CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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**SUMMARY**

Family engagement is a struggle within many school systems. Schools find it difficult to actively and creatively involve parents with their students’ schooling process. Research shows, however, that engaging parents in the education of their children produces positive results, helping students better succeed in schools. The reason behind the poor involvement of parents is due to a lack of opportunities as well as negative past experiences with schools. This paper establishes some guidelines for planning school/family activities as well as proposes several innovative and creative solutions for engaging families in school activities. Implementing the activities and plans listed will create a pivotal point in schools, which will allow schools and families to develop positive relationships and help students become more successful in their educational process.

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# **INTRODUCTION**

 Family engagement within the Oswego, Kansas, school system is slim to none. Families do not see the need to be an active part of their child’s schooling. This is a very unfortunate occurrence. Statistics show that when families and community members are engaged and active in the school system, students are more likely to succeed. “A synthesis…concluded that there is a positive relationship between family engagement and improved academic achievement” (National dropout prevention center, 2016).

This lack of parental involvement may stem from a variety of issues, but the main challenge, I believe, is caused by a lack of understanding how to become involved and a negative experience some parents have had in the past with the school or school officials. Due to the need of families becoming an integral part of the education process within the Oswego schools, this paper proposes several innovative ideas on how to creatively engage families in the schooling of their children.

# **BACKGROUND**

 Family engagement is not only a problem for the Oswego, Kansas, school district, but for school districts throughout the United States. This problem does not stem from a lack of parents wanting their students to achieve. Parents and educators, in fact, are advocating for the same goal: success of the students. “Both research and common sense tell us that parents and educators share the same goal—student success—yet strong school/family/community partnerships are often elusive” (Houston, Blankstein, & Cole, p. 2, 2010).

The problem, therefore, lies somewhere else. I believe there are two main problems within the lack of parental engagement in schools. First, parents view schools in a negative light due to a bad experience in the past. “’Low income parents are often suspicious of schools—they frequently have bad memories of their own time as students…’ (Houston et al., p. 2, 2010). “They [parents] may be intimidated by feelings of ignorance and uncertainty, and they may assume that their children will experience the same kinds of difficulties…” (Houston et al., p. 3, 2010). The second reason is caused by a lack of knowing how to become active with their child’s schooling.

Before continuing the discussion on ways to get parents involved with schools, we must first understand the importance of parental involvement. According to an article by Edutopia, schools should create “an environment where all families feel embraced by a school’s culture, not just invited to attend its events” (Wolpert-Gawron, 2016). By creating these environments, parents feel more welcome to enter into the school setting and students begin benefitting from the effects of having the full support of their parents.

“…an environment where all families feel embraced by a school’s culture, not just invited to attend its events” (Wolpert-Gawron, 2016)

That same article by Wolpert-Gawron (2016), listed above, also states that when schools begin putting forth the effort to actively engage families, the benefits “far outweigh the effort.” Figure 1 below lists some of the benefits, stated by the National Dropout Prevention Center (2016), students begin to receive when families become more actively engaged in schooling.

**FIGURE 1**

Now that we have briefly covered the benefits of parental involvement, we can begin to explore innovative and creative solutions to helping parents and families become more engaged in schools. The following few sections list several ideas and activities to help with this integration process.

# **SIX SENSES**

In his book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers will Rule the Future*, Daniel Pink (2006) lists six senses that he says are essential in today’s society: Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play, and Meaning. Using these six senses, we can begin to transform the way in which parents view the school and create a plan to help integrate families into the education process.

**DESIGN**

The concept of design states that “[i]t’s no longer sufficient to create a product, a service, an experience, or a lifestyle that’s merely functional. Today it’s economically crucial and personally rewarding to create something that is also beautiful, whimsical, or emotionally engaging” (Pink, p. 65, 2006). Families will not come to the school for an event if they are not compelled by something exciting, fresh, and new. Families in today’s society have so many distractions pulling them in many different directions. If the school wants to engage these families, they need to create something that is fun and engaging. It is for this reason, schools must brainstorm innovative ways to make current programs stand out from other events and activities pulling families away from school functions.

**STORY**

 The idea of “Story” is gaining significance in today’s society. Using narrative within the school setting can help us relate with parents better. It helps us interact more personally with the families. Knowing about the families is good, but placing what you know in context with a narrative, helps us better understand the families and where they are coming from. “When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in *context* and to deliver them with *emotional impact*” (Pink, p. 103, 2006). Once we understand families, we can better empathize with them, creating a deeper bond between the families and the school.

