

92 Ways to Involve Families and the Community in Education

INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT HOME: Parent-initiated or child-initiated requests for help and, particularly, ideas from teachers for parents to monitor or assist their own children at home in learning activities that can be coordinated with the children's classroom instruction.

1. Provide families with printed suggestions for simple things they can do at home to help students achieve at higher levels. Ask parents to set aside a specific time each day for doing homework. Ask parents to read to or listen to students at least 30 minutes a day. Library books, hobby books, newspapers, catalogs can be used as the source of this activity.
2. Create student homework notebooks; homework assignments are written in the notebook, teachers and family communicate about how the student is doing; this provides a means of notifying parents that students are making progress, that problems are beginning to arise, and remind parents of upcoming meetings, conferences, etc.
3. Suggest that families hold study groups for their high school or middle school child and other students to work on special projects or especially difficult homework assignments.
4. Develop a written contract with parents that include those things of particular importance to student's academic improvement: getting enough rest, eating properly, doing homework on a routine basis, limiting TV watching, etc.
5. Suggest parents limit TV reviewing to a set amount of time. Provide suggested list of TV programs to view and discuss.
6. Suggest questions for parents to ask students about homework assignments to stimulate conversations about learning.
7. Provide homework assignments that families can help with — watching a news program on television, discussing a particular question with family, interviewing a neighbor, creating an object or drawing a picture, etc.
8. Provide guidelines for how to help students with their homework — how to provide help, what to do when students don't understand the assignment or cannot do it, etc.
9. Establish a homework "hotline" for parents to use to check homework assignments.
10. Ask parents to sign homework.

11. Develop parent/student journals, asking parents and students to answer the same question. Examples: What was your most surprising experience? Who do you most admire and why? What do you like to do best of all?
12. Conduct workshops for parents: how to help with homework, how to study for a test, how to motivate students, how to structure positive behavior, how to help students prepare for college or careers.
13. Hold family reading nights and invite families to come to make books and bookshelves out of cardboard boxes while they listen to storytelling or have stories read aloud. Invite students to come in their pajamas.

SCHOOL/HOME COMMUNICATION: The basic obligation of schools to communicate from school to home about school programs and children's progress, including the use of letters, memos, phone calls, report cards, newsletters, conferences and other mechanisms.

14. Post your school's mission statement at the entrance to your school so everyone knows what it says.
15. Key messages have to be repeated at least five times before they "trigger" a response or establish an understanding.
16. Develop several key messages among staff that should be repeated to parents each time you send information out.
17. Vary the method of communication. Use flyers, newsletters, radio, hall charts, cable TV, signs outside school, phone calls.
18. Avoid educational jargon or words that are difficult to understand.
19. Send home more single page, colorfully designed information sheets, rather than lengthy newsletters or announcements.
20. Establish a "Take Home Tuesday," one day a week when newsletters, announcements, etc. are sent home. Parents will begin to look for information on that day. Use the same color of paper each week so parents will recognize them.
21. Create student assignment notebooks that students use to write homework assignments, parents check and support students in doing homework, and parents and teachers use it to share information about student progress or difficulties.
22. Maximize messages by using humor, cartoons or other interesting design elements, quotes or success stories.
23. Consider holding family information sessions, back to school meetings, etc. at a community center, local church, or community park.

24. Coordinate communication efforts with PTSA, School Council or other school-wide groups.
25. Encourage several joint meetings of School Council members, Family Resource/Youth Services Center Advisory Board, PTA Board for planning activities and the school calendar and for working together on issues of mutual concern.
26. Use focus groups to find out from families what they need, what they desire for their children and how they feel about activities that are in the planning stages.
27. Use the Parents and Teachers Talking Together program, sponsored by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. Hold a session for parents of at-risk students by inviting them personally and letting them know you need and value their opinions. (www.prichardcommittee.org)
28. Set up a communication plan that has a goal of communicating on a consistent basis with all parents.
29. Set scheduled “Coffee with the Principal,” times for parents to have coffee and informal conversation with the principal.
30. Create a “parent room” or “parent corner,” a place in the school where parents can gather for coffee, to pick up materials, see videos, or share information. Have parent information books, tapes, guidebooks, SBDM minutes, glossary of school terms, etc. available to check out.
31. Have a bulletin board especially for parent information and announcements.
32. Develop a sign that welcomes parents and family members to the school.
33. Set aside a day to invite fathers or grandparents to school for lunch or breakfast.
34. Maximize the use of phone calls to:
 - a. Get acquainted at the first of the year
 - b. Welcome new parents and students
 - c. Have parents calling parents
 - d. Inform parents of positive things their children have done
 - e. Establish a phone “tree” in classrooms — after seeking permission to give out phone numbers
35. Make a commitment to call three parents every week with positive messages about the child’s progress and let them know about upcoming events.
36. For specific activities, have students write letters of invitation to their families.

