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Making *the*
Most of
Middle School

Putting Parents in the Middle

(School, That Is)

By J. Michael Hall

Teachers and administrators often overlook a great source of critical support—parents.

As I speak to fathers and families around the country, I introduce myself as a “recovering” middle school principal. The remark always elicits a collective gasp from the audience. It’s as if I told them that I had just returned from some catastrophic experience. No matter what age of parents I am talking to, they all live in fear of middle school.

The vast majority of middle schools serve grades 6–8. Middle schools are built primarily to address the distinct needs of this age group (11–13) and over the years have developed fantastic practices to manage the roller coaster years of the middle grades, both academically and behaviorally. As middle schools have become more and more refined to better engage their students, however, they have developed fewer and fewer ways to engage their students’ parents.

As an educator, I have seen an interesting phenomenon take place concerning parents of students in the middle grades. For most of my teaching and administrative career, I was around sixth graders. If the sixth graders were a part of an elementary or an intermediate campus, then the parents were involved in much the same manner as parents typically are in elementary schools. They were still very active in parent organizations, they still volunteered, and they would still walk their children into the building on occasion. When the sixth graders were a part of a middle school, however, not only would you not see parents get involved, but it seemed they barely stopped the car to let their kids out in the parking lot. This mystique of the middle school has been an impediment for parent involvement.

Entering middle school is a big change for students who are already faced with multiple challenges. These students are dealing with tremendous physical changes as they enter puberty as well as many social changes as they encounter a more intense social experience consisting of boyfriends, girlfriends, sports teams, and the dreaded cliques. They are also becoming more involved in school activities like sports, academic competitions, and performing arts. On top of all of this, students are learning a totally different way to do school. Instead of remaining in the same classroom with



the same teacher all day, students are now attending 4–8 classes during the day with a different mix of students, subject matter, and teaching styles. They also have to contend with new rules of engagement, new freedoms, new responsibilities, and those blasted combination locks on the lockers in the crowded halls.

With all of these new issues and stresses in their lives, middle school students need help—even if they don’t ask for it. One of the challenges of middle school teachers and administrators is ensuring that students are well supported during this trying time. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators often overlook a great source of critical support—parents.

Parents of middle schoolers change almost as much as the students. When students enter middle school, they and their parents tend to believe all of these myths they’ve heard about middle school. But there is a reason these are called “myths.” To better involve parents in the middle school we must understand the difference between fact and fiction. I’ve encountered the following myths—and the corresponding truths—based on my experiences as a middle school principal.

Myth #1: Middle school students don’t want parents to be involved.

FACT: Middle school students do in fact want their parents to be involved. More importantly, they need

them to be involved. It's not that students don't want their parents around; they just don't want them around in the same way that they were before. Now, as students try to gain more independence, they want to be able to focus on their social relationships and their incubating identity without a lot of interference from their parents. Even though they seem to resist it, students need guidance and boundaries as they continually try on more and more independence. They also need support and structure in order to handle all of the new and unfamiliar academic requirements that come with middle school classes.

Myth #2: Parents of middle school students don't want to be involved.

FACT: Middle school parents typically fall into one of three categories. The first type of parent has been very involved in the past but may have finally burned out or been turned out. The second type of parent has never been very involved in the school. These parents either may not have been involved due to life or work circumstances or they did not fit the clique or caste system that many times exists in elementary parent organizations. The third type of parent may or may not have been involved in the past but is now so shell-shocked about having this adolescent middle schooler in the house that he or she can barely be involved in the child's life, much less his or her school.

Middle schools need to reach out to parents to help them through this stage of their child's life. Parents need to be on the same page with the school. They need to understand how these children are changing, how the school is built to work with those changes, and how they can partner with the



Three Keys to Involving Parents in the Middle School

- 1. Give plenty of notice:** Parents of middle school students usually don't have just that one student, so they are busy with both their middle school student and other children in the house. A month's notice and a 2-week reminder of events will help them manage their time so they can plan on being involved.
- 2. Don't trust students to get the message home:** Because it is such a challenge to get information to parents through their students you must use a new set of tools. You either offer incentives for students to get their parents to attend certain events (e.g., homework passes, free tardy passes, pizza or ice cream cones at lunch) or use tools that circumvent the student as a channel of communication. Such tools include e-mail blasts, computerized phone calls, and school Web sites. Many parents have e-mail and Internet access, and almost every parent has a phone number. Schools must be diligent in keeping up with current e-mail addresses and phone numbers of parents. Ask for them to be updated on a regular basis. One of the most successful ways we have found to communicate with parents is through mail-outs. The attendance at our father events in middle school has almost doubled in some schools when we mail out the flier instead of sending it home with the students.
- 3. Provide the parents help in understanding their middle school student:** Even though middle school teachers are professionals and know all about students at this grade level, many parents are flabbergasted. Provide materials about adolescent development, explain how your middle school is built to deal with developmental issues, and encourage parents to stay involved through these trying times. By letting parents know that you understand both them and their child, you will more easily gain a partner in helping their child succeed.





school in all facets of the students' development. Now instead of volunteering for field trips and office tasks, parents are needed to chaperone dances, work in concession stands, and stay in constant communication with the school about their child's progress. For parent involvement to be different in the middle grades it must be defined differently for parents so that they can partner in the appropriate manner.

