

7 Steps To Grow Involvement

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by Tim Sullivan

Use the approach to parent involvement taken by the most successful parent groups. These resolutions will change how you think about attracting members and volunteers.

How do we get more parents to our meetings?

It's the most common question by far we receive at PTO Today. There isn't even a close second. We ran one survey about key parent leader concerns, and after more than 600 responses, "Increasing Parent Involvement" received more votes than the five other options combined (everything from fundraising to running meetings to dealing with staff).



While getting parents to *meetings* shouldn't be the ultimate goal, we know that involving parents and connecting with the wider school community is the number one challenge of today's parent leaders.

Feel like just a few folks do all the work in your group? Frustrated when you can't find new volunteers—never mind new leaders? Tired of other parents running away (in fear of getting sucked into the volunteer black hole) when you walk down the hall? Ever hear talk that your PTO is a small clique—even though you would love to welcome more volunteers)?

We're here to help. Repeat after us: We will focus our efforts on connecting with our school community. Everything else stems from this single goal: the fundraising results, the arts and enrichment programs, the fun. Don't get us wrong; it's not simple. Change never is. But your efforts in aiming for improvement, even if your group isn't magically transformed overnight, will pay off in the long run.

With apologies to Stephen Covey, welcome to PTO Today's 7 Habits of Highly Effective Parent Groups.

1. We will redefine our group goals to focus on involvement and engagement.

Is maximizing your meeting attendance really your goal? Or is it creating a wide community that celebrates learning and creating an atmosphere that welcomes family involvement?

Imagine your average meeting: Call to order. Reading of old minutes. Reports from each committee, including discussions and brainstorms for upcoming events. Report from principal. New business (maybe a presentation from one gift-wrap rep or another). Check the watch—wow, it's getting late! Thanks for coming. See you next month.

Worthwhile and valuable? Absolutely! Maybe even interesting for the few uber-volunteers who really get

into their work. But are you really surprised that your meetings don't draw in the majority of parents like moths to a flame?

What if you reduced the business at monthly meetings and focused instead on family involvement? Couldn't that fundraising rep make his or her pitch just to the fundraising committee, and couldn't the fundraising committee be entrusted to make the candy vs. candle decision on its own? Wouldn't time-pressed families be more likely to make it out to school for a potluck supper and an art activity with the art teacher? You may find that you don't need a monthly general meeting at all or that you can hold a meeting to vote for new officers during a 15-minute break in the annual Family Reading Night.

People tend to think that parent involvement is when parents physically enter a school building, but in reality it's much more. Parent involvement is also attending a child's Halloween program or helping with homework. Your group could add hundreds of more items to that list, with meeting attendance as just one entry.

2. We will sell family involvement for what it is—a great benefit for families and children.

Marketing 101. Multiple choice question. Which of these is not a benefit listed or implied in a Volvo advertisement?

- a. Your child will be safe.
- b. You'll have plenty of room for family goodies.
- c. You'll be comfortable and relaxed in luxury.
- d. C'mon, please help our salesman earn a really nice commission.

Need more time? The answer is d. Volvo has learned well the key lessons of marketing and sales—folks buy after answering a very simple question: What's in it for me?

Parent groups, however, often wind up begging and pleading for involvement. Please come to our meeting. Please volunteer for the fair. And when the pleas aren't heeded, the conclusion is that those parents just don't care.

Use the approach to parent involvement taken by the most successful parent groups. These resolutions will change how you think about attracting members and volunteers.

Let's step back and think about what's in it for parents. Why is parent involvement so important? Because your involvement helps your child. Now that's a message parents can respond to.

Don't believe it? The statistics are overwhelming. According to noted involvement experts Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp, in their compendium of research *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*, dozens of studies all scientifically support the same conclusion:

"Programs designed with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better than otherwise identical programs that do not involve parents as thoroughly, or that do not involve them at all. Schools that relate well to their communities have student bodies that outperform other schools. Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background whose parents are not involved. Schools where children are failing improve dramatically when parents are called in to help."

Turn the marketing message around. It's not: Please help us. Instead it's got to be: We're going to help you help your child. Make it personal: Get involved with our school because statistics prove that doing so will be

good for your child.

Mark Levin, an expert in association management, makes this point in his book *Millennium Membership: How to Attract and Keep Members in the New Marketplace*: "Remember, membership is not about the organization, it's about the member. Organizations need to change their members' perceptions about what the organization is dedicated to doing. Is it in [existence] to provide stuff or to help solve problems for its members? In the new millennium marketplace, the answer must be: *We're here to solve problems.*"

Even on a more simple level, marketing basics make sense. Rae Cornell of the Holbrook PTA in Grand Ledge, Michigan, reports that her group puts up lots of pictures of different events and purchases they have made under a banner that reads: "Your PTA \$\$ at Work." Can your group follow suit?