**SYMPHONY**

 “Symphony is largely about relationships” (Pink, p. 134, 2006). To have a successful family engagement program, one must be knowledgeable about how relationships work. They are able to see the big picture and use the elements to create something bigger and better. “They must know how to link apparently unconnected elements to create something new” (p. 134).

**EMPATHY**

 To empathize is to “imagine yourself in someone else’s position and intuit what that person is feeling” (Pink, p. 159, 2006). As part of the six senses, empathy is a vital component of any program. “…good designers put themselves in the mind of whoever is going to experience the product or service they’re designing” (p. 173). If we can empathize with families, we can better understand where they are coming from and the feelings they may have toward the school and its administrators and teachers. This understanding will help us better create a program that both meets their needs and interests and benefits the students and school.

**PLAY**

 Play has three aspects: games, humor, and joyfulness. Games are becoming a prominent part of our society. People learn to connect and manipulate facts when playing games. Humor has “the ability to place situations in context, to glimpse the big picture, and to combine differing perspectives into new alignments” (Pink, p. 198, 2006). Joyfulness is something that should be prevalent in any program. Laughter is contagious, and what better way is there to connect people than through fun and laughter? It builds a sense of unity that is hard to develop in other ways.

**MEANING**

 The final sense is “Meaning.” “The search for meaning is a drive that exists in all of us—and a combination of external circumstances and internal will can bring it to the surface” (Pink, p. 217, 2006). Pink says that most people think about what the purpose of their life might be. A program developed to help better the educational experience of their children may not be the final sense of meaning in a parent’s life, but it could give them a sense of purpose and pride in the program and the school in which their child attends.

# **THE PLAN**

After understanding the six senses, we can begin to develop our program to help families become more involved with our local schools. While developing this program, we must return to the senses to make sure each element of the program relates back to the goal of maintaining the integrity of the senses. This act of evaluating the ideas and how they relate to our goals is called Value Mapping, and will help us sort through our ideas to determine which ones we should execute, and which ones, although they may be great ideas, do not line up with our goals and should be eliminated, or put on hold, for our next possible project. (Linkner, p. 191, 2011)

Planning family engagement activities should involve creative thinking and a new look on what has been done and what could be done. Linkner, in his book, *Disciplined Dreaming* (2011), states, “Change agents win because they have the courage and creativity to break the mold” (p. 9). To be an agent for change, one must think outside the box. If we want to more actively engage families, we must think past traditional family activities and begin creatively brainstorming ideas that will dramatically impact students and their families.

Linkner (2011) goes on to talk about leveraging creativity (p. 11), risk-taking (p. 13), and rewards being “based on fresh ideas, improvisation, and a willingness to release your grip on the status quo” (p. 18). Change needs to happen in our schools; creative thinking, risk-taking, and improvisation can make the difference between a lack of parental involvement and an exciting program, actively engaging families in the education process.

**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

Now that we have some basic guidelines to follow for a new program, we can begin to brainstorm family engagement program ideas. Figures 2 below shows some potential ideas.

**FIGURE 2**

**Back to School Bash**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Volunteers** | **Supplies** | **Set up** |
| * 2 for each inflatable
* 4 for registration table
* 4 for snacks
* 1 guarding door prizes
* 4-5 available for families with questions
 | * Inflatables – bounce house, maze, bungee run
* Snacks
* Door prizes
* Sign in registration papers
* Tables
* Chairs
 | * Have inflatables set up and ready to go
* Door prizes should be displayed – winners will be announced 30 minutes before event ends. Need to be present to win.
* Registration table should be the first thing families come to. 4 Volunteers should be working this table. Have plenty of registration papers laid out so multiple families can register at the same time
* Tables and chairs should be available for families
* Snacks should be out and ready to distribute
	+ Hot dogs
	+ Chips
	+ Cookies
	+ Water
 |

**Math Night (Lakeshore, 2016)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Volunteers** | **Supplies** | **Set up** |
| * 2 per station
* Greeters
* 4-5 available for families with questions
 | * Volunteer Sign-in Sheet, name tags for volunteers
* Math incentive give aways
* Station Posters
* Station Supplies (listed in next column)
 | 6 Stations* Add It Up! – Reinforce early addition and graphing skills
	+ “Roll, Add, & Graph” chart
	+ Crayons
	+ 2 Dice per group
* Tangram Tasks – Shape recognition
	+ Tangrams
	+ Picture-making cards
* Number Detectives – Build number sense
	+ “Guess My Number!” game riddles
	+ Hundreds Chart
* Line Jumping – Addition and subtraction
	+ Masking tape (4 number lines on floor labeled 1-20, about a foot apart)
	+ Addition and subtraction flash cards with facts to 20
* Telling Time Match-Up
	+ “Telling Time Match-Ups” cards (4-5 sets)
* Snacks
	+ Variety of healthy snacks and drinks
 |

