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Effectively Engaging and Involving Busy Parents in a Catholic School's Parent Association and Activities



Posting pictures of those in attendance at meetings on a school's social media site is a great way to affirm parent engagement.

When discussing how to engage and involve busy parents, it is important to understand the traits of these parents. Typically, the generations of parents who have children in grades PreK through 12 have less free time than those of previous generations. These mothers, fathers, and guardians are less inclined to volunteer in general, which creates challenges for Catholic school administrators, who rely heavily on the support of volunteers.

Research has shown that most parents today who are willing to volunteer like to work on specific tasks that are clearly defined. Additionally, these adults like to volunteer with friends and peers. For example, instead of having one chairperson for an event, having co-chairs has been shown to be beneficial.

Featured below are ten specific ideas as to how Catholic school administrators can reach these busy parents and actively engage them in the school's parent association and/or activities:

1. Ask parents to serve as guest speakers on subject areas in which they have expertise and experience.

- Parents who are invited to serve as guest speakers feel valued and appreciated for their expertise:
 - A fireman or paramedic might give a presentation on first aid or safety;
 - A banker might provide information on the importance of saving money or developing habits of saving;
 - An attorney might assist in creating interest in a mock trial program at the junior high or high school level.

“I like anything that involves me being closer to my child. Last year I volunteered to be a guest speaker in my daughter’s class; I LOVED IT! It was so much fun, but also helped me gain valuable insight into the way teenagers were thinking and how they communicate to each other. This knowledge has helped me professionally.”

- Jacqueline C., parent of children in Catholic school

2. Survey parents annually to see which days of the week and times work best for their schedules to attend parent meetings.

- It is helpful to both school administrators and parents to understand each year what are the best times for them to attend meetings or participate in school activities:
 - Many parents appreciate an 8:00 a.m. meeting, knowing they will leave the school at 9:00 a.m. and be at work by 9:30 a.m.;
 - Some parents prefer to have meetings or engage in school activities at the time they are picking up their children in the afternoon, while still others will suggest evening meetings.

3. Engage the entire family.

- As family time is becoming diminished with an increase in demanding schedules, engage parents with activities that involve the entire family. For example, offer times when parents and students can volunteer together for a “school maintenance day.” Extend this family time to specific programs or subject areas. For example, if the student is in drama, the family can work to build the set, sew costumes, or paint props together.

4. Be mindful of the changing family dynamic.

- It is important to be respectful of the culture of today’s families. Many parents are divorced, some are remarried, others are widows, and there are many blended families. Additionally, some students today are being raised by guardians or are adopted. When using language to promote “parent” events, ensure that you are sensitive to these situations by not limiting vocabulary to “mother” or “father,” but including broader terminology such as “guardian” or “grand-friend.”

5. Utilize technology.

- To engage parents who are busy but who want to be involved, schools can utilize technology to work smarter, not harder. Many texting services are offered that allow messages to be sent to parents reminding them of events or notifying them of school announcements. Websites such as SignUpGenius.com allow parents to supply items or sign up for specific volunteer time slots. Notifications are emailed to the volunteers with reminders, and no paperwork is lost or phone calls have to be made.

The image shows a screenshot of the SignUpGenius website. The top navigation bar is yellow and contains the SignUpGenius logo, a home icon, and links for 'How it Works', 'Pricing', 'Resources', and 'Help'. On the right side of the header, there are links for 'Find a Sign Up', 'About Us', and 'Blog', along with buttons for 'Create a Sign Up' and 'Login / Join'. The main content area features a tablet displaying a 'BACK TO SCHOOL PTA Fundraising Campaign' sign-up page. The page lists several roles with their respective sign-up buttons: 'One-Time Sign-up - Any Amount (1 volunteer)', 'Event Chair', 'Event Facilitator', 'Event Signer', 'Event Signer', 'Event Signer', and 'Event Signer'. To the right of the tablet, there is a large heading 'Group Organizing Made Easy' and a sub-heading 'Say goodbye to reply-all emails and paper sign up sheets. Coordinate events and people in minutes with online sign ups.' Below this is a prominent orange button that says 'Create a Sign Up'.

Karina, a parent of two girls in Catholic school (5th and 10th grades) in Florida recently remarked, “What makes me want to volunteer at my children’s school is that it allows me to help make it a better place for them, as well as be part of their daily world. I get to see firsthand what they see, and I get to hear what they hear at school. It also shows my kids that I care about them and the schools they attend. It certainly plays a big role in how well they do in school. To top it all off...I actually have a lot of fun helping out!”

6. Find common ground.

- Many teachers and school staff have families of their own, thereby providing an opportunity for relationship building. By relating to the parent community on a personal level, many barriers can be broken. Administrators and teachers who are also busy parents are often asked to volunteer or engage in activities by their own child's school. Sharing this common ground and being authentic can go a long way in realizing that others face the same situation, and make the same sacrifices.

7. Establish "Parent Resource Centers."

- One school in Atlantic City started an informal afterschool ESL course to bring students and parents into the classroom. Once a week the students work on iPads and the parents learn English on a Smart Board. This has increased attendance at their PTO meetings and participation at school events.

