

10 Ways to Get Families on Your Action Team

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Yes, you **can** find wonderful, giving parents and family members to serve on your school Action Team for Partnerships! They may, in fact, be just waiting for an invitation. Following, are a few ideas for getting families on your team who are willing, not only to share their own experiences, but also to speak for the ideas and interests of other families. Don't forget that "family members" come in all forms; not only as parents, but also as grandparents, step-parents, aunts and uncles, legal guardians, and other significant, caring adults in the life of a child. **DPI VISTA Monthly 6 October 2009**

- 1. Ask teachers for ideas.** As the primary point of school contact for most families, teachers will be well-informed about many students' parents. Approach teachers one-on-one in a quiet moment. Ask for names of family members they think might like to help out the school in a way that is different and, one could argue, more meaningful than volunteering for a field trip or providing a classroom snack. Use your chats with teachers as an opportunity to keep them up-to-date on Action Team activities and goals, to answer their questions, and to get their ideas about how teachers and families together can improve children's learning.
- 2. Look to your school's parent organization.** Parents at the PTA or PTO meeting are already involved and willing to invest time in their children's school life; there's no need to sell them on the idea. A PTA parent might be willing to act as a liaison between the parent group and Action Team – i.e., keeping the PTA informed about what the Action Team is doing and how the parent group can be involved. It's a good idea to let the president of the parent group know what you're trying to accomplish. S/he may have good suggestions for Action Team candidates, too.
- 3. Specify the time commitment and the duties.** It's much easier for a busy Mom, Dad or guardian to agree to attend one meeting a month than to sign on to a lengthy, two-year commitment for a major school initiative. Many parents don't volunteer to serve on Action Teams or say, "no," because they're nervous about being able to live up to what may sound like pretty rigorous demands. Be ready to give family representatives a one-page summary about what the Action Team does, how family representation enriches the work of the team, and what expected duties are.
- 4. Be flexible.** Can't get working families to attend Action Team meetings during the school day? Consider holding shorter, more frequent meetings occasionally at night, in the morning just before school starts, or during the lunch hour. Offer Action Team members a stress-reducing school breakfast or lunch – one less thing for your family member to squeeze in during the day.
- 5. Ask the Action Team to celebrate the school's diversity.** Connect the Action Team to families with diverse cultures by designating school events or activities that celebrate families' cultural traditions and history. Build on the team's connections with families to identify new Action Team members, fill families' needs for helping children learn, and link families to each other.

- 6. Parents love company.** Aim for two to three parents or family representatives on your Action Team. A sole parent member may be reluctant to speak up, especially when everyone else on the team has worked together in the same profession for the past eight years **DPI VISTA Monthly 7 October 2009** and attended each others' baptisms, bar mitzvahs, and birthday parties. Consider asking a veteran-member to mentor new members, or to walk them through questions about the group's mission, past accomplishments, and procedures for making things happen. Don't let family members feel lonely.
- 7. Leave room on the agenda for issues important to families.** Make the report from families a priority on every meeting agenda and schedule it early in the meeting. There are few gestures of respect more powerful than being listened to. Parents are much more likely to make time to attend meetings if they have important information to share and know that their work and contributions will receive due consideration.
- 8. Agree on a communications strategy.** Who will type up Action Team meeting notes and e-mail them to all members, including the ones who couldn't attend? How can absent members get their thoughts and comments about the meeting to other members in between meetings, instead of waiting until the next meeting? Make sure all members have each others' e-mail addresses and phone numbers and know who to contact if the unexpected arises.
- 9. Keep everyone informed about Action Team efforts.** Summarize Action Team developments in the monthly family newsletter and among staff committees. Introduce Action Team members at school meetings and recognize them at end-of-year celebrations. Display a poster near the school entrance highlighting Action Team and partnership goals and accomplishments. Maintaining the Action Team's visibility will make it easier to attract new members among school families who already know what the Action Team "is."
- 10. Use issues of interest to gain members.** The family member who walks into the principal's office with a question or concern is a potential Action Team member. So is the parent who speaks up at a family forum and the one who fills out and returns a family survey. What are the issues that galvanize families and stir their enthusiasm for their own child's learning? How do those issues touch all children in the school? Parents and family members who feel that their interests have a venue in the school can make long-lasting contributions as Action Team members.