

Tips and Strategies for Increasing Parent and Family Involvement in Virginia Schools

Improving Student Achievement and Outcomes through Parent and Family Involvement

Gathered from a statewide questionnaire of parents, teachers, and administrators in Virginia public schools Virginia Department of Education and the Center for Family Involvement at the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University

A note about this booklet...

It is commonly acknowledged that one of the most important components of student achievement and success is parent involvement.

Today's parents—and families—are bombarded with growing demands, but regardless of their background or circumstances, overwhelmingly parents want what is best for their children. Parents are vital partners in their child's education and life success.

In 2009, a Virginia Department of Education stakeholder group on parent involvement in public schools disseminated a questionnaire to over 1000 parents, teachers and school administrators across Virginia. Recipients were asked to share strategies schools have used successfully to partner with parents and families to improve student outcomes.

Over 450 recipients responded, providing the tips and strategies in this booklet.

Readers are encouraged to browse these tips and commit to trying several new strategies to support the involvement of parents and families in the education of their children.

This booklet can be found at www.centerforfamilyinvolvement.org.

Credits:

Graphic Design

Visual Appeal, LLC

Printing

AlphaGraphics

2010

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Section 1: Host events and activities that bring parents and families into the school

Establish a strong Parent–Teacher Association/Parent–Teacher Organization (PTA/ PTO) that spearheads and supports a variety of family events, both fun and educational. Some examples:

1. Organize music programs or talent shows in which students perform for the community.
2. Organize book sales and other fundraisers.
3. Host cookouts.
4. Hold a Thanksgiving lunch or dinner.
5. Promote family activities like “Game Night.”
6. Offer an after-school activities program.
7. Host a “Discovery Night” where parents, students and teachers learn together, in an interactive way, about a topic of universal interest.
8. Hold an “Exceptional Education Success Night” to recognize student performance.
9. Organize a “Community Day” at which families provide volunteer time.

10. Arrange for an “International Night” to showcase different cultures.
11. Hold a “Family Reading Night;” focus on particular reading programs (e.g. Accelerated Reading Program).
12. Establish SOL- themed events.
13. Host a “Fall Festival” or a “Winter Enrichment” program.
14. Organize a “Drug Awareness Night.”
15. Provide a “Health and Fitness Night.”
16. Arrange for a “Technology Night.”
17. Hold a Parent University or Parent Academy to train parents in leadership skills.
18. Have PTA meetings that include students so parents and students can learn together.
19. Organize parent/student orientation for each grade level during the spring.
20. Hold family orientations for new students at the high-school level.
21. Implement “Families and Schools Together,” a program to encourage parents to foster imagination-based play with their kids and support parent-to-parent socialization.
22. Print (in the local newspaper) open invitations to parents and others to attend local Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) meetings.
23. Include parents and students on faculty committees.

Offer programs, events and activities related to encouraging parent involvement such as:

1. “Parents as Partners” - information and support to foster parent involvement.
2. “Parent of the Month Club” - recognition of parent contributions to the school community.
3. “Three for Me” Project (parents pledge to volunteer three hours per year per child).
4. “Watch Dogs” (a male mentoring program).
5. “Man on the Move” for minority parents and students.
6. “Booster Clubs” - parent support of school programs and activities.
7. PTA restaurant nights.
8. Parent workshops on how to support student learning in specific subject areas.
9. Programs to encourage English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) parents to become involved with their child’s education.
10. Incorporating student performances into family-oriented events.
11. Orientation day(s) before the first day of school and at back-to-school night (within the first month) to familiarize parents and children with the school setting.
12. Meetings at which supper, desserts, snacks and/or prizes are provided.

13. Planning sessions with parents to help them develop strategies for supporting their child's success inside and outside of the classroom.
14. IEP meetings and parent-teacher meetings that support parent and student participation.
15. Daily or weekly tutoring sessions in which parent volunteers assist children who need extra remediation in certain areas.

Remember to ensure that different school events are offered at varying times during day, evening and weekend hours in recognition of families' diverse schedules.

Encourage parents to get involved with volunteering in their child's school by inviting them to:

1. Read to classes.
2. Help with testing and classroom monitoring needs.
3. Be guest speakers.
4. Chaperone events and field trips.
5. Work with students to help plan events for fundraisers, field days, and curriculum-related events.

Section 2: Communicate with parents frequently, using a variety of methods

1. Develop and use a home-to-school/school-to-home communication system, using methods that work best for specific parents and teachers (mail, the phone, email, communication notebooks, face-to face meetings).
2. Ensure that parent contact information is up to date so that communication flows.
3. Encourage regular use of school and classroom newsletters, web pages, blogs, monthly calendar of events.
4. Inform parents about and assist them in using online classrooms such as iSchool, Edline, SCORE, and Blackboard.
5. Offer materials in other languages for parents of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students.
6. Send letters to parents or offer information online but follow up with personal contact to ensure effective communication.
7. Conduct home visits by special educators and administration when necessary.
8. Offer events such as "Cake with the Counselor," "Coffee with the Principal," or "Parents and Pastries" to encourage communication between parents and their child's school.

9. Have teachers or students write out homework assignments and/or daily progress reports for parents to sign to ensure parents are aware of assignments and are able to monitor their child's learning at home.
10. Deliver weekly reports of progress and suggested home follow-up to parents of students who are receiving speech, physical, or occupational therapy services.
11. Encourage group meetings with therapists, counselors, teachers, administrators and parents, and frequent contact between case managers and parents.
12. Make contact with parents and families prior to the beginning of the school year.
13. Create smaller class sizes in order to give teachers more time to communicate with parents.
14. Encourage all school personnel to take an interest in children with disabilities.
15. Inform parents about and invite them to Special Education Advisory Committee Meetings.
16. Arrange for Robo-calls (automated telephone calls to all families) to be made for important information or alerts (upcoming exams, parent-teacher conferences, school holidays).