3. We will start a family involvement committee.

Does your group's structure fit your priorities?

You've got a fundraising committee and a teacher appreciation committee and a hospitality committee and a nominations committee, but do you have a family involvement committee?

This group's sole purpose will be to brainstorm and execute programs that engage more and more of your school community. From the mundane (they might be charged with personally inviting an inactive member to help with the auction) to the new and unique (they could organize an involvement festival); these folks will have your most important mission in mind.

At the Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Cincinnati, parent group President Jane Haslem describes a most successful program. At the heart of the program is a database of volunteers containing the talents, availability, skills, occupations, and preferences of their volunteers. Armed with that knowledge, the group has a ready-made pool of skilled, available help that can be matched with appropriate needs.

4. We will offer family involvement events (without strings).

The long-term growth of your group—your chance to deepen the connection between your group and the wide community of families—depends on how your group is viewed by the community.

Are you always asking for help? Worse yet, is your group equated mainly with fundraising? We've said it before: Fundraising is important because of what it helps your group do. Fundraising shouldn't be what your group does. In fact, in the long run your fundraising efforts will be even more successful once you truly connect with your community.

So how do you do it? One great way is with the emerging trend of offering family-friendly events through the school. Family reading night. Family math night. Potluck supper. Family technology night.

The key is that your group is connecting families with your school and their children—and that's it. That's extremely valuable in and of itself. No raffle. No impassioned speech for future meeting attendance. Just a great night or afternoon for families to connect with your school. Kids will benefit. Families will benefit. And in the long run you'll have a new group of converts who understand and appreciate your mission. Think it might be easier to get help and attendance (and higher bids!) at the auction once your community equates your group with helping them have quality time with Janey or Johnny? Absolutely.

5. We will recognize that time is the new currency.

This one is straight from Mark Levin and his involvement primer. We don't need to tell parent group leaders about the value of time. Two jobs. Three kids. Soccer. Football. Cheerleading. Scouting. Church groups. School activities. Dance classes. Taking care of grandma. We're tired just thinking about the time demands on today's families.

How can your group respond to this new reality? First, you need to realize that time fear may be the single biggest factor keeping parents away from involvement, and you must combat time fear proactively.

Time fear is that sneaking suspicion in the back of your head that if you raise your hand and agree to collect tickets at the dance, then pretty soon you'll be the dance chairperson—charged with listening to every new album to make sure there are no dirty words, and begging all your friends to help you keep 12-year-olds a safe distance apart.

Your group needs to ensure that involvement can fit into the schedule of today's parents. Be honest: Is meeting attendance mandatory for parents to really feel like a part of your group? Do you and your leadership team believe that you're the most committed to kids because you give the most time? If so, you're putting up barriers to involvement. Some parents, even ones who have a deep passion for your school and involvement, just don't have the time that you do. Do you have involvement opportunities for working parents? For shy parents? For single parents? Are you careful to break down the big jobs into several little ones so that folks at all points on the time spectrum can give what they are able?

Another idea: Take the time to learn about the talents, skills, and interests of your parents. Ask parents what gifts or skills they could contribute to your school and find a way to take them up on their offers. A relatively shy mother might gladly make weekly updates on your parent group website, but she might never come back if you ask her to read aloud to a class. Similarly, that history-buff mom who never has time for meetings and committees might be just the person to chaperone the trip to the history museum.

Once you've sold your group (using benefits, remember) on the value of involvement, your next challenge is to make that involvement as easy as possible. Show your members and supporters that you respect their time, and they'll reward you by sharing that time.

6. We will carefully develop and reward new volunteers and new leaders.

While wider community involvement is the ultimate goal, you still need excellent leaders to keep the involvement engine running smoothly. Do you have trouble filling officer and chair positions? Are your leaders counting down the days until the end of their terms starting in September?

