



Reinventing Back-to-School Nights

Get students involved in creating parent engagement

By Jodi Mahoney

Some months ago, you probably wrapped up another set of back-to-school nights. And they likely felt similar to last year's back-to-school nights, consisting of a two-hour block with the principal, the parent-teacher organization (PTO), and other speakers addressing a crowd of uninterested parents eager to get to the classrooms.

Once in the classrooms, parents sat in too-small desks to watch presentations about curriculum and homework policies. The sessions were short (20 to 30 minutes), and teachers raced to fill them up with information and avoid requests for one-on-one conferences. Sound familiar?

The format served a function many years ago—when curriculum information wasn't online, when teachers didn't post images on social media, and when the only way to learn about

what happens at school was to come to school and hear about it. Times have changed, but our back-to-school presentations haven't.

Less Is More

As I transitioned into a new school as principal, I began to wonder what we might do differently. We tried something new within the structure of back-to-school nights in each of the last three years, and each time, it felt stale. We experienced a number of problems of practice, including:

1. **Child care.** Who's watching the kids when parents are at the school?
2. **Specialists/nonclassroom teachers and staff.** How do we get more parents to visit them?
3. **Time frame.** What if you have more than two children, but

there are only two sessions of teacher presentations?

4. **Principal and PTO.** No one wants to listen to a group address; most parents skip this event and come only for the teacher sessions.

I decided it was time to reinvent back-to-school nights in order to address some of these issues, and I created a new, student-led format called "Take Your Parent to School Night." The vision was simple: Create an event that allows parents to "experience" school with their children.

Letting Students Lead

Every child was encouraged to bring a parent to school and lead them through the activities they engage in every day, virtually eliminating the need for child care. Every member of

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the staff was available at the school during the two-hour open-house event, helping parents meet specialists. The flexible time frame also allowed parents to visit two or more classrooms, if needed.

Instead of a group address, I pre-recorded a short video introducing the new format and inviting parents to our school. Also featured in the video was a statement from the PTO that allowed them to reach the entire school community.

My teachers and I created a bingo card that students would use to guide their families around the school. Each location had a stamp, sticker, bookmark, or prize for students to collect when they visited. We collaborated with the local teachers' association and South Brunswick (New Jersey) Education Association Pride and applied for a \$600 grant to allow us to buy snacks.

Every staff member created activities for students and parents to do together during their visit. In classrooms, teachers prepared activities that highlighted current curricular themes. Many created handouts and minilessons for parents, highlighting key facets of their classroom components.

Some parents might have left feeling a little less informed about school rules than at prior back-to-school nights. But we felt confident that the “formal” information was available on our district website, and interactive engagement with their children was just as valuable. How fun it would be for parents to see where their child eats lunch, takes classes, and learns!

We still wanted the evening to offer resources and support for parents, of course, and invited other district departments and representatives.


Chartwells, our cafeteria food supplier, offered applications for free and reduced lunches. The transportation department answered questions about routes. We provided a help desk for our web-based parent portal.

Parents Positive

After the shift to Take Your Parent to School Night, participants' feedback was positive. Staff members preferred this format over the old format, too, noting that attendance was much higher than in years past. “What a success!” one teacher wrote. “So many parents told me how much they liked the new format. The amount of information exchanged under one roof in one night [was] stupendous!”

More than 75 percent of the parents responding to a feedback form felt the new format met their needs. “I thought the new format was

fantastic,” one said. “My children all loved bringing me all over the school and were very excited about the scavenger hunt.” Others commented that they'd like to see more curriculum content presentations, and this is an area we can improve next year.

With so much information at parents' fingertips, we no longer need to deliver formal presentations; these no longer reflect the dynamic learning environments we create and offer to our students. And given the overwhelmingly positive feedback, this is a format we will continue to use. When parents, students, and teachers come together around learning, everybody wins! What will you do differently next year? 

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