Section 3: Create a warm, respectful, and welcoming school environment

1. Create a warm reception for parents at the front office.
2. Welcome greater use of volunteers and provide volunteer lists with contact information to all teachers.
3. Encourage parents to assist in classrooms and become involved with school teams.
4. Send personalized invitations encouraging parents to visit the school.
5. Have special events with teachers, administrators, and counselors to offer parents the comfort and confidence to participate in activities at school.
6. Send a personalized thank you to parents from teachers and/or administration for bringing supplies, volunteering, or attending certain school-sponsored events.
7. Offer a forum during PTA/PTO meetings for parents to voice their concerns to the school and school board.
8. Ask administration to show their support of the PTA/PTO.
9. Develop a personal rapport with parents so they feel more encouraged to get involved with their child's school.
10. Ensure that the school responds to phone calls and emails within a reasonable amount of time.
11. Remain calm and positive in every situation.
12. Send home parent input sheets and surveys for parents to make suggestions for creating the type of environment in which they would feel comfortable participating.

13. Support parents' involvement in policy decisionmaking, such as dress codes and grading.
14. Offer support for parents through the guidance department or school administration when necessary.

Section 4: Be flexible in accommodating parents and families

1. Schedule specific dates for parent-teacher conferences and offer meeting times during and after school or on Saturdays.
2. When possible, use other locations, such as the home, to hold parent-teacher conferences to accommodate some families.
3. Offer child supervision during meetings with parents.
4. Provide options for transportation for parents who need it.
5. Supply interpreters and/or liaisons for the ESOL population.
6. Create flexible school office hours so parents may come by before or after work.
7. Hold PTA meetings at convenient times for parents to attend.
8. Support student-led Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings.
9. Ensure continuous communication with parents to offer both positive and constructive feedback on child's progress.
10. Have disability experts on school staff for parents to better educate themselves on their child's disability.
11. Offer meeting times during open houses for parents of students with disabilities to meet with teachers and administrators.
12. Conduct surveys to determine parent and student needs.
13. Provide information on special topics of interest to the parents.
14. Schedule special educators to visit with parents and students prior to the start of school to ease the transition.
15. Offer after-school programs for preschoolers.
16. Provide tutoring after school.

Section 5: Provide a variety of resources for parents

1. Offer a help line for parents to use after school hours.
2. Develop an email system providing instructional help and tips to parents.
3. Publicize the availability of the Parent Resource Center, in which information, technology training, and support are available for parents to use at their convenience.
4. Assign a Parent Resource Coordinator to assist parents in using and navigating an information library, with materials relating to specific disabilities and learning styles.

5. Set up a program for parents and children to prepare them for making a successful transition out of one school and into the next, or from high school into post-school life.
6. Develop and hold classes through the guidance department about parenting adolescents.
7. Offer classes and information sessions, online and in person, on the special education process.
8. Hold parent meetings to provide information on financial aid and the college admissions process.
9. Encourage Special Education teachers to take time to explain options to parents.
10. Offer parent- and teacher-led workshops on topics such as how to help with homework, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, positive behavioral supports, or other disabilities such as autism.
11. Provide written, disability specific materials to parents outlining important information about disabilities and services when students are found eligible for services.
12. Develop flyers to let parents know how the school can assist their families and educate them on their rights.
13. Develop and offer School-to-Work programs.
14. Send letters and information to parents suggesting ideas and resources on how to help their children succeed in the classroom.
15. Offer Q & A sessions for parents of children with developmental delays as their children move into kindergarten.
16. Hold meetings or informational sessions about Title I services.
17. Inform parents about the Transition Council of Central Virginia.
18. Hold a curriculum expo to highlight what students are being taught.
19. Share parenting strategies at PTA meetings, with a focus on preventing or dealing with behavior problems.
20. Offer sign-language classes.

Section 6: Support parents in helping their children at home

1. Offer a training session for parents on how to help their child with homework.
2. Open school computer labs or libraries in the evenings so parents may access blogs, teacher web sites, and other resources and tools on the Internet.
3. Coordinate remediation and homework sessions for students in neighborhoods within the school's boundaries.
4. Recommend that parents encourage their child to read to them daily.
5. Distribute assignment planners to students.

6. Assign homework in a way that encourages parents to be actively involved with their child's homework and study time.
7. Send parents weekly folders with graded work so they can track their child's progress and monitor areas in which they need assistance.

Next Steps

Where Can You Find Out More about Involving Parents in Their Children's Learning?

- A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement (2002), by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Available through their web site at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/Keyfindings-reference.pdf>.
- Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships (2007), by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies. New York: The New Press.
- Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs (2000). By National PTA. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service. See www.pta.org or www.vapta.org.
- 176 Ways to Involve Parents; Practical Strategies for Partnering with Families (2006). By Betty Boult. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc.

What Else Can You Do?

- Work with your school community to choose one or two things to work on this year to improve parent/family involvement.
- Use your division's Parent Resource Center, or if you do not have a Parent Resource Center, contact the Virginia Department of Education to inquire about a Parent Resource Center start up grant. For information, contact Gloria.Dalton@doe.virginia.gov.
- The Virginia Department of Education is committed to improving parent and family involvement for students with disabilities and all students. If you have information or strategies to share, please contact Gloria.Dalton@doe.virginia.gov.

VA Department of Education Logo, featuring the state of Virginia with a torch.

The Center for Family Involvement at the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University provides training and resources for families and the

people who work with them. CFI Logo. www.centerforfamilyinvolvement.org.
1-877-567-1122

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