

HANOVER HORNETS

PARENT ACTION GROUP

13 THINGS TO DO THIS YEAR

Take the focus off fundraising. Building your group will be a struggle if people think all you do is fundraise. Start taking steps to shed that image: Limit major fundraisers to two or three a year; run more family events; and make sure new families see your group as a resource—their first contact with you shouldn't be a fundraising flyer.

Get the whole school excited. One of the most fun things about Parent Action Group work is the energy created by a special event or program. Getting the kids excited can build momentum in ways you might not expect—for teachers, for the school, and for your group as a whole.

Limit meetings to one hour at most. General meetings are the time to inform members about what the group is doing and to get input on major decisions. If you're spending two hours going over auction plans or discussing appreciation ideas, it's time to change. Do the detail work in committees or in executive board meetings. General membership meetings shouldn't be draining.

Create a welcoming committee. A welcoming committee organizes greeters for every event—they make sure newcomers meet other people and get settled in. You want to get people over that initial feeling of being out of place. It's a simple step, but it can make a big difference.

Reach out to a group of parents who don't normally participate. A great way to enrich your group is to target a subset of parents who are uninvolved. Whether it's single parents, dads, immigrants, or people who live across town, take the time to find out why they don't take part, then see what you can do to tear down some of the barriers.

Over communicate. Just because you told people something doesn't mean they heard it. Take every opportunity to communicate information about your parent group. Whether it's upcoming events, your goals for the year, or just the fact that you exist and are looking for volunteers, it's important to

get the word out. Send emails, make frequent announcements, talk to people in the drop-off and pickup lines. And don't be afraid to repeat yourself.

Survey parents and use their feedback. Ask parents what they would like to see from the Parent Action Groups, what kinds of programs they will support, and any other key questions you might have. Be sure to keep the survey short, email it directly to parents if possible (or give kids an incentive to return it), and make sure you use the information you've gathered.

Let somebody new run with an idea, even if you think it might fail. New people bring new perspective and new talent to your group. Use that to your advantage by letting an enthusiastic volunteer pursue a pet project, don't quash her enthusiasm with comments like "We tried that. It won't work." Set the guidelines, such as available budget, then relax and let her go for it. Sure, the project may fail. But it also might be a surprising and rewarding success. In which case you've created an avid member you wouldn't have had if you shot down all of her ideas at the start.

Make the school feel more welcoming. Believe it or not, lots of parents don't feel comfortable coming into a school. Any negative experience will reinforce that feeling. Maybe you can't make the office secretary friendlier, but you can paint the entryway a bright color, hang a welcome sign, and do a little landscaping around the front door.

Expend less effort trying to get people to attend meetings. Lots of groups evaluate their success based on how many people they attract to meetings. But meetings are a poor gauge of involvement. Would you rather have 30 people at your meeting and six people helping at the school carnival, or the other way around? The point is that parents can do lots of things that will help your group more than just attending a meeting.

Connect with other parent group leaders. Parent group leaders in your own district are dealing with many of the same challenges you face. Getting together to share information and ideas, or even simply to talk and vent, can be rewarding. Make it a point to call leaders from nearby schools. You'll also find lots of like-minded folks to talk to on the message boards at ptotoday.com.

Form a parent involvement committee. If building involvement is your number one concern, you should have some people who spend time thinking about ways to do just that.

Celebrate an achievement (your group's or the school's). People are attracted to success. When things go right, make sure you share the news. When things go right in a big way, throw a big celebration. In a sense, it's good marketing for your group and the school. But it's also a great way to build excitement and momentum.