

# Five Steps to Getting Parents to Your Meetings

Recruiting and engaging parents is a common concern among parent leaders who are looking for new strategies to increase parent participation.

Getting parents involved is challenging in every community. Cultural differences and different understandings of involvement makes parent engagement even more challenging in many schools.

This step-by-step guide is the result of a series of conversations with diverse parent leaders from various organizations. It offers some reflective questions, suggestions for your consideration, and examples of how one local elementary school PTA answered the questions for that particular step.

**Step 1** Before inviting parents to one more meeting, think about why you want them to come. What is the goal of the meeting? Knowing your goal will make recruitment a lot easier.

Examples:

- ⇒ To provide important information about the school.
- ⇒ To give parents ideas on how to support their children's learning.
- ⇒ To get volunteers.
- ⇒ To build community.
- ⇒ To educate parents on the importance of being involved.

## Specific Goals

- To engage parents who reflect the diversity of the school community.
- To build a foundation for long-term involvement.
- To provide useful information to parents.
- To provide an opportunity to build relationships among parents and staff.

## Why Don't Parents Come?

- They don't see themselves in the leadership?
- They don't think the meetings are useful or do not know what the agenda is.
- Busy with work and kids.
- Come from cultures in which parents were not supposed to be involved.
- Uncomfortable that other parents seem to know everything.
- Meetings sometimes feel like an "insider's" club.

## Step 3

Now, create an agenda that addresses the barriers you listed in Step 2.

- ⇒ Don't start the agenda like a business meeting. Welcome people and do something to make people feel welcome who may be new or intimidated. Consider doing an icebreaker.
- ⇒ Make the bulk of the agenda about something parents can use to help their children.
- ⇒ Make the topic relevant to the time of the school year.
- ⇒ Have the business at the end of the agenda and limit the use of "Roberts Rules" and other protocols.
- ⇒ Have a set agenda and stick to it.
- ⇒ End on time.
- ⇒ Have a raffle as the final item so people stay until the end.

## Step 2

Now that you know why you want parents to come, think about all the reasons why parents often do not attend.

Here are some things to consider:

- ⇒ What did parent involvement look like in the communities in which many of the parents grew up?
- ⇒ Does your parent leadership reflect the diversity of families in your school community?
- ⇒ What do most parents think about your organization? Do they know what it does?
- ⇒ Do your outreach strategies (e.g. listserve, flyers, phone calls) reach the majority of your parents?
- ⇒ Does the format of your meeting make it feel welcoming to parents who may be nervous about attending or do not understand MCPS culture?
- ⇒ Is the topic relevant to most families in your community?
- ⇒ Are the meetings too long or run too late?

## Possible Agenda

- 6:30 Dinner
- 7:00 Welcome. Have everyone introduce themselves to someone they don't know.
- 7:10 Cultural Bingo—fun activity to talk with each other, feel valued, and learn about different cultures in the school.
- 7:30 Principal and teachers give an interactive presentation on Curriculum 2.0.
- 8:00 Announcements
- 8:15 Raffle
- 8:25 Closing and evaluation

## Set Up

- Pick up pupusas and order pizza.
- Parent Ambassadors welcome parents as they arrive.
- Set up chairs in small circles of 8.
- Call the interpreter and reserve the translation equipment.
- Bring nametags, markers, and pens.
- Get Cultural Bingo sheets in English and Spanish from DFCEP.
- Create evaluation in English and Spanish.

**Step 5** Finally, create an outreach “campaign” that considers the barriers from Step 2. Here are some ideas:

- ⇒ Flyer that addresses the barriers.
- ⇒ “Robo Call” that is written in a way that people will understand why they should come.
- ⇒ Enlist parents to help make personal calls.
- ⇒ Motivate students to push their parents to attend.
  - \* Some schools provide ice cream to the grade with the most parents in attendance.
- ⇒ Remind parents on the day of the meeting.
  - \* Some elementary schools put a sticker on their students to remind parents about the meeting.
- ⇒ Organize car pools.
- ⇒ Translate your outreach materials to the languages most often used in your school.

**Step 4** The agenda is only part of what needs to be considered to make a meeting successful. Here are some things to think about for the setup of a meeting.

- ⇒ Childcare. Many schools have aftercare programs that will do the childcare for you. Others use high school students with adult/staff supervision.
- ⇒ Interpretation. Do some of your families need an interpreter? Have bilingual parents greet and welcome non-English speakers when they walk in. Consider having additional meetings that are just in the other languages.
- ⇒ Food. Parents are coming from a busy day. Also, food makes a meeting seem more comfortable and welcoming.
- ⇒ Time. Have the food available 30 minutes before the meeting starts. That way, parents won’t feel so rushed and most people will be in place before the actual meeting gets started. It also offers an opportunity for community building.
- ⇒ Chairs. Consider putting chairs in small circles of 6 to 8. That will make the meeting less intimidating and give people a chance to talk with a small group of parents.
- ⇒ Greeters. Have some parents at the door welcoming people. Give everyone a nametag. Make sure the leaders are easily identified.

**Parent Meeting**  
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4<sup>TH</sup>  
Free Pizza and Pupusa's will be served at 6:30.  
Meeting will be from 7 to 8:30 pm  
Kids After Hours will provide free babysitting and activities for kids  
Parent Ambassadors will lead groups in Spanish, Amharic, Korean, and French.

The grade with the most parents in attendance wins an ice cream party.

**Agenda**

- Dinner
- Cultural Bingo
- Answers from OTEs teachers
- Budget vote
- Program updates
- **DOOR PRIZES**

Win a prize if you know answers to any of these questions:

- Do you know where pupusa's come from?
- What is a *Step Team*?
- Describe *injera*.
- What is a *hijab*?
- What do you get from kissing the *Blarney Stone*?

Ms. Pulliam and teachers will answer questions such as:

- How much time should my child spend on homework each night? What if he or she doesn't understand it?
- Can you explain the new curriculum so I can understand it?
- When does my child get the chance to play a musical instrument?
- What is *CT*? What are *MSAs*?
- How do I know if my child is on the right path?

Oakland Terrace Elementary School PTA

# Pulling It All Together

Getting parents out to meetings requires you to be as intentional in your efforts as you are with other programs. Try to think out of the box and remember that you want to grow as the year goes on.

1. Develop your goals. Why is this meeting important?
2. Think about what gets in the way of parents coming.
3. Create an agenda that considers the reasons why people don't attend meetings.
4. Think about the other variables that will make it easier for parents to attend and participate.
5. Create an outreach campaign that addresses the barriers from Step 2.
6. Evaluate. What worked well and what could you do differently the next time.



Created by

the Montgomery County Public Schools Department of Family and Community Partnerships  
and the Study Circles Program in collaboration with:

Montgomery County Council of PTAs, Montgomery County NAACP Parents' Council,  
Gaithersburg High School PALA, Rockville High School PALA, Earle B. Wood Middle School  
Latino Parent Committee, Asian American Parents Advocacy Council



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