school communities.

*Key words: extracurricular activities, parent involvement, teacher initiative*

### REFERENCES

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