 **“Frozen” Movie Night**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Volunteers** | **Supplies** | **Set up** |
| * Greeters at the door
* Popcorn and Beverage worker
* Tech/Sound Guy
 | * Sound system
* Projector
* DVD player
* “Frozen” movie
* Popcorn
* Drinks
 | * Minimal set up required
* Movie will be in gym or main auditorium (whichever the school has available)
* Make sure sound system works and movie is ready to go
* Have popcorn made and ready to go. Local movie theatres may donate popcorn
* Have drinks out. Bottled water, juice boxes
 |

**Super Hero Family Literacy Night (Beltran, N.D.)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Volunteers** | **Supplies** | **Set up** |
| * 2 per station
* Greeters
* 4-5 available for families with questions
 | * Volunteer Sign-in Sheet, name tags for volunteers
* Handouts – Bag with bookmark, snack ticket, and reading pledge
* Books to give away
* Station Posters
* Station Supplies (listed in next column)
 | 7 Stations* Super Words – Families will use the words “super heroes read” to build new words
	+ Super words handout
	+ Sentence Strip
	+ Pencils
* We Need a Hero! – Families will create a super hero
	+ We need a hero organizer
	+ Pencils
	+ Blank paper
	+ Crayons
* This Looks Like a Job For… - Families will create a super hero comic strip
	+ Sentence Strip
	+ Pencils
	+ Crayons
* Secret Identities –Families will create super hero masks
	+ Mask shape templates
	+ Colored cardstock
	+ Markers
	+ Yarn
	+ Sequins, feathers, stickers, etc. for decorating
* Reading Headquarters – Families will read together
	+ Capes made out of tablecloths (table clothes and yarn)
	+ Super hero books
	+ Comfy reading area
* Super Snack – Families will decorate and eat cookies
	+ Cookies
	+ Frosting
	+ Frosting bags and tips
* Smack Attack! – Families will rhyme super hero words
	+ Word cards
	+ City Background
	+ Rhyming words on villains
	+ Fly swatters with super heroes taped to them
 |

**Beach Party**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Volunteers** | **Supplies** | **Set up** |
| * 2-3 per station
* Door Greeters
* Roamers – to catch anyone looking lost
 | * Station Supplies
* Prizes for stations (fish necklaces)
* Name tags for volunteers
* Volunteer Sign-in
 | * Beach Ball Volleyball
	+ Beach Balls
	+ Families will compete in a game of volleyball using beach balls. Scores will not be kept. No net, just hitting the ball back and forth.
* Photo Booth
	+ Photo Booth props
	+ Camera
	+ Sign up sheet so parents can have their pictures e-mailed to them!
* Snack Area
	+ Beach Picnic Snacks – hot dogs, chips, fruit, water
* Limbo
	+ Limbo Game
* Ring Toss
	+ Rings
	+ Alligator to toss rings on to
 |

As you can see, a variety of events are listed above. Each event fits the six senses: Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play, and Meaning. These events are fun, innovative, and engaging, and will create an atmosphere in which parents will feel comfortable entering into the school. They will also create new memories for the parents, which will cause the old, negative memories to, hopefully, recede into the background.

This family program will also allow parents to form bonds with other parents and teachers, creating for them a network of support. Once this happens, students will begin to profit from the relationships formed, parents will feel more comfortable entering the school, and a more positive ambiance will surround the students and school.

# **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the task of engaging families is not an easy one, but is necessary for students to be the most successful. Linkner (2011), talks about “Inflection Points” and “pivotal change” in his book. These are “a point where one social or business trend changes trajectory and starts off in a new direction” (p. 128). I believe the development of an innovative and creative program for family engagement could be a pivotal change for our school system. The lives of our students could be drastically changed if the families of these students started to become more involved with their schooling.

By creating this program, families would become more comfortable in the school, attitudes toward teachers and school staff would change, negative comments at home and around the community would diminish, and the students would see a more positive aura surrounding their education. How beautiful would it be to see the lives of these students changed for the better because their parents stepped up and got on board with their education?

**“Creativity is not the spice of life, it is the very stuff of it!”**

**-J. Michael Fox, M.S.**

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