

Using the McDonald's Approach to Generate Parent Involvement

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Wherever this California principal puts on a parent program, working class moms *and* dads turn out by the hundreds. Here's why.

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Parent Program Tonight



Have you ever held what you thought was an outstanding and informative parent education program only to be disappointed by the poor turnout?

While principals, teachers, and even other parents are quick to chastise those who miss an important opportunity to help their children, the problem could be that your school isn't doing enough to get parents to attend. As educators, we often fail to use even the most basic marketing principles to promote our parent education programs. We may send home a single flyer or a letter from the principal announcing an event, and then complain when parents don't attend. Could you imagine an amusement park or toy manufacturer using a single advertisement to entice customers?

Over the past few years, I have been principal at several schools that have taken a proactive marketing approach to their parent involvement programs. Through these efforts, we have been able to increase parent participation to the point where as many as 500 parents and students attended our parent education events. We did it with what I call the "McDonald Approach."

Marketing Your Program

Too often, teachers come up with great ideas to present to parents, only to be disappointed when so few show up. That's because they spent all of their time planning the activities and left the marketing to the last minute. It's a mistake I vowed I would never make. I tell the planners that the first step in organizing a parent involvement program is to develop a marketing plan.

As a result, the organizers often spend as much time marketing the program as on the presentation itself.

Here are some of the marketing strategies that have worked for us and could work for your schools as well.

Determine your target audience. It may seem obvious that the target audience for a parent involvement program is the parents. But because the end result of parent involvement programs is to help students, they also need to be included in the target group. My experience has shown that students are the best motivators for getting parents involved and bringing them to school.

If you offer the children activities and prizes they enjoy, you can bet that they will hound their parents to attend—just like they drag their parents to McDonald’s for a Happy Meal or to the mall for a special toy. One of our more popular incentives is to offer families inexpensive fast food meals—pizza, hamburgers, or tacos—before our evening programs. Parents are happy not to have to cook before rushing to the meeting and the chil-

dren think it’s terrific. We even found many fast food restaurants that were willing to help support our dinner programs in exchange for recognition.

Offering inexpensive prizes to children who attend meetings with their parents is also very motivating. It’s amazing how a free pencil, eraser, or plastic toy can attract students—and their parents—to attend an event.

Offer parents something free. For the past three years, we have offered free tickets for raffle baskets to parents who attend our evening programs.

People love a chance to win something, and baskets loaded with snacks, books, coupons, and movie tickets are great incentives. One year, we gave two free raffle tickets to all the dads who attended a program. It was wonderful to see so many fathers in the audience.

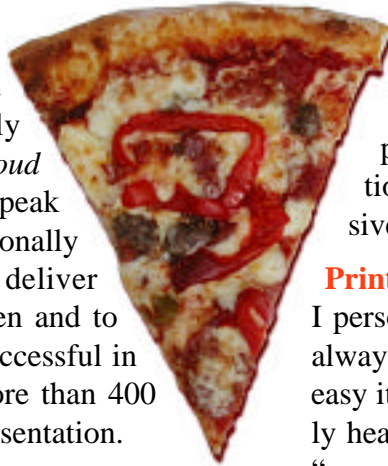
Advertise to inform, educate, persuade, and remind. One advantage schools have over corporations is our ability to deliver messages directly to parents by personal messengers—their children. Where corporations spend millions of dollars to get their messages into homes, we can do it for the cost of paper and



printing. But getting the paper out of the backpacks and into the hands of parents can be tricky. Luckily, there are several techniques that can help.

1. Tell students about upcoming presentations.

One year, we had Jim Trelease, the nationally acclaimed author of *The Read Aloud Handbook*, come to our school to speak to parents. Before the event, I personally went into each classroom to deliver announcement flyers to the children and to talk about Trelease. We were so successful in getting our message home that more than 400 parents came to hear Trelease's presentation.



2. Remind parents-and remind them often. If parents see flyers for a program or hear their children talking about it, they will start to think that this must be an important event. It's a little like the way movies are promoted by advertising and word of mouth. You have to go just to see what all the fuss is about.

3. Make it snappy. Like most parents, I rarely have the time to read lengthy documents beyond the

first three or four sentences. So it's best not to send home a long letter outlining the merits of the upcoming program. Instead, use your computer skills to design a professional-looking flyer with attractive graphics and brief, bulleted items about the speaker and program. Don't forget to include information about free prizes or childcare, inexpensive dinners, and raffle offerings.

Print the flyer on bright colored paper. When I personally distribute flyers in the classrooms, I always mention the color of the flyer and how easy it is to find in their backpacks. I have actually heard children tell their parents that they have "something bright green" to show them.

4. Advertise for free. In many communities, children are dropped off at school or walk to school with their parents. One year, we took advantage of this situation by having some of our students stand outside holding picket signs advertising a parent education program. Parents couldn't help but notice the students and their signs. By enlarging flyers and displaying them on fences, win-

dows, and classroom doors throughout the campus, we also are able to reach parents who are waiting for their children at dismissal time.

Provide childcare. The cost of childcare or the difficulty of finding a reliable babysitter can often deter parents from attending a program. But parents feel confident about bringing young children to school if they know that school or district employees are available to provide childcare. We have been able to generate enough money from an adult education program to offer free childcare during our parent involvement programs. In addition, the local high schools have service organizations that volunteer to provide extra help when we need it.

Involve the students. An important part of our parent involvement programs is what we call Parent and Child Time. This is an activity in which parents interact with their children. The students love working with their parents and sharing what they do all day in class, and the parents become better acquainted with their children's knowledge and ability. Everyone wins,

and parents are encouraged to attend future programs.

Write press releases. Sadly, education news usually takes a back seat to car chases, the weather, and entertainment in your local newspaper. But you can change that. Since I started writing press releases about our parent involvement activities and faxing them to education reporters, I have had a number of articles printed—all with accurate information.

Offer quality programs. There is no point in doing a fabulous job of marketing and promoting your program if it's so boring that parents will not attend the next event. If you have the resources, pay to bring in a professional who knows how to send a strong message in an entertaining way. Parents will appreciate it and will look forward to your next event.

Be innovative. Not all parents can be volunteers, but most want to be involved. To attract them, we offer a number of non-traditional parent activities.

For example, we organized a fall campout one Friday night on the school playground, and invited par-



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ents and staff members to pitch tents. Families brought their own dinners and enjoyed a magic show. Later, they participated in a variety of family activities, including line dancing, making bird nests, learning to juggle, listening to stories, and participating in a sing-along. The next morning, the local Lions Club served breakfast to the campers.

Another non-traditional event was a Saturday family field trip to a science museum. Families and staff members rode school buses and enjoyed a day together at the museum, where they participated in hands-on activities. On “Take Your Parent to School Day,” parents are invited to take a tour of classes at each grade level, eat lunch with their children, and spend time in their classrooms.

These activities are in addition to our more traditional parent education programs. One of these is a four-week workshop in which parents attend presentations on reading, writing, mathematics, and assessment, and then work with their children to put into practice

the strategies they learned.

Because parent involvement is such an important aspect of school success, schools should go beyond the routine flyer not only to inform parents of involvement activities but to make those activities exciting for both parents and students. By using some simple marketing techniques, schools can increase parent participation. So, when you’re planning your next parent education program, think about how McDonald’s would market it.

RESOURCES:

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