37. Hold “students as teachers” nights where students teach family members or community members about special projects, computer use, etc.
38. Create a “Parent University,” a series of information sessions for parents on assessment and accountability, school-based decision making, technology, portfolios, homework helps, etc.
39. Develop or identify information that can be used in newsletters that address questions parents may be asking. For example, share information about testing prior to spring testing dates.
40. Use local newspapers/radio to send out key messages of importance.
41. Hold “Freshman Day,” “Sophomore Day,” “Junior Day,” and “Senior Day” at your high school. Invite parents for breakfast or lunch. Have them meet with the principal and school counselors to learn about what’s important at that grade level. Invite them to attend classes with their students.
42. Encourage local radio shows and cable TV to use teachers and principals as sources of information about what is going on in schools and to serve as resources for parents and the community for ways parents and citizens can be involved.
43. Develop a two-way plan for communicating about student progress in multiple ways: report cards are only one source of information. Tear-off sections of reports to parents can provide a way for parents to send back questions to teachers — or request additional information or a time for a meeting. Use phone calls or e-mail to discuss progress.

FAMILY HELP FOR SCHOOLS: The involvement in schools of parent and community volunteers who assist teachers, administrators and children in classrooms and other areas of school. Parents and others who come to the school to support and watch student performances, sports and other events.

44. Be willing to ask parents to share experiences and information from their work or culture; demonstrate specific skills from work or hobbies; talk about how school work relates to the world of work — how a carpenter needs geometry or how a salesman needs writing skills.
45. Ask parents to be spokespersons in community groups, churches, and civic clubs to communicate about what’s happening in school. Parents can be powerful advocates for the school and are credible to others in the community.
46. Encourage parents to apply for the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership. After these parents receive this level of training, they can be powerful resources to local schools. See www.cipl.org

47. Encourage parents to serve as greeters or guides in the school, parent resource room, school office, cafeteria or library.
48. Organize parents to serve as hall monitors at middle or high school, especially during morning and dismissal times. They set a different tone in the school that minimizes problems.
49. Invite parents to accompany students on field trips or other extracurricular events. Parents can be effective group leaders in these instructional settings.
50. Keep a running list of things parents can do to help; post it in the parent center or on a parent bulletin board so parents could check the list when they come to school and have a few minutes to help. Many parents spend time waiting to pick up students after school that could be used productively.
51. Invite parents to attend professional development sessions of interest to them.
52. Ask parents to help create a weekly school newsletter.
53. Ask parents to help develop a brochure about your school.
54. Ask family volunteers to help design a “School Fact Card” for families to post on the refrigerator; it might include school phone number, starting, ending and lunch times, names of principal, secretary, and school counselor, school council meeting dates, etc.
55. Invite speakers or ask parents of special needs students to talk about the unique needs of these students so other families and students learn how to be supportive.

SCHOOL HELP FOR FAMILIES: Schools providing assistance to families in relation to the families’ basic obligations: responsibilities for their children’s health and safety; supervision, discipline and guidance for children at each age level; and positive home conditions that support school learning and behavior appropriate for each grade level.

56. Develop parent support groups around topics or issues: special needs students, discipline, what to expect from students at various age levels, technology, the Internet, and how to protect children; provide child care.
57. Offer classes to parents and the necessary encouragement to complete a GED, provide in-home child care, or other training needs; provide child care.
58. Hold back-to-school or fall-festival nights with the family resource or youth services center to share information. Serve dinner and invite local agencies and businesses to set up information tables.

59. Provide a school-wide supper at the end of the month when food stamps run out. These should be celebration events — with child care and transportation provided. Parents should be complimented on strategies they have been using with their children and ideas can be shared for what they can do at home during the coming month to help their children achieve at higher levels. Some schools have ice cream socials; others have had DJs with line-dancing instructors.
60. Work with family resource or youth services centers to identify other family needs and work to meet those needs as a school.

INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNANCE: Parents and other community residents in advisory, decision-making or advocacy roles in parent associations, advisory committees and school improvement or school-based councils. Parent and community activists in independent advocacy groups that monitor the schools or work for school improvement.

61. Encourage parents to run for school councils and for district school board seats.
62. Hold focus groups (discussion groups) asking parents how to engage other parents. Provide coffee and cookies or a meal and child care.
63. Get parents involved in helping to develop discipline policies. This encourages parents to have input and then helps to implement the policies at home.
64. Develop strategies that ask parents how they would deal with situations that arise in the school.
65. Get parents involved in school committees. Make sure that this work is worthy, well-organized and creates results.
66. Invite all parents to attend school-based decision making training to prepare them for future participation with the school council and its committees.
67. When individual students have discipline problems, invite their family members to help create a plan to deal with the problem. Ask what works for them. Be prepared to share what you've found works at school.

COLLABORATION AND EXCHANGES WITH THE COMMUNITY: Involvement of any of the institutions that share some responsibility for children's development and success. This includes programs that provide access to and coordinate community and support services for children and their families, and other arrangements that draw on community resources to support children's learning.

68. Ask parents to use their business connections and skills to support the school.
69. Develop business partners who will plan collaboratively to focus their energies and resources on strategies that will raise student achievement.

70. Host a dinner meeting and conduct a Business Leaders and Teachers Talking Together using the Prichard Committee's Parents and Teachers Talking Together format to discuss what local leaders and teachers want for students. Call the Prichard Committee for assistance.
71. Establish a School-to-Work program and invite businesses to participate through mentoring programs, service learning, etc.
72. Ask business partners to use their worksite for display and distribution of information about schools and parent involvement. Such items of information can include questions to ask about your school or questions to ask at school conferences.
73. Ask business partners to allow use of empty store front windows for displays about school projects and successes.
74. Ask business partners to work with you to develop curriculum units around work areas. These instructional units should demonstrate how the basic skills are needed in every field of work.
75. Ask businesses to make available space for having school conferences, training sessions for teachers, brown bag lunch sessions on changes in schools for parents and other citizens, and parent support workshops.
76. Work with business leaders to provide resources that will move the business expertise and skills into the classroom. Move beyond the traditional ways businesses have offered help in the past.
77. Work on a plan for taking elements of "school" to the worksite for sharing with employees, rather than always expecting the community to come to the school.
78. Ask businesses to provide summer employment for teachers — perhaps only a few weeks — but an experience that provides first-hand experience about what the working environment outside the school demands.
79. Ask local newspapers to run public service ads for the purpose of letting the community know how their tax dollars are being spent.
80. Involved students in community service projects, under the guidance of parents, community leaders, or others that will benefit the school and involve all members of the community. For example, art and journalism students could develop local PR for local fund drives, such as United Way, Habitat for Humanity, and all students could work on clean up projects, visiting nursing homes, etc.
81. Invite local celebrities to come to school and read to students. This could be coordinated through the library, grade level groups, or individual classrooms.

82. Develop a speakers' bureau and include students, parents, business leaders, etc.
83. Ask local civic or service groups to invite teachers and/or administrators to speak to them during the summer months. Share successes and concerns that need community attention.
84. Ask local civic groups, churches, banks with changeable signs, social workers, etc. to share your key messages to parents in their newsletters, signs, and advertising.
85. Establish a community homework hour. Ask families, churches, business leaders, and others to support students in setting aside that hour for homework or reading.
86. Establish a community mentoring program for middle school or high school students; invite community members to come to school once or twice a year and spend 20 minutes one-on-one with students, asking about career goals, offering advice, listening to their concerns about the future.
87. Develop a PR program to inform the community about innovative and successful school programs or awards. Ask local businesses to assist.
88. Invite the community to school programs (student art shows, holiday programs, plays). Hold such events in other community facilities.
89. Ask local civic groups to provide dynamic speakers to talk to students about the realities of the workplace; what they look for in interviews, job opportunities and educational requirements. Thank them by asking them to stay for lunch, sending a thank you note (ask students to do this) or thanking them through a letter to the editor.
90. Establish a process to send regular letters to the editor sharing the positive things happening at school. These could be written by students, teachers, parents or administrators.
91. Make a video about your school to share with new parents and with the local cable TV. Involve students and parents in creating the video
92. Make a video about how families and community members can get involved with education. Show it to parents, offer it at the worksite, doctors' offices, etc.

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