

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Two principals
provide perspectives
on critical issues

BY CHRISTINE HANDY AND TRACI TOWNSEND

Prin cipals and school leaders can work hard to educate students and build positive student programs, but parent support is critical in helping to drive successful schools. This is especially important at the secondary level: Parent engagement tends to decrease as students move from elementary to middle level and high school.

Parent engagement begins with ensuring that parents feel welcome and are “beating down the walls to get in and not out,” as Shelley Burgess and Beth Houf advised in *Lead Like a Pirate*. Try using some of these strategies to welcome parents, lay the foundation for positive relationships, strengthen community, and increase parent engagement. Here’s a look at how two schools in Maryland boost engagement with parents.



Hold Informal Social Gatherings Outside of School

At Gaithersburg High School in Gaithersburg, MD, the principal of the school and the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) president sought parents to host gatherings called Backyard Chats. "Once a parent agreed to host either at their home or a community center, we requested that they talk with their high school children to collaborate on an invitation list and start inviting," says Christine Handy, former principal of the school, who now serves as president of NASSP and chair of the NASSP Board of Directors. Parents either provided the food, did a potluck, or the school supported the event by reimbursing the parents for food. During the Backyard Chat—attended by school leaders and some staff—people ate, socialized, and had a moment to talk about the upcoming school year and programs. Staff were able to mingle with parents and students and answer any questions.

Even in summer, the principal at Silver Creek Middle School in Kensington, MD, advanced her goal to build community. "I worked with our new PTSA president and officers to plan three summer socials (called Husky Summer Socials) during our first summer as a new school," says Principal Traci Townsend. The first social took place at a community center of an apartment complex where several families lived, and the other two were hosted by families in their homes. "Our goal was to be inclusive and to ensure that all families felt welcomed. The relationships formed during that first social helped lay a foundation for our community," Townsend says.

Offer Volunteer Opportunities

Sometimes parents want to get involved but don't know exactly how to do that. Principals can help by outlining opportunities.

"The PTSA president and I created a list of volunteer opportunities available at the school and provided it to parents in English and Spanish," Handy says. "I shared it at all parent meetings, and it was available in the main [office] and counseling offices." The school's PTSA and Boosters use SignUp Genius to help organize and solicit parent volunteers for specific events, such as concessions at athletic events, after prom, at the homecoming dance, etc.

Think about actively asking parents to share their skills directly with students. "Some parents may be interested in presenting during the lunch periods to our students at our STEAM cafés, some may be interested in cooking for our International Night, and others may want to accompany students on field trips," Townsend

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says. "I also reach out to our PTSA when I need volunteers to help with an event or activity at school."

Emphasize Continuing Communication

Keeping the lines of communication open between parents and the school is a good starting point, but consider taking it a step further. As principal at Gaithersburg High School, Handy held a standing monthly meeting with the PTSA president to discuss upcoming school and parent activities, brainstorm ideas for increasing parent engagement, and address parent concerns.

"Whenever we are dealing with a serious incident at the school, first I call my immediate supervisors; second, I call my PTSA president. Yes, you read that right. I feel it is important for the president to know what is going on, as they can help me to alleviate parent concerns," Handy says. "Our PTSA president also assists with getting important information to parents through using Remind, a free mobile app. We send them the morning announcements to push out to parents, and they use this app to send important reminders and messages, and when needed, emergency updates."

The school also uses Blackboard messaging to get important announcements and emergency information out to parents, as well as social media outlets such as Twitter and a school Facebook page.

Each Sunday, Townsend sends home a voice and email message to every family in the school in both English and Spanish highlighting upcoming events and

ADVICE FROM PTSA PRESIDENTS

The PTSA presidents at Handy's and Townsend's schools weighed in on the issue of parent engagement:

Carrie Bohrer, Gaithersburg High School PTSA president: I strongly believe that it is important to have a strong relationship between principals and PTSA. This adds value to the student and parent journey through education. A good, strong working relationship between a principal and their PTSA fosters great conversations. It creates a level of trust, transparency, and respect of ideas, and this allows parents to feel as though they are a true part of their child's education. Including parents in instructional leadership allows them to be a stakeholder in the school. These are things that Dr. Handy has put in place. She always says "parents are our partners," and she doesn't just talk the talk, she walks the walk. She is innovative, and we have striven to increase parent engagement through multiple and varied opportunities and are proud of our growth.

Leslie M. Cradlin, Silver Creek Middle School PTSA president: Communication is vital in promoting the collaboration and engagement of families and our school community in the education of our children. Dr. Townsend's bilingual (English and Spanish) weekly phone call/email is a key component in reaching all of our families and keeping them informed of happenings at Silver Creek. She is also proactive in addressing staff, the PTSA, and families when emergencies or difficult situations arise. Her straightforward communication style, open-door policy, and quick response time have built confidence and trust in our parent community. These are things that parents value.

