

Keeping Current

Research-Based Ideas for Teachers from the Editors of *Better Teaching*®

Increasing Parent Involvement

The research on parent involvement shows that all parents can make a difference in the education of their children. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status and education levels, all parents can help. When parents are involved, students do better in school.

What's the key to getting parents involved? Reach out to them. Ask for their help. Tell them how they can get involved and where you can use their help.

Make it easy for parents to contact you

It's important to reach out to the parents of your students, but it's just as important to make it easy for those parents to communicate with you. Remember that some parents may not feel comfortable talking with a teacher. There may be language barriers. They may lack self-confidence. Or they may have had a bad experience in school themselves.

Here are some things you can do:

- **Encourage parents** to spend time in your classroom. Invite them to stay for a few minutes when they have the opportunity.
- **Chat with parents** when they pick up their child after school. Talk about anything—but not always about education.
- **Invite your active parents** to bring another parent with them when they visit your classroom.
- **Call a parent** you don't know well and ask for help with a small project.

- **Give parents** your phone number or e-mail address and encourage them to contact you. Find reasons to contact the parents you don't hear from.

Send home a class newsletter

An occasional, short, well-designed newsletter is one of the most effective ways to keep parents informed and involved. And it doesn't have to mean extra work for you.

Unless you love to do it, there's no reason to do all the writing yourself. Have parent volunteers or your students write articles for you. Don't reinvent the wheel, either. Many word processing programs have newsletter templates. Unless you enjoy graphic design, adapt one of those to meet your needs.

Finally, create some standard features—a question for family members to discuss together, an activity that families can do together, and a “help wanted” list of volunteer opportunities, for example.

Get the most out of parent volunteers

Because there are never enough eyes, ears or hands in a typical classroom, parent volunteers can be a big help to you and your students. Here are some

tips for making the best use of parent volunteers:

- **Communicate.** Be clear about your expectations when you ask for help. Some parents don't want to work with students but will be happy to collate papers. Others want one-on-one contact with you or with students.
- **Organize.** Have everything ready in advance. Parents volunteer because they want to help, but if they don't feel that their time is being used well, they are not likely to return.
- **Motivate.** Let parents see how work fits into the big picture.
- **Demonstrate.** If you want parents to work as tutors, ask them to observe you for a few sessions.
- **Interact.** Building a relationship with parent volunteers takes a little time. But it's the best way to motivate them to return. Take a few minutes at the beginning and the end of each volunteer's shift to say thank you.



Invitations from students get results

There is no one as persuasive with parents as their own children. So ask your students to write a personal note to their parents the next time you have a special activity planned. You may find that participation increases when parents receive an invitation they can't refuse.

Keep parents in the homework loop

Parents can play an important role in guiding and supporting their child's homework efforts. To be truly effective, however, parents need to know what those assignments are. Design a simple student homework log book. Provide space for students to record assignments, due dates and any special instructions. Ask parents to review the assignments and initial the notebook each day.

Make interactive homework assignments

Some of the most effective parent involvement takes place at home. Encourage parents to get involved. Send home occasional interactive homework assignments—assignments that require a degree of parent participation. Here are a few ideas for interactive homework assignments:

- **Five-minute homework helpers.** These are quick and easy activity ideas that require no preparation. Parents can fit them in at any time. —Ask that parents and students read together weekly. Suggest reading from newspapers or favorite books. Have them record the details of their time together. —Have students discuss with their parents an issue in your school or in the news. Send home a list of questions to get the conversation started. Have them record their discussion together. —Develop a short list of vocabulary words taken from college entrance exams. Ask parents to spend five minutes a day reviewing the words with their child.

Make the most of parent conferences

While they may not be new or innovative, face-to-face conferences remain one of the best ways to communicate and build relationships with parents. Don't wait until there is a problem to schedule a conference—meet with parents to talk about what their child is doing well, too. Here are some things you can do to make the most of conferences:

- **Plan.** Know what you want to accomplish and allow enough time to accomplish it.
- **Prepare.** Have examples of the student's work available to share with parents.
- **Begin the conference** by saying something positive about the student—even if the purpose of the conference is to resolve a problem.
- **Choose the language** you use carefully. Present information in a positive way. Talk about abilities and needs rather than strengths and weaknesses. Avoid educational jargon—be clear, direct and to the point. Arrange for a translator if necessary.
- **Avoid arguments.** Listen carefully to the parent's point of view and express differences of opinion diplomatically.
- **Set goals.** During the conference, set goals for the child. Talk about what the parent can do at home to help him reach those goals.

Keep the communication channels open. Follow up after the conference—even if it's only to thank the parent for attending.

- **Parent-child challenges.** Place two copies of an activity—a multiplication test, a “circle the misspelled word” test or a geography quiz, for example—in a sealed envelope. Give an envelope to each of your students to take home to their parents. Attach a note that asks the parent to take the test with their child and then compare answers to see how they did.

Make home visits

Home visits are a good way to reach those hard-to-reach parents who never come to school. They can also help you gain valuable insights about your students and their families.

Here are some strategies that can

make home visits more successful:

- **Define a goal for your visit.** Most visits last from 20 minutes to one hour, so there isn't time to do everything.
- **Bring something with you**—a book to share, a picture of your own family, information about the school. It will help you break the ice during those first few minutes.
- **Don't require parents** to read or fill out anything in your presence—they may not have good literacy skills.
- **Listen carefully** to what parents have to say. If they have questions you can't answer, let them know when you will get back to them.