8. Establish parent ambassador programs by grade.

- Parent ambassadors working in teams provide wonderful opportunities to reach parents through social activities, work and play opportunities for children, and social media networking.
- Offering parents the option to be trained as "Parent Ambassadors" is yet another way to allow busy parents to be involved in an organized fashion at set times. These parents who are knowledgeable of the "Four Great Things" that the school offers in terms of academic programs; safe and community-focused environment; Catholic identity; and co-curricular and extracurricular activities are a blessing for the school.
- Some schools provide incentives for parent involvement in various activities. The incentives can go toward enrichment activities for students in a particular grade, or can be as simple as a free dress pass for attending a parent meeting.

"The most rewarding part of volunteering is the respect shown for my knowledge, experience, and expertise, as well as the friendships that have developed," remarked Claire, a grandparent of a 4th grader in Catholic school, who volunteers once a week as a reading coach. One group of volunteers that could be truly beneficial for many schools are retired school employees and teachers. They have the skills needed and are looking for a place to offer them.



Finding ways to serve the community as a family is ideal for parents who are busy but want to spend time with their children and help those in need.

9. Respond to parents in a timely manner.

- Parents born between 1965 and 1980, who are now 36 to 51 years old, have been known to have the traits of being independent, techno-literate, and appreciative of fast and frequent communication. One way to meet their needs is to utilize social media. By posting about school events, breaking news, and student successes, administrators are able to monitor social media notifications. Schools now can respond to the questions, comments, and concerns that are posted in a timely manner because they receive the notifications in real time.

10. Clearly communicate the volunteer opportunities available to parents.

- Mailing or posting an online "Parent Volunteer Opportunity Sign-Up" form in the summer is a great way to welcome parents to your school and let them know what events will be offered for the coming school year, explain how they can get involved, and what is entailed with each option. Once the forms are completed, school staff can directly and efficiently contact those parents who would like to volunteer for the specific tasks. Incorporating opportunities for parents to be members of the School Board or its committees is another ideal way to build strong relationships in support of the school and to allow parents to have their voices heard.

When developing ways to engage and involve busy parents effectively in a school's parent association and activities, it is important to keep the ideas above in mind. The Church remains vocal about the critical need for parental involvement "...that the parents have been appointed by God Himself as the first and principal educators of their children and that their right is com-



MEET ...

Barbara F. Simmons
Adjunct Consultant

Guidance and College
Counseling Assessments

Barbara F. Simmons has been associated with educational institutions and positions in business organizations her entire career. She has taught at the secondary level, both in public and private schools, and has been a college counselor and director of college counseling at two Catholic secondary schools. She also served as assistant director of admissions at Wellesley College, assistant director of undergraduate admissions at Santa Clara University and Santa Clara's director of admissions for graduate programs in counseling psychology and education.

Barbara will be leading the unique CSM Summer Certificate Program in Guidance and Counseling in Monterey, CA, on June 26-28, 2017. You will find more information regarding this program on the Catholic School Management website, www.catholicschoolmgmt.com.

pletely inalienable," (Pope John Paul II FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO, Section II, B.40). "...a parent component must be a part of many different church sponsored educational programs." (TO TEACH AS JESUS DID, Section 59). This parental involvement fulfills the mission of the Church by providing parents with opportunities to serve the Church by way of the school and to build relationships with educators who work with their children on a daily basis. To read more testimonials from Catholic school volunteers, visit CSM on Twitter.

CASE STUDY: One CSM client was able to successfully transition its Parents' Guild meetings from ones that were poorly attended and not effective to ones that are welcoming, productive, and are now used as an enrollment tool. How did this occur? First, new Parents' Guild officers were elected and training was held regarding bylaws, roles, and responsibilities. A survey was conducted to learn what date and time was the most convenient to have the meetings. It was determined that having the meetings the first Friday of the month at 8:00 a.m. allowed parents to plan accordingly in advance. Facebook events were established for these meetings and RSVPs were suggested. Meeting agendas were formed and sent to all parents in advance. Attendees are always greeted at the door with a hug, hot coffee, and homemade food is available. After introductions of those in attendance, there is a review of the mission of the school, and a reminder of why the group was established, acknowledging the parents' sacrifices to attend the meeting and send their children to a Catholic school.

Each month a guest speaker presents information on a relevant topic for 15 minutes. These guest speakers have included School Resource Officers talking about safety precautions, Code Red drills, etc.; the Campus Minister who reviews initiatives that involve the students; or the Principal providing a "State of the School" address. The parents in attendance vote on who they would like to have speak at the upcoming meeting. Following this, updates are given by each PG officer regarding their areas of responsibility.

Opportunities are provided for Q&A at the conclusion, and there are always lots of photos taken (including a group photo) which are posted on social media. This client has found that posting the photos on social media has been a way for parents to let others know they were in attendance and to showcase their school support. Minutes are emailed following the meeting, and the planning begins for the next month. There is now an emphasis on not only inviting current parents to attend, but also inviting prospective parents to join the meetings as a recruitment tool. (To see an example of an agenda from this school and the photos that are mentioned, visit our CSM Facebook page.)



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