Let's take another step back to Marketing 101:

- **Make volunteering easy.** Set up systems that nearly guarantee success. Make sure that your current leaders are keeping detailed records to pass along to their successors. Not just what you did but also how you did it, what you did wrong, and what you should have done.
- **Develop your leaders.** When a member shows an inclination toward leadership, give her chances to succeed; connect her with one of your existing leaders in a (formal or informal) mentor relationship. Let her behind the curtain to see the value in leadership. Show her how group leadership helps the leader (increased confidence, marketable job skills, prestige in the community).
- **Reward volunteers.** Recognition is the volunteers' paycheck, says Mark Levin. And for your parent group, it may be the most inexpensive check you ever write. Use your local paper. Use your school

newsletter. Use carrier pigeons. Just be sure to thank your volunteers every time you can. The recognition is great for keeping good volunteers and—as a sneaky side benefit—those folks not recognized might work a bit harder to see their name up in lights next year.

7. We will treat new parents with extra-special care.

They just shot 32 rolls of film of Jimmy's first first-day-of-school outfit. They wiped away tears as Jimmy walked into the school building. They supplied Jimmy with the full 64-crayon Crayola set, plus the 12-crayon set just in case. They're the new school parents, and right now they couldn't be any more in love with your school.

So how do you treat them? Does the first message they ever receive from you come equipped with a gift-wrap order form and a "return checks or cash here" envelope?

Starting now, let's present a new model. These are the parents with no (or few) preconceived notions of your group. It's a blank slate. Make that first impression an involvement impression. My suggestion is to have a relaxed meeting for all new parents, says Tammy Kuhlow, an HSA volunteer in Wisconsin. "We would make it a social occasion and just have the board members along with select committee chairs to talk about what Home and School is about in a relaxed fashion."

Kuhlow's suggestion opens up many possibilities. How about a Welcome New Families night (no recruiting involved at all that night, except of course for a sign that lets everyone know who put on such a wonderful event) followed by personal phone calls to each attendee and a personal invitation to join your group? Maybe new families get a free hot dog at the Fall Festival.

Make sure that first-time volunteers get a personal, extra-special thank you. Ask those new volunteers how the first experience went and ask for their suggestions for new involvement opportunities. If their first experiences with your group are positive, they'll be much more likely to stay involved.

The Result

Take a mental snapshot of your group today, and then get cracking with your leadership team on creating a revitalized parent group. It's not easy—you and your fellow leaders will likely still be carrying a heavy load—but the rewards are great. Keep track of how that snapshot changes as your group moves from a service user ("please help us") to a service provider ("we're going to help you help your child").

If you're like us, you'll break a few of these resolutions by September 15. But a few more will make it maybe until the holidays, and one or two might even become ingrained as habits for your new and improved parent group. Parents with a deeper connection to your school will more easily support all of your group's efforts.

It's a gradual process, one that can only begin when your leaders commit to change. While change is difficult, we know the rewards can make it all worthwhile.

Academic Volunteer Program

How would you like one of your programs to actively engage more than 45 percent of your school families and touch every student in your school?

The Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Cincinnati, Ohio is getting those kind of results with its Academic

Volunteer Program—I.H.M Assist. Here's school volunteer Jane Haslem in her own words:

"The program is designed to be a resource pool of volunteers for our teachers and staff. At the heart of the program is a database of volunteers in Microsoft Access containing the talents, availability, skills, occupations and preferences of our volunteers. Interested teachers are teamed with a volunteer coordinator who links skilled, available volunteers with the type of volunteer help desired.

"This program started in January 2000 with 117 volunteers. After our last volunteer drive in September 2000, we had 237 volunteers that represented 46 percent of the current school families responding. Our volunteers took over mundane tasks such as scheduling extra help for the computer lab, staffing the book fair, doing bulletin boards, preparing classroom materials from home, mounting art show pictures, and typing tests. Through this program, we've also:

- identified and provided several speakers for our Culturefest
- started or expanded small reading/math groups in the first and second grades
- implemented Junior Great Books in our third and fourth grades
- had 18 parents help 90 fifth-graders with their Indian Day
- identified and provided guest speakers for our seventh- and eighth-graders (an EPA scientist and a microbiologist, for example)."

Haslem credits this integrated volunteer program with several key successes. It speaks to those parents who want to get involved but who aren't going to devote their time, at least at first, to nonacademic activities. It gives a way for working parents to contribute. It taps into the hidden skills and talents of our parent community.

In Haslem's words, her parent group customized this program from another school. Borrowed, stole, copied, or customized—in the parent group world, that's just fine. Especially when the result of the felony (or customization) is such a success.

Tim Sullivan is founder and publisher of PTO Today. He writes a regular column for *PTO Today* magazine, offers weekly tips in the Leader Lowdown email newsletter, and shares his thoughts on the blog. You can also [find Tim in the ptotoday.com Community](#) and follow Tim on Twitter [@TimPTO](#).