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by Executive Director J.  
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## Making Parent Involvement Work for Involved Parents

As a present parent, a former teacher and a “recovering” middle school principal, I love PTA and any sort of positive parent involvement that helps parents and schools work together better. However, I HATE MEETINGS! I have to be in meetings for my work, I have to be in meetings at my church, I have to be in meetings for the Little League and, unless you are in some sort of great other dimension, most of these meetings don’t tend to be real fruitful. If they are not fruitful I don’t like going. As a matter of fact, if they are not mandatory for me to participate then I won’t go to them. I may support the effort, I may volunteer a lot of my time in other ways, but meetings do me no good. In my presentations to school officials and PTA leaders I often make the point that the only reason we are getting parents to show up is because we kidnap their children and make them sing! If you didn’t have my child sing, dance, act or look more adorable than usual, then I would not show up to the typical parent meeting. I am not a mean person but I only have so much time and I cannot afford to commit any more time to things that don’t help me or my child (I have cable TV for that!)

**If you cannot justify your own time with a good outcome then there is a good chance that your less-enthusiastic participants will see less of a point than you do.**

I spend almost every day of my life trying to help families (including my own) be stronger and the kids to have better opportunities, but my time is limited just like everybody else’s. In our typical Strong Father programs I always want to make sure we are doing things that are worth the time of the folks that attend. In your own efforts, I would invite you to ask yourself some very important, basic questions about your parent involvement activities:

### **Is There a Point to All of This Hub-Bub?**

If your activity is not going to help me be a better parent, or help my kid be a better student, or help us all form a better community, then I do not have the time. Make sure that there is a point for most of your constituents. How does this help struggling families (that would be all of us!) and what kind of payoff will there be for your efforts and the efforts of your participants? If you cannot

justify your own time with a good outcome then there is a good chance that your less-enthusiastic participants will see less of a point than you do.

#### **How Does This Fit Into Our Plans and Goals?**

Just because your school has had a Fall Carnival for the last seventy-two years does not mean it has a place in today's scheme of things. Now I love carnivals, I am a cake-walk-aholic (I have serious skills!) and my wife's third grade class made so much money from Bingo last Fall that they are now under investigation from the IRS and FBI on racketeering charges, but if you are just trying to raise money let me send you a check for \$25 and not get a funnel-cake stomach ache. If you are working to build community or are just looking to provide a cheap outlet for family fun then I am in support of your efforts; but if it doesn't fit within the goals of the school or the parent organization then let's spend our time and money on the things we most need.

**If the horse is dead then get off of the horse - you don't get anywhere and it begins to stink after a while. The same holds true for your parent involvement efforts.**

#### **If You Are Not Getting the Desired Response Then What Are YOU Going to Change?**

You have volunteered much of your time and energy to be a leader in your school and you were chosen for your leadership skills. However, leadership means you must respond to the needs of those in your stead. I see so many people that try to do something that does not meet their expectations, and instead of changing how they do business, they spend all of their time trying to convince folks to support a flawed plan. Ask ALL of your constituents what works for them and respond to it!

I have seen leadership groups read really good feedback and then still do everything that goes against that same feedback. Instead of looking for new and better ways to do things we continue to do things ineffectively. We gripe about people not being involved instead of finding the best way to meet their needs.

When I was a principal many of my teachers were griping about having to spend an evening at school when so few parents would attend an open house. I thought it was a valid point so we actually put on a MORNING open house. It made sense. I knew that as a parent myself, even though I wanted to meet teachers (who I already met) and support the school's effort, it was usually the last thing I wanted to do at 7:00 p.m. on a weeknight. But I liked coffee and I hated to get to work on time. We found out that most of our parents commuted and they came to the morning open house at a much higher rate then they did in the evenings and they were a lot less cranky! It was a huge success. Parents were happy, kids were manageable and the teachers had saved an evening for their own. Yet the staff still wanted to know why we were not having a P.M. open house like all the other schools! If the horse is dead then get off of the horse - you don't get anywhere and it begins to

stink after a while. The same holds true for your parent involvement efforts.

### **Are the Planned Activities Built to Have a Lasting Change on Kids and Families?**

Parents are in the business of trying to raise good kids. If your presentation will help them do that then your time is well spent. If you are bringing in someone to just be funny and not help folks in the long haul, then you wasted your time and my money (that I spent on all that ring tossing). The job of being a parent or a student is so important and so much work that if you want me to continue supporting your efforts then you must support mine as well. That is where the word "association" has so much strength. If you are looking out for my well-being then I am going to support your efforts any and all the time. I will give you money, time and allegiance but only if there is benefit for my family.

**Ninety-nine percent of the parents that I meet care deeply about their children and are looking for more and better ways to raise their kids.**

### **What Difference Does This REALLY Make?**

I am sure that you have asked that question after you have put so much work into something that didn't turn out the way you planned. The work that you are doing is of the utmost importance. There is TREMENDOUS RELEVANCE in helping parents be more involved in the lives and education of their children. Ninety-nine percent of the parents that I meet care deeply about their children and are looking for more and better ways to raise their kids. We have to make sure that our efforts are focused on meeting the needs of very busy families that are facing a lot of challenges.

It does not matter how fun the carnival was, or how funny the presenter was, or how fancy the playground is if it doesn't positively affect the lives of the children that we are all concerned about. The whole reason to have parents and teachers be associated is to improve the lives of our children and the community in which they live. Let us make sure that we keep our focus on those efforts and let us all make sure that we don't waste our time or the time of others on things that don't help kids be the best that they can be. I may never have a school named after me (except maybe the reform school!) but I have two children and hopefully many grandchildren that will carry my name for a long time. I want my efforts and yours to make their life the best that it can be. That would be worth all the time and energy that we all have.

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