

Build Your Volunteer Base: 11 Ideas

[PTO ptotoday.com](http://ptotoday.com) /pto-today-articles/article/262-build-your-volunteer-base-11-ideas

by Poornima Apte

Tried-and-true ideas to nurture volunteers and make sure that every involvement experience is a positive one.

Recently, my daughter and I drove past a middle school late in the evening. The school parking lot was overflowing with cars, and we wondered what was going on inside. "Maybe it's a parent group meeting," she said, and I couldn't suppress a smile. Little did she know that any of the chair-people of our town Parent Advisory Council would kill to have parent involvement like that.



Creating sustained involvement is one of the biggest challenges any parent group faces. Even parents who are interested in parent group participation at the beginning of the year can slowly drop off the map. The key is to make sure you nurture your volunteers by making sure they have a positive experience each time they participate.

Here are some ideas we have implemented at Fisher Elementary in Walpole, Mass., to enroll volunteers and sustain parent participation.

Getting To Know You

Don't assume that parents know what your parent group is all about. You have to tell them.

At the beginning of the school year, our co-chairs make folders for distribution at open house and at the first parent group meeting. The folders have information about the PAC and the programs it offers. At open house, we place the PAC table right by the door so parents can stop by either on the way in or out. We also look for a way to get people to linger; fresh-baked cookies work well.

We especially focus on volunteer surveys, making sure to include one in every folder. It also helps to hand the survey to each parent individually. Ask people to fill out the survey on the spot; you'll get much better response that way.

If possible, follow up the surveys with a personal phone call. Thank parents for their time, and remind them what they signed up for. This also gives you a chance to learn whether the parent has specific interests or talents that weren't listed on the survey.

Say the Magic Words

My daughter's third-grade teacher sent out a request asking for volunteers for an in-class writing camp. She specified that parents themselves need not be great writers. More important, she knew how to toss the bait: Helping at the writing camp, she wrote, will give you an idea of what to expect come MCAS time. The next morning, she had eight volunteers. MCAS is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, a standardized test every third-grader faces for the first time. Parents, many of whom were probably more anxious about the test than their children were, signed up to find out what all the fuss was about.

It's All About Access

There's got to be some advantage to showing up at every bake sale and school volunteer event, and there is. For one, you get to be on a first-name basis with the principal and the teachers. That does matter and grants you audience with school authorities, who often are very willing to pay you back for your time.

Our phone-in coordinator, who handles all the absentee phone calls for the school, gets to chat with the principal every morning. She lists this as one of the perks of the job and often mentions it when she asks for volunteers.

Be Sure To Ask

We had an ace co-chair at Fisher who was particularly adept at remembering what people's skills were. One frantic winter evening, we desperately needed a willing volunteer to churn out a well-designed flyer overnight. Carol worked the phones, made the call to a friend of a friend, and found a parent who did the job willingly and who was delighted that she had been asked.

Most people who don't volunteer say they don't because they were never asked. Be sure to ask. The most effective way is one to one, whether in person or on the phone. You're more likely to get a yes if you ask someone to handle a specific task rather than to join our group or even help out at the carnival. You'll also do better if, like Carol, you can match people's talents with the job they fill.

PTO Spells "Mom Support Group"

Miss the cooler talk at work? What better way to continue the trend than to hang with friends together at a school event? Imagine getting to be with friends, make a couple of new ones, catch up on the latest neighborhood gossip, maybe learn new parenting techniques and, best of all, find out more about what's going on at your kids school. The fact is that a parent group is also a social outlet for many moms, and there is no better way to make that point than to invite a friend as a volunteer to have her check out the action for herself.

People are more likely to participate in a group when they know someone who's already involved, so don't be shy about extending that invitation.

It Takes a Village

Fisher School hosts a spring carnival every year, and our family has always done

the tickets. I recruit about five neighborhood kids and their moms. One afternoon we roll 1,000 ticket bundles for the school. I follow this with an ice cream sundae party as a small incentive for the little ones. Having children count and bundle elastics around tickets might not seem like much, but to them it is real work, and they and their moms are always delighted to help.

When it is time to actually swing the carnival into action, it feels like the whole town shows up to help. Our family helps set up the ticket booths, and every able body drags tables, puts up posters, tears duct tape—it is a great example of community work in action. It feels like a setting right out of a Master Card commercial: Massage for stiff back, \$65. Pizza for dinner, \$20. The look in our daughters' eyes when we rush around setting up the tables, knowing that we care about their school, priceless!

Parent volunteers send the message to their children that they care—about them and about their schools. Every time you come in for reading hour, you build your child's self-esteem. Besides, you're taking advantage of all the years when they actually do want you in there. Later on, when the eye rolls begin and you become an embarrassment, you can choose to work from the sidelines. It is important to take this message to potential parent volunteers by stating it loudly and often.

If You're Happy and You Show It...

The sense of community that volunteering can bring is the most powerful feeling of all, and it helps if the uninitiated also get to watch you in action. Fisher carnival and art program planning meetings are highly anticipated events. We host the meetings at volunteers' homes, and the conversation, food, and drinks flow freely. The fun is infectious, and we always have moms ready to join the planning committee. If you have fun and show it, and make the committee a welcoming one, new volunteers will find a reason to join and stay.

Spread the Net Wide

You're fishing for volunteers and your list of friends is only 10 members long. What's a co-chair to do? Spread the net wide and send out the word. For our annual soup luncheon, the organizer assigns each grade one item: fourth and fifth grades do soups, third grade does bread, etc. Then she assigns one coordinator for each grade.

Each coordinator gets a list of items needed from her grade. The coordinator calls the room mothers and gives them the list. The list finally trickles down to individual parents, who sign up to bring items when asked by room moms. It works without a hitch, and everyone helps. Having room moms make the final requests also lends a personal touch to the asking.

Attention to Detail

Sometimes the way to a volunteer's heart is through her stomach. Community grocery stores are often very gracious and donate small deli platters for parents who come in to volunteer straight from work. Similarly, we formed babysitting co-ops where one of us would watch kids while two moms went in to volunteer. Then when your turn rolls around, you know where to look for help with the kids. If your group can provide babysitting services, all the better.

Learning the Ways

If you have a fifth-grade graduation ceremony at the school and your child is graduating, wouldn't it be nice

to actually relax and enjoy the ceremony? We ask fourth-grade parents to attend to the fifth-grade parents that morning. In return for their services, the fourth-grade moms get to watch what's involved in the ceremony and get to take notes for when their own babies graduate from elementary school.

Similarly, we ask second-grade parents to volunteer at third-grade science night. When it comes time to return the favor, third-grade parents volunteer at second-grade math night.

All of us have seen one volunteer who just does not want to step down. Having a mentoring system, where rookie volunteers learn from more experienced ones, makes transition easier and makes the older volunteers feel better about letting go.

Use Incentives To Encourage Involvement

Fisher School has an incentive program called Fisher Smarts. Students usually earn these for good skills, both academic and social. Every student contributes his Smarts to a class kitty. At the end of the year, the class with the most Smarts wins a pizza party.

We extended the Fisher Smarts program to parents. Every parent who attends a parent group meeting gets to bring home a Smart for his child. The child is recognized the next morning at school and can add to his classroom's Smarts collection. Parents would never leave the meeting without the incentive, and the Smarts serve as an added draw to attend all meetings.

The neat thing about a parent bringing back a Smart is that it directly boosts the child's self-esteem, making the child proud that his parent participated in the school process.