

Strategy 1: Creating a family-friendly school environment

Action Steps:

- Establish a stakeholder group of parents and school staff to guide family-friendly development and activities
- Assess the diversity of families in your school, including diversity in race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, home language, and disability, and create a school environment that is friendly to all families
- Create a family-friendly policy or mission for the school
- Create a school environment that is welcoming to families
- Plan regular events to bring families and school staff together for positive interaction in support of learning



International Festival and “Taste of School 45”

Buffalo Public School #45,

renamed *The International School* in 2002, serves approximately 1,000 students in grades pre-K-8 who speak 29 different languages. In April of 2003 the school will collaborate with families and the community to host the school’s 11th International Festival. During the festival students take the approximately 600 families and community members who attend the annual event on a “colorful journey around the world by performing cultural songs and dances” (Salinas, Jansom, & Nolan, 2001).

Planning for the annual event begins early in the school year, according to Principal Colleen Carota, and involves parents volunteering in many capacities (personal communication, August 22, 2002). Parents representative of the cultures in the school are recruited to help students develop performances from their native countries. Parents also help coordinate and prepare food for the ***“Taste of School 45”*** held the same evening in the school’s cafeteria, where students and families sample treats from around the world such as Somalian sweet bread and Polish Kielbasa.

“The International School has always been a splendid example of how to bring together people from varying cultures around a common goal: providing the best education possible for their children,” said Buffalo School Superintendent Marion Canedo. “It is always very gratifying to see the many different costumes, food, languages, and traditions represented. It brings children and families together to celebrate their own culture and to learn about others. It is a unique experience and a wonderful learning opportunity for students, teachers, and families alike.”

Planning social events that bring together school faculty and staff with families in informal gatherings is one effective way to create a family-friendly school environment. Informal gatherings help educators “make connections and build relationships” with families (Lueder, 1998). Feeling welcome at school with events such as these can help encourage families to become more involved in activities to enhance their children’s learning.

Schools can try a variety of strategies to build a bridge connecting the faculty and staff with families. The message these strategies convey to parents should be: “*You are welcome, you are important to us, and we want to work with you to educate your children*” (Lueder, 1998, p. 62).

Family-friendly Schools

Henderson, Marburger, and Oom (1986) define “family-friendly” schools as those that “create a climate in which every aspect of the school is open and helpful.” Family-friendly schools strive to forge partnerships with *all* families, not just those that are most involved. Unfortunately, the opposite can also happen: school culture can marginalize families by creating an environment that discourages involvement (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, *Critical issue*, 1996).

Family-friendly Social Events

- Meet-the-teacher events (*morning and evening sessions to accommodate parent’s schedules*)
- Ice cream socials
- Domino tournaments
- Dads’ Day breakfast
- Kids’ Turn to Teach Day
- Faculty/family sports and games
- Grandparents’ Day

Families...are the most important visitors on our premises.

They are not dependent on us, we are dependent on them.

They are not an outsider in our business, they are part of it.

We are not doing them a favor by serving them, they are doing us a favor.

Opening Doors, Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, no date

“Fortress” Schools

“Fortress” schools are those that do not welcome or provide outreach to families; they have inconvenient hours, unfriendly staff members, and an unwelcoming atmosphere that inhibit home-school communication and family involvement (Reyes, Scribner & Scribner, 1999). Additionally, if the first time parents hear from a school is when there is a problem, this “lends a negative association to school involvement” and may be discouraging to parents (Aronson, 1996). Creating a family-friendly school environment means taking a close look at the building, atmosphere, policies, and activities of the school, and, with parental feedback, making sure all of these aspects are conducive to family involvement.

Schools must become places where families feel wanted and recognized for their strengths and potential.

(Ballen & Moles, 1994)

Middle School Family Involvement

Family involvement often begins to decline when students reach the middle school years. Families interviewed for Giannetti and Sagarese's *The Roller-Coaster Years* (1997) indicated they felt welcomed in their children's elementary schools but felt less welcome and even "left out" once their children reached middle school (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1998, p. 40).

Building Middle School Connections

Urbana Middle School in Urbana, IL, with a student enrollment of 1,100, has implemented a number of strategies for involving middle school families. Among them are:

- *Creating a welcoming environment, including a "Community Center"*
- *Facilitating a "continuum of involvement" for family participation*
- *Encouraging parents to talk about school-related activities with their children*
- *Maintaining effective communication with families (phone calls, notes home, etc.)*
- *Maintaining a homework hotline and school information hotline*
- *Hosting three-way conferencing, including parents, teachers, and students*
- *Encouraging parents to become classroom volunteers and organizing the volunteer effort*

Community Connections coordinator Barbara Linder indicates that ten years ago there was the perception that parents were not welcome in Urbana Middle School. But once the formal parent involvement activities began and parents and teachers saw the positive benefits, participation gradually grew, and success began to "breed success." Continuing challenges for the middle school include finding the time required for teachers to build relationships with parents and involving families of at-risk students, who do not always feel welcome in school settings (Patten, 2002).

Successful middle and secondary schools recognize that "both the expectations and means of family involvement" at those levels are very different from what they were during the elementary school years (Patten, 2002).

