

# Supporting parent involvement – a key to better schooling

*Dennis Sleigh*

**S**ome schools still operate on an outdated paradigm that equates parent involvement with women working in the canteen. Equally dated is the view that male involvement means working bees or membership of the school board. A much healthier model offers equal opportunity when involving parents in the school.

In my school, dads work on canteen, dads listen to youngsters read, dads drive teams to sport, and dads attend meetings of the P&F. Mums, of course, also do all of these things. I have to be honest and admit that the male:female ratio is still too low, but the barriers are crumbling. A big break-through occurred when the first woman president of the P&F took up her position and proved to be a great success, just like her male predecessors (in my previous schools, I rarely even had a male on the executive of the P&F, proving that patterns vary with geography).

This highlights the needs to demolish stereotypes. *If we limit parent involvement in any way our schools will be poorer for it.*

In this final article on parents in school, I want to emphasise positives, rather than attacking negatives. For that reason, having previously considered three important topics – who wants parent involvement, making everyone feel welcome, and listing key strategies that honour parents – I now want to examine ways to develop a coherent plan to enshrine parents as real partners in the education of their children.

Moses gave us 10 Commandments, and in seeking to enhance parent involvement, we too could follow 10 guidelines. If we try to follow these, our parent programs will be enriched and our educational offerings will also be better because the overall educational package of our school will be based on firmer foundations. Let's look at these guidelines.

## 1 Identify areas of need

Many teachers agree the presence of parents in the classroom can enhance the educational efficiency of our programs. Some spare hands during a gross motor development program, some spare ears during a reading class, some extra coaches during a sporting clinic – all of these bring obvious benefits. However, before we launch a program to improve our parental involvement, we need to look closely at exactly what benefits this will bring to our children.



Don't invite parents into the classroom merely to tick that box on the principal's Annual Attestation form; let's have them there because we can benefit from their skills and talents.

In one class parents might help children learn correct pencil grip during preliminary writing lessons; in another they might deliver a lecture on the Snowy River Scheme. The use to which parents can be put is limited only by our own imagination. If we want to improve our programs, we must do the homework first – identify the real needs that parents can meet.

## 2 Remember our legal obligations

Bringing parents into the classroom has certain important legal implications. Faced with serious demands for the on-going safety of children, governments today insist that everyone coming into contact with children must be a fit and proper person. The requirements to be met will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction but each school should be aware of its relevant legislation.

In seeking the co-operation of parents to comply with this legislation, explain that this is not a bureaucratic intrusion into parental privacy, but a commitment by education systems to protect children from foreseeable dangers.

## 3 Develop an articulated policy

We can easily assume that because we know what we are doing in schools, so do the parents who give up their time to work with us. On reflection, this is clearly not true. Therefore it makes sense to develop a simple handbook to assist parents in this important task. The existence of a handbook is also proof that you regard parental involvement as a priority issue!

Such a handbook can include notes about wearing visitor's badges or approved name tags; arrangements for morning tea; ideas on how to keep your own pre-schoolers occupied while helping in the classroom; simple ideas on how to remember children's names... the list is endless but take a few minutes to select some suitable contents and then you will have something to

offer to your parents as a sign of their value to you and the school.

#### 4 Offer some training

Not everyone knows how to help children select suitable books in the library or to teach children how to skip; some parents might be challenged at the thought of telling stories to a class full of six-year-olds or helping older children tackle someone in a rugby match – but most people can learn these skills if someone teaches them. The time taken to develop parental skills will not only help you to enlist some useful volunteers, but it may also help these people as parents in the family home.

The instruction periods need not be lengthy, but they should be very practical. I have witnessed some very valuable lessons shared among parents where one group of parents pass on their ideas about how to make settling in school easier for the next lot of enrollees. Small wonder these lessons work – they are given by practical people, about practical matters. The end result is the formation of an ever-growing body of skilled and enthusiastic parents.

#### 5 Support networking

When you call for volunteers to help in classrooms, some people may want to respond but feel insecure to do so by themselves. If you set up informal networks (e.g., all the parents whose child started school this year or those parents with offspring in the school choir) and try to get these networks to meet occasionally, perhaps for a cuppa or a chat, you are likely to find that your request gets better traction – the networked parents talk among themselves and together they decide that at least some of them can respond to your call.

Informality is the essence of these networks – so don't start organising meetings for them. If they want to get together, they can do so on their own initiative, perhaps down at the local coffee shop after they drop their children at school. The important point is to give people a sense of confidence that comes from being part of a group, instead of being simply an individual.

