
TWO-BY-TWO

Edmund Hatch Bennett Elementary School

Taunton, Massachusetts

Wishing volunteers would step forward to chair committees? Concerned that a broader representation of your parent body ought to be involved in decision-making? Facing the willingness of the same person to plan and implement activities and worried that she/he will one day burn out?

Bennett Elementary School in Taunton, Massachusetts tackled these questions and came up with a solution that met their District's Improvement Goal—to involve more parents—and their School Improvement Goal—to involve more persons in decision making and broadening parent/family representation. This endeavor established a dynamic activity that demonstrated the district vision statement—that education is a shared responsibility.

Several years ago, when pondering these questions, a group of parents put their heads together and examined strategies for engaging parents in leadership roles. During their discussions, these parents agreed that the traditional officer structure of their Parent Teacher Organization (President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer) was not working effectively. Additionally, they agreed that it might be easier and more fun for a chairperson or officer to work with someone since this provides an opportunity for new friendships, idea sharing, and problem solving. Lastly, they agreed that parents and family members might be more interested in the work of the Parent Teacher Organization if there were benefits beyond the intrinsic value of assisting their child's school. Hence, a new Parent Teacher Organizational structure developed.

The new structure would consist of the traditional elected officers with an encouraged option for co-leadership (two-by-two). In addition, the new structure called for the formation of an Executive Board whose membership would consist of the elected officers, all activity/event chairpersons or co-chairs (the reward), a representative from the School Council, and faculty representation. Monthly Parent Teacher Organization meetings would become bi-monthly meetings with the alternative month reserved for the working meeting of the Executive Board.

The Executive Board makes decisions around fundraising strategies, develops a menu of parent involvement activities designed around the six types of involvement, and suggests disbursement of funds in accordance with school policy and student need. The general meetings of the Parent

Teacher Organization are organized around brainstorming new ideas, updating parent information, bringing general tentative decisions to the larger body of interested families, and recruiting additional program ideas.

The encouraging results provided an ongoing framework for recruitment, retention of involved families, broader program offerings meeting multiple and diverse needs of both students and families, and a stronger sense of pride and ownership among the entire school community with regard to student outcomes.

The Executive Board currently consists of more than 36 active parent members representing all grade levels. Program offerings have expanded to include weekday, weekend, evening, and summer programs. Family involvement at the school, using on-site attendance as a measurement, has risen exponentially to the point where frequently, due to space constraints, two sessions of a program need to be offered. Survey results indicate a high level of satisfaction among the parents and family members around new program offerings, their sense of being informed about school business, and their desire to get on board with idea sharing. Activity leadership is thriving, and a stronger connection between and among the various stakeholders has emerged.

Beyond the additional cost of more refreshments, this idea took very little revenue. The need for increased funding came from the new programs and activity development. However, given their ownership for the nature of parent programs, there is genuine willingness to raise funds, write for small grants, and petition the district for additional financial support.

Bennett School's philosophy of two-by-two (as co-chairpersons) has offered a sense of security to family members and provided a mentoring relationship for new families arriving each school year. No longer is decision-making held in the hands of a few. At the Bennett School, it's understood that there is room for all.

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