Myth #3: Middle school teachers don't want parents' help.

FACT: Teachers need parent involvement so their students can be successful. In the elementary school, a teacher may have 20–30 students and therefore can provide more care and personal communication with the parents who desire or require it. In the middle school, many teachers have as many as 90–150 students per day and cannot possibly reach out to every parent. Because of the sheer number of students, the teacher must now simplify the teacher-parent relationship (which is no easy task considering parents now have multiple teachers to communicate with). Teachers still need parents, however, to help them keep track of the student's progress and help set standards for the child. If parents will check homework assignments, graded papers, progress reports, and report cards and hold the student accountable, then they are providing the teachers a tremendous amount of help.

In order for parents to do all of this, however, schools must set and communicate these

expectations to parents in an effective manner. Parents cannot meet expectations that are not explained. Schools should publish a list of ways that parents can help and then standardize as many of those ways as possible. For instance, many elementary schools send a folder home with students on the same day of the week every week. There is no reason that this type of standard practice couldn't be continued in middle school. It helps the parents stay on track and keeps the students accountable.

Myth #4: Middle school students don't communicate with their parents.

FACT: Actually, this myth is pretty much true. Middle school students don't communicate with their parents. Even when they do talk to them, they don't talk about what is important to parents or teachers. Students talk about what is important to themselves, like social situations, their apparent mistreatment by teachers, other students, and bus drivers. They talk about everything except their academic endeavors. Students at this age are much less likely to bring home fliers, to convey messages from teachers or principals, and to understand why these actions are more important than discussing student romances taking place in the lunchroom. To add insult to injury, students may exaggerate when they talk. In my tenure as a middle school principal, there were many times that I would initially offend parents by discounting a student's account of a classroom or hallway incident. I had to explain to parents that I didn't think that the student was necessarily lying (even though that has been known to happen from time to time) but rather that there was what really happened and then there was what was reported after it passed through the filter of a middle school student.

Parents and teachers have to learn to communicate with each other instead of relying on the student. Students should be accountable for communicating with both their parents and their teacher as a practice, but parents and teachers should not count on information that they send via students. By communicating directly, parents and teachers can save themselves the hassle of trying to decipher information from students.

Although the middle school years can be a trying time for both parents and students, they don't have to be the nightmare many parents envision them as. Parents can educate themselves and provide indispensable support to their child by connecting to and communicating with the school. Together, schools and parents can help students succeed academically, socially, and personally as they progress through the middle school grades.

J. Michael Hall is the founder and executive director of Strong Fathers-Strong Families. He is a former teacher and middle school principal. You may contact Mike at mikehall@strongfathers.com.

Former SEDL Employees Release New Book About Leading Professional Learning Communities

The past few years have brought a proliferation of books about professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are often seen as a way to increase student achievement, heighten teacher reflection and collaboration, and even enforce compliance with prescribed programs. Shirley Hord and Bill Sommers, former SEDL employees, believed many of these books provide only part of the picture of what a PLC is and how to establish one.

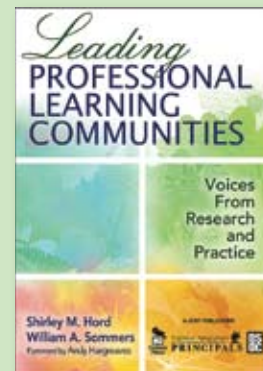
“Some of the recent books focus almost entirely on collaboration, which is certainly part of a PLC, but there is so much more to a professional learning community, especially for the principal or other leaders,” said Hord. “Bill and I saw that many of these books weren’t thorough in their discussion of what a PLC really is, the learning that must take place within the community, and what it takes to lead a staff to become a PLC.”

Thus, Hord and Sommers wrote *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices From Research and Practice*, recently published by Corwin Press. The book explores the critical role of the

principal and other leaders in the development of a PLC by discussing what research literature says as well as what really happens in schools. It also discusses the constant focus needed on student and teacher learning and the commitment and courage necessary to lead a PLC.

In the forward of *Leading Professional Learning Communities*, Andy Hargreaves, the Thomas More Brennan Chair at Boston College, explained that the book addresses the paradoxical nature of PLCs. “In essence, leadership entails working with and indeed thriving on paradox, not merely trying to eliminate or endure it,” he wrote.

The book illustrates how PLCs can help increase leadership capacity, embed professional development in daily work, create a positive school culture, and develop accountability. It also addresses how to manage the conflict that arises, the creativity needed for problem solving, and the courage to challenge existing systems and ways of thinking when necessary.



Leading Professional Learning Communities was published by Corwin Press in conjunction with the National Staff Development Council and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. It may be ordered from SEDL's publications department either online at www.sedl.org/pubs/ or by calling 800-476-6861. The cost is \$30 for the paperback.



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