#### 6 Respect cultural differences

It's fine to say that cultural *stereotypes* are undesirable, but that should not blind us to cultural *differences*. We must be sensitive to those customs that underpin the cultures of many of the families who use our schools. If these cultural values clash with the values we appear to be preaching, painful conflict may occur and we will find ourselves in a lose-lose situation. To use a very simple example, if a person feels that parenting requires staying at home all day with young children, it is pointless asking that person to come up to the school to act as a reading mum. To see if there are relevant cultural norms that impact on the plans in your school, do a survey to see what cultures are represented in your school

community and then ask a sensitive person from each of these cultures what pitfalls you need to avoid. Many years ago I worked in a school with a high proportion of people from a culture where women were expected never to leave the house unescorted at night. When we changed our meeting times from evening to afternoon, we increased our meeting attendance greatly.

#### 7 Consider the parents' physical needs

I sometimes shudder when I find volunteers sitting on cold verandas during wintertime, listening to children read. Likewise, I feel embarrassed when parents who have served generously in our classrooms all morning are made to feel that they cannot join the staff for a cuppa at recess. These are two simple examples of how we sometimes fail to consider the physical needs of our helpers. We can also ignore their social or emotional needs, and then we wonder why they seem reluctant to return to the school. If we really value parent participation and involvement, we must look for ways to manifest this esteem. Let's not say "Yes, we want you here" and then act as though these volunteers are an unwelcome interruption.

Think of appropriate facilities, desirable conditions, supporting practices that will say, much louder than our words ever will, that we appreciate the partnership that has been forged between parents and teachers. A little thought at the outset will reap major benefits in the future.

#### 8 Provide flexible time options

One of the supporting practices might centre around the timetable. Schools often find it hard to develop flexible timetables because there are so many constraints ranging from bus arrival times to the needs of part-time staff, but this reasonable difficulty should not be presented as an unsurmountable barrier. If we can be creative about the times we ask parents to attend classes, they will usually make some accommodations of their own too. Another simple example may show what I mean: if you prefer to involve parents from the start of the school day until recess, you might find it is very hard to attract any parents who must first drop children off at pre-school, where classes often start 30 minutes later than primary classes. In the same vein, if your parental attendance at school assemblies is low, you might discover that staging these events during the final 30 minutes of a day will make life easier for parents, many of whom come to school at the end of the day to pick up their offspring. Again, just take time to consider the needs of the parents and you will often be pleasantly surprised at the response you elicit.

#### 9 Offer childcare

That previous point highlights another issue that can militate against high levels of involvement, especially when you are looking for parental

support in the classroom: the problem of what to do with pre-school children. Some teachers are open enough and flexible enough to cope with having a small number of three-year-olds in their classroom while the carers work with the students. I like that model myself, because it reminds your enrolled students that education is a family affair. However, it is not always possible to do this. If you cannot manage that flexibility, look around for alternatives. Perhaps you might have a small room where the youngsters can play with toys, watch a video, or look at books. Clearly, we must offer these children the same protection that we give our students – a level of supervision will be needed – but it is possible to find creative ways to do this without undermining the parent support program.

#### 10 Build fathers into the program

Throughout this article, I have clearly emphasised the role of mothers, because they constitute the majority of our helpers in schools. However, let this statistical reality not blind us to the rich potential of fathers. In recent years I have seen a significant increase in the number of dads who help in classrooms, serve on canteens or act as guest speakers in a variety of classrooms. This change is a wonderful one, and it is to be encouraged. Sometimes we can accelerate the rate of growth in this field by keeping our ears open to the possibilities. If we hear that Brian is going to take three months long service leave, why not invite him to pop into the classroom once or twice between painting the bathroom and replanting the front lawn? If we hear that George has just returned from a business trip to Egypt, why not invite him to address the senior students on his travels? If Phil has just rebuilt his vintage car, why not have him share some of his delight by showing it off to the children in Year 3?

We have many fascinating parents in our school community but we will only know of their talent pool if we keep our ears to the ground. We can tap into this rich source only if we recognise and respect the contribution that comes to a school when mums and dads are really part of that community of learners. These 10 guidelines will support us in our attempts.

If you would like to contribute to a dialogue on this topic of parents and school, please email me at [dennis\\_sleigh@stannestemora.nsw.edu.au](mailto:dennis_sleigh@stannestemora.nsw.edu.au).



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