Giannetti and Sagarese (1998) offer ten strategies to encourage family involvement at the middle school level:

1. Dust off and roll out the welcome mat.
2. Advertise your expertise.
3. Implement an early-warning system.
4. Show parents a familiar, positive portrait of their child.
5. Convey shared values.
6. Reassure parents that their child will be protected in your care.
7. Demonstrate your inside scoop (*educators may have knowledge about middle school students that parents don't have*).
8. Empathize with parents about the tough job they have.
9. Be an effective and fair disciplinarian.
10. Be a consistent role model. (p.40)

Building Family-friendly Atmospheres

Practices for creating a family-friendly atmosphere in schools include:

Family-friendly policies:

1. Developing and publicly posting a family-school-community partnership policy that provides the philosophical framework for all family-school-community activities.
2. Establishing policies and practices that “acknowledge traditional and nontraditional families” (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000) and recognize the variety of parenting traditions and practices within the school community (National PTA, Standard 2: Parenting, 2002).
3. Creating an open-door policy and climate in the school that is responsive to parents and their concerns.
4. Providing translations of printed material and making available translators for all languages spoken in the school, including sign language for hearing-impaired families.
5. Arranging for flexibility in routine tasks such as registration and orientation (on-line options, telephone options, day and evening hours, etc.) to accommodate different family needs.
6. Considering varied family needs and preferences when scheduling meetings and school events; and offering child care, transportation, and refreshments for participating families.
7. Creating an atmosphere that says, “*We respect everyone. We understand and will try to accommodate your unique needs and concerns*” (Aronson, 1996, p. 60).
8. Recognizing the special time constraints on families who have children with disabilities or who are caring for aging parents.
9. Recognizing and welcoming parents/guardians with same-gender partners.

Family-friendly faculty and staff:

1. Fostering “total teacher commitment” among administrators and teachers who believe in the value of and are experienced in family involvement, and who demonstrate respect for families and their primary role in raising children (Berger, 1995; National PTA, Standard 2: Parenting, 2002).
2. Maintaining a school office that is inviting and welcoming to visitors.
3. Maintaining a staff of school employees who are friendly and responsive to families and who reflect a “sense of family” in their “actions, beliefs, and language” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002, p. 31).

School staff who are successful in engaging family members share the following qualities:

- They know they must have the support of parents.
- In every interaction, they demonstrate their concern for the child.
- They always treat parents the way they would like to be treated.
- They always demonstrate professionalism and confidence.

(Canter & Canter, 1991)

4. Developing the school as a “culturally competent system” staffed by individuals “whose behaviors, attitudes, and policies recognize, respect, and value the uniqueness of individuals and groups whose cultures are different from those associated with mainstream American culture” (Engiles, Fromme, LeResche, & Moses, 1999).
5. Hiring a family coordinator/liaison (voluntary or paid) responsible for connecting families and educators. (See **Strategy 2: Building a Support Infrastructure**)
6. Hiring language and/or culture teachers who can help bridge various languages and cultures, and support families of varied backgrounds.

Family-friendly environment:

1. Posting welcome signs in all the languages spoken in the school.

Visitors are Welcome at Our School!

We are proud of our school and the overall learning process at Mountainview. We encourage parents to visit the building and to observe your child’s classroom, browse through our media center or just talk to the principal about your ideas for improving our school. We request only that prior notice be given and that visitors check in at the office upon arrival.

**School Policy Statement, Mountainview Elementary
Mountainview Elementary School, Morgantown, WV**

2. Creating a classroom/school environment (pictures, books, resources, etc.) that reflects the diversity of families included in the school.
3. Maintaining a welcoming bulletin board that includes visitor information, announcements, news articles, and photographs of recent school events.
4. Creating and posting user-friendly school maps in several places throughout the school building.
5. Reserving several parking places for family visitors near the front door.

6. Providing disability access to buildings and parking areas.
7. Creating a family center where parent involvement activities are coordinated.

(See **Strategy 2: Building a Support Infrastructure**)

Ways to welcome new families:

1. Creating a welcoming booklet and/or videotape that provide helpful information to families about school policies, personnel, assistance, resources, and volunteer opportunities.
2. Coordinating school tours and orientation sessions for new families.
3. Linking new families with volunteer mentors who have children who are similar in age, cultural background, disabling condition, etc. to provide information, guidance, and support.

The Rush-Henrietta Central School District in West Henrietta, NY, provides each new family to the district a “Welcome Folder.” The folder is full of helpful brochures and handouts describing the school district, its programs, and various community services, as well as educational and recreational opportunities for both children and their family members.

(Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Lueder, 1998; Hiatt-Michael, Promising Practices, 2001; Berger, 1995; Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1995; National PTA, *Building Successful Partnerships*, 2000).

How Father-Friendly is Your School Environment?

1. *Do faculty and staff welcome and value father involvement?*
2. *Do faculty and staff welcome the involvement of gay fathers and caregivers?*
3. *Do faculty and staff members greet fathers as they drop off and pick up their children?*
4. *Do school forms include a space where a “significant male” can be listed?*
5. *Are opportunities for involvement provided that will be of interest to fathers, grandfathers, and uncles?*
6. *Are activities planned to show fathers that they are an important part of the program and their children’s lives?*
7. *Do school posters and brochures show images of fathers as well as mothers?*
8. *Does program literature include references to both fathers and mothers, “he” as well as “she”?*
9. *Are program hours flexible so working fathers and mothers can participate?*
10. *Are suggestions for involvement solicited from fathers?*
11. *Are report cards sent to both parents to keep non-residential fathers informed?*
12. *Are male outreach workers a part of the school staff?*
13. *Are male tutors and mentors recruited by the school?*
14. *Are opportunities provided that will help fathers enhance their parenting skills through education and modeling?*
15. *Are opportunities provided to help fathers build more positive self-respect and self-esteem so that they will be empowered and feel they have something to offer their children?*
16. *Are professional development opportunities offered to the faculty and staff on father involvement?*
17. *Does the school have policies and guidelines related to working with families that include fathers?*
18. *Are mothers invited to play a role in recruitment and support for male involvement?*
19. *Are opportunities provided for father-to-father support?*
20. *Do school programs promote the idea of “cooperative parenting,” whether parents live together or separately?*

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000; Casper and Schultz, 1999)