

## INCREASING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL

After years of unofficial research consisting of scores of conversations with other parents, I have identified five major reasons why parents or guardians are not involved in PTA/PTO/PTSA programs at their children's schools. These five familiar reasons probably strike a chord with many of you:

1. *I simply don't have the time.*
2. *The meetings are held at inconvenient times.*
3. *The organization only concentrates on fundraisers.*
4. *There are too many cliques; no one ever talks to me.*
5. *I tried to volunteer, but I was overwhelmed and felt lost.*

Who among us hasn't used at least one of these "excuses" during our child's school tenure? And while personal accountability must be acknowledged with each of these reasons, there is also a need for organizations to take responsibility for determining why parental involvement is dwindling and what can be done to fix the problem.

In my roles as a youth-program coordinator, trainer, and speaker, I have worked with and encountered many parent-led volunteer programs all across the country. Some of them are incredibly successful, but other programs have run out of steam. For these less effective programs, I've been asked to review the reasons why potential members are not showing up. Over the years, I have developed strategies and suggestions that can help overcome the obstacles.

The bottom line almost always ties back to the five familiar excuses, and my goal in offering constructive feedback is for these well-intentioned groups to reestablish membership, increase participation, and spark interest and attendance. So here is my list of strategies that can help you address each common obstacle. Try them out and help your parent organization become an effective, efficient, and energetic source of student support.

### REASON#1: *I don't have the time.*

This is probably the number one reason that parents across the country give for not participating. It's easy to claim, and in reality, we all understand this dilemma. We are all overworked, over-committed, and over-scheduled. But how many parents really, truly understand all that the PTA/PTO/PTSA does for the school—and for the students and staff? Everyone knows that the PTA is a parent-teacher organization, but do all parents realize the importance of its role? I will bet that if you took a poll of parents, they would have no idea what the parent-teacher group actually does and how it makes a significant difference in the ability of the school to meet student needs. When people don't understand the mission of an organization and the important ways it benefits them and their children, they won't find the time.

With so many time constraints, it can seem overwhelming to add another meeting to the agenda, especially if parents don't believe they can make a valuable contribution to the discussion. Well-intentioned meeting facilitators often believe that Robert's Rules of Order add to the efficiency of their meetings. But in this particular setting, these official parliamentary procedures can actually do more harm than good. A PTA/PTO/PTSA is not a governmental entity and is not going to be penalized if Robert's Rules of Order are not used. The goal should be to conduct a meeting in a business-like manner, not to intimidate the meeting's participants with difficult to follow parliamentary procedures. More people will participate in the meeting if they understand the process. Instead of the overall group getting confused while a few veteran members make motions, reopen discussions, and make amendments to the original appeals, opt for a different decision-making model that can be easily followed by the masses. The best meeting method follows this schedule:

- a. Quickly brainstorm ideas without a lengthy discussion following each idea.
- b. Discuss the pros and cons of each idea.
- c. Modify/condense/edit the ideas.
- d. Follow up by discussing the revised ideas.
- e. Prioritize the ideas.
- f. Reach a consensus. Vote on what to implement.

This model allows for more discussion, more input from members, and offers a less intimidating environment.

Most parents expect meetings to be long and boring. Surprise them by publishing the times that the meeting will start and stop. Then, adhere to that schedule. Begin with the most pertinent issues first. The reading of the minutes or any discussion from the last meeting that is not relevant to the current meeting should wait until the end. All entertainment, except for a brief welcome, should also be at the end so that parents will be encouraged to stay.

## **REASON#2:** *The meetings are held at inconvenient times.*

Most meetings are held at night because it's always been that way. But is this really what works best for your audience? Investigate the possibility of a before- school breakfast meeting or a lunchtime appointment. Instead of always having the meetings at school, what about another central location? Or what about scheduling the meeting to coincide with a school-wide function such as a skating party? Is there a room where parents could meet while the children skate? Hosting a webinar is not traditional for most parent groups, but many corporations turn to this technology to meet the convenience requirement of today's busy adults. Explore the use of WebEx or a Google Hangout versus a live meeting at the school.