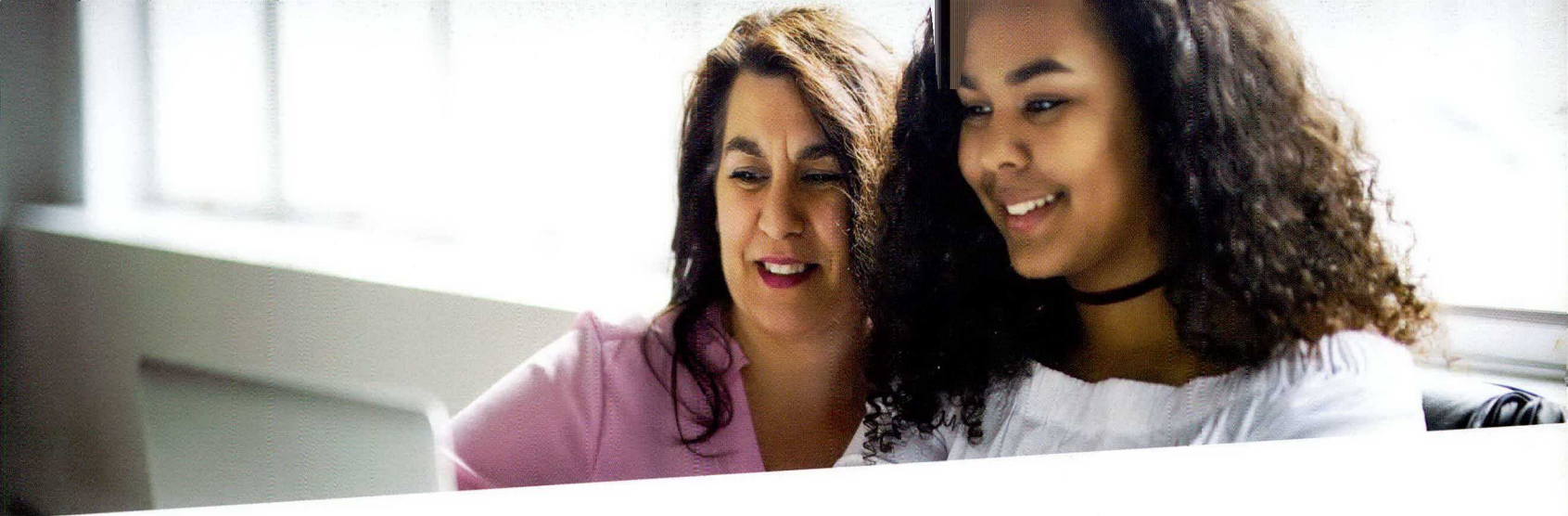
activities, which helps form relationships with parents. She also asks the PTSA president to post messages on her behalf via Listserv as a way to inform parents about events and encourage participation.

Form Special Interest Groups

Work to understand differences by forming groups around specific communities within the school. "Understanding that our Spanish-speaking parents were more comfortable attending informational meetings that were presented in Spanish rather than using translation services, we held regular Latino Parent Meetings," Handy says. "The meetings provided information critical for parents to support their children in school and to understand processes used in our school for class registration, graduation requirements, ESOL supports, postgraduate opportunities, parent volunteer opportunities, and to reiterate that this is *our* school and that we need them as our partners. Additionally, we had various activities sponsored by our NAACP parent representatives to support special interests of African-American parents, to include scholarships and financial aid, internships, and school supports."

Silver Creek Middle School holds parent gatherings called "Cafecitos" that are conducted in Spanish with a parent as a translator. "Parents ask questions that they have about our school, and I share volunteer opportunities with them," Townsend says. "The Cafecitos are also important because the parents form relationships with each other. Our monthly Mochas and Muffins meetings with our African-American parents accomplish some of the same goals. These meetings often include a conversation about race, the achievement gap, and implicit bias. We discuss the performance data of our African-American students and how our school is addressing this gap."

The school also organizes grade-level parents as another special interest group. "I meet separately with parents of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students each semester," Townsend says. "Our counselor and administrator of each grade level also



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attends their respective meeting to answer parent questions, as well as announce information and activities for the semester."

Engage in Collaboration and Inclusion

Making parents and students feel like they're part of the school team is important and helps build bridges between the school and parents. Handy says her motto is "parents are our partners," and Gaithersburg High includes the PTSA president and other parents on their Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). "This gives us a parent perspective as we make decisions that affect the instructional focus of our school, review data, and make changes to our practices and schedules. It also ensures that parents have input and understand the 'why' behind decisions," Handy says. "We also include our student government association president and students on our ILT."

Silver Creek Middle School uses study circles to provide a structure for action and dialogue to talk about race and address the achievement gap. "I have used this program as a way to encourage parent engagement, and as a result, parents become dedicated and active participants in addressing this issue," Townsend says.

Another method she uses is restorative justice. "While many associate these practices with discipline, they can also involve parents in addressing problems, thus increasing parent engagement. Restorative circles are used to help restore relationships that have been negatively impacted." She cites one instance in which the school conducted a restorative circle after a physical altercation occurred between two students. The students' parents, a few of their teachers, their school counselor, and Townsend were members of the circle. Each contributed information and their own heartfelt personal feelings about how the altercation impacted them and what the students could

do to restore community. "That circle resulted in improved relationships between all participants, and the parents felt that they were active contributors to the process and our school community," she says.

Emphasize Recognition and Appreciation

Both Handy and Townsend say they firmly believe that what gets appreciated gets repeated, and that it is important to recognize and thank parents for their volunteerism and contributions to the school. Both school leaders send letters, cards, and notes of appreciation. Additionally, they publicly celebrate and recognize parents at Back to School Night, PTSA meetings, and other events and make nominations to school district awards and recognition programs. Both schools also utilize social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook to give parent shoutouts. 📱

Christine Handy, EdD, is the former principal of Gaithersburg High School in Gaithersburg, MD, and is currently president of NASSP and chair of the NASSP Board of Directors. **Traci Townsend, EdD**, is principal at Silver Creek Middle School in Kensington, MD.



TO LEARN MORE ...

Check out data for 2016: McQuiggan, M. & Megra, M. (2017). *Parent and family involvement in education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016* (NCES 2017-102) [Table 2], Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017102.pdf>.

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