## **REASON#3:** *The organization only concentrates on fundraisers.*

Schools need funds. It's an unavoidable fact of life that most of us accept. And the parent organization is often the group charged with generating these additional funds. But there is so much more that parent organizations do for the school and surrounding community. Do your parents, teachers, and community members/leaders receive regular updates about what your group is accomplishing? In today's world, a social media committee or

representative is a must so that information about your group can be disseminated to supporters and the rest of the community. An active presence—online and through social media—allows parents who have a hard time staying connected because of work or other commitments to access a tweet, Facebook post, or Instagram picture without stepping foot on campus. In turn, the PTA/PTO/PTSA's volunteer work, events, and other community contributions can be highlighted so that the group can be seen as more than a money seeker. Press releases can also provide positive exposure regarding the group's efforts and upcoming events, and should be sent to all media outlets with pictures and/or a novelty from the upcoming event such as a T-shirt. The information should indicate who the media can contact for more information and why it is important for them to cover this activity.

**REASONS#4&5:** *There are too many cliques/no one ever talks to me. I tried to volunteer, but I was overwhelmed and felt lost.*

Whether their feelings are the result of something real or only perceived, people won't participate if they feel alienated, alone, lost, or overwhelmed. Fortunately, there are some simple strategies for creating a more welcoming atmosphere. These strategies will also help volunteers feel like part of a cohesive group that values and encourages their participation. Every time there is a meeting, board members, officers and committee chairs should wear name tags indicating who they are and their position within the organization. This immediately allows parents to put a face with a name and job title.

As parents enter the meeting, there should be a few officers/board members/ committee members on site to welcome all parents. Everyone wants to feel welcome, and for a new parent who has never attended before, this positive first impression is essential.

At every meeting—or at least at the first meeting of the semester—there should be a seating section by grade level so that parents are able to easily identify other parents from their child's grade. These sections should be clearly marked. If there is more than one child in a family, the parent can choose where to sit, but these seating assignments immediately promote a sense of belonging and allow a parent who came alone to claim a home base and have conversations with other parents whose children share the same grade level.

Extend your outreach by creating an informal mentoring system within the organization. Pair new parents with seasoned members who can show the rookies the ropes and answer questions. Host a tour of the school. Show the new parents where supply closets are, where extra materials can be found, etc. Allow them to become instantly familiar with their surroundings rather than having to find their way alone.

At every meeting, have a suggestion box available and invite attendees to submit ideas for campaigns and events using their personal or professional skills and expertise. The need for parents to be invested and to feel like a contributing member of the organization is crucial.

In today's fast-paced society, it can be a struggle to maintain and increase attendance within any organization. In order to recruit members who will stay the course, organizations need to clearly define their mission, promote the value of their group's purpose, and be intentional in outreach to potential supporters. Gimmicks like food and entertainment at meetings are fine for a one-time spectator, but to maintain loyalty and consistent attendance, your members must be invested in the organization's long-term success. With a strong and active PTA/PTO/PTSA in place, it's a win-win-win situation . . .for students, parents, and the entire school community.

## HOW TO RECRUIT AND KEEP VOLUNTEERS

Every time a volunteer is needed for an event, keep this sentence in mind; Fill the person, not the position. Volunteers should experience fulfillment while they are working. If not, their willingness to assist will not be as great, and their dropout rate will be high.

- 1. Volunteers are more likely to do a good job when they are interested in the task they are asked to do. Find out what your prospective volunteers like to do, and capitalize on that.*
- 2. Lead volunteers/team leaders should always be identified by a special shirt, distinctive name tag, lanyard, or other identifying item. All volunteers need to know who is in charge.*
- 3. Volunteers must know exactly where to go when they arrive. This should be told to them in advance of the event. They should also know who to report to and how to contact him/her if there is a problem.*
- 4. Volunteers need to know their exact shift times. There must be a well- defined start and end time for each shift.*
- 5. Volunteers should know in advance if they will be working on their own or as part of a team. If they will be working as a team, every member of the team should know in advance who will be serving as the team lead.*
- 6. Volunteers should know what is expected regarding their assignment. There should be no gray areas; job duties must be clearly explained. This needs to be in writing and also expressed verbally so there is no miscommunication.*
- 7. Volunteers should understand what the goal and desired outcome is with each task they have been assigned. Are they expected to get the task finished quickly, or is it more important to have it completed with precision? This is a very important detail that is routinely omitted; this omission has the potential to cause different personalities to clash in a big way!*
- 8. When the job/shift/event is over, there should be a central station where the volunteers return supplies, check out, and say goodbye. This is the perfect opportunity to say “thank you” and to acknowledge the volunteers’ efforts. (But, don’t forget to follow up with an email or written thank you note, too!)*

**When volunteers feel appreciated and valued, they will continue to volunteer!**