

VIEWPOINT

How to Develop Parent Coaches

BY JAMES FORNACIARI



James Fornaciari

Although all administrators and their teaching staffs have had to deal with difficult parents, the vast majority of parents prove to be excellent partners. Secondary school principals can make their schools more powerful by developing strong parental partnerships and asking parents to serve as “coaches.” As a teacher in an AP classroom, I have learned to place great stock in the role “parent coaches” can play, which might be defined as parents who reinforce what their children are being taught in school and “coach” their children on how to succeed in school.

Just as a football coach needs parents to speak positively after a difficult loss, it is also important for parent coaches to speak positively after a poor test grade is posted.

I don't just expect parents to be coaches—I actively encourage parents to become coaches at home. My school, Glenbard West High School in suburban Chicago, encourages parents to be involved in many events and booster organizations because they are a valued component of our school culture. However, my experience in a rigorous classroom calls for parents to go beyond the traditional involvement and calls for even greater parental engagement. I expect my parent coaches to relive the Renaissance and the French Revolution with their children at the dinner table each night.

Parent coaching at home will vary depending on the course and grade level of the student. For example, I ask the parents of my European History AP students to ask questions about course themes, historical figures, and events. By engaging in these types of discussions at home, students can become aware of weak points in their understanding and research and make an effort to correct them. A middle school math teacher might prescribe a few math games that parents can play with their children in order to sharpen skill development.

Many of the most beneficial forms of coaching at home can benefit children of all ages and coursework. These would include (but are not limited to) providing encouragement, teaching time management, teaching organizational skills, and discussing distractions. Parents can offer valuable input in these areas without having to be an expert in a particular subject. One of the traits I encourage parent coaches to foster in their children is that of resilience.

Early in the school year, I share a powerful video clip with parents from University of Pennsylvania researcher Angela Duckworth. Duckworth's research offers valuable insight into the all-important trait of resilience, or what Duckworth calls “grit.” In many schools, a large percentage of AP students often fail to sit for the exam. I am proud to say that 99 percent of my students have taken the AP European History exam over the years. Why are my results different? It is due in large part to parent coaches who understood that developing grit would be a lifelong benefit to their children.

TAKE THESE STEPS TO DEVELOP PARENT COACHES:

Use your school newsletter and website to highlight the contributions that parent coaches are giving in your school. The newsletter can also be used to include a recent article outlining some of the traits or characteristics you are asking parents to encourage.

Take advantage of staff meetings to emphasize the value of parent coaches and

to highlight staff members who are finding success with using parents as coaches.

Partner with other schools in the district or region to bring in speakers who can offer valuable insight into some of the areas in which parents most need support. These special events could be made available to both staff and parents.

Build on Back-to-school Night

How can schools get this kind of “buy-in” from parents? First, make sure parents understand the nature and objectives of the course. Strong teachers take advantage of back-to-school night each year to inform parents about the value and benefits of their course and to enlist their partnership in the mission. During their presentation, teachers should outline the important aspects of the course, such as the testing schedule, homework, and writing requirements. It is essential that teachers clearly discuss the time and effort required for students to be successful.

It is important to emphasize that the course will be a challenge, and that at some point, parents might begin to question the mission. The teacher should let the parents know that this kind of reaction is not uncommon when students are truly

challenged with high expectations. Encourage parents to be proactive in contacting the teacher once a concern arises; this can go a long way in developing a trusting relationship. I also strongly encourage my parent coaches to remain positive with their children.

Just as a football coach needs parents to speak positively after a difficult loss, it is also important for parent coaches to speak positively after a poor test grade is posted. Teachers will find that most parents will actually become more invested stakeholders in the process.

To help teachers better capitalize on the back-to-school program, administrators should be sure to address its importance during new teacher orientation and during faculty meetings prior to the start of the school year. Consider employing professional learning community teams to discuss expectations

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PARENT SUPPORT STRATEGIES

As principal, be as inclusive as possible in developing parent coaches by anticipating parents' needs.

- Have interpreters and child care on site for important events (like back-to-school night).
- Consider providing meals/snacks and transportation in conjunction with these events.
- Some schools have found success in bridging communication gaps by enlisting the help of "neighborhood captains" who ensure that all families are given up-to-date information on important school events.

for back-to-school night. Principals also can help their teachers by creating a schedule that allows enough time for teachers to really engage parents in meaningful discussion.

Make the Call


Another easy way to build parent coaches involves making phone calls. Be sure to remind teachers that this simple strategy should not be used only as a way to contact the parents of struggling students. I have found great benefit in making positive phone calls to parents. By taking the time to contact parents and offer positive feedback, a teacher can develop an even greater relationship with parents. If parents were not sold initially on their new coaching responsibility, they will be after receiving positive feedback from a caring, trusted teacher.

Of course, teachers may also have to phone parents to discuss a challenging student, but most parents will appreciate the efforts to include them in their child's education, and they will be eager to develop a coaching plan for improvement.

Tap Into Technology

As principals continue to invest in powerful technologies to improve instruction, they can also encourage teachers to use technology to foster stronger partnerships with parent coaches. Understanding that most parents lead busy lives, giving them quick and easy access to information is vital to building a strong connection with 21st-century parents.

Encourage teachers to take a few minutes to send an email blast containing updates and student highlights. Or, encourage teachers to use social media. I use my AP class Twitter account to update parents on progress. Twitter also serves as a great method to highlight student success stories and a way to share coaching tips.

With a little encouragement and guidance from a supportive administration, teachers will be prepared to truly engage parents as coaches. And with a little extra effort, these partnerships can lead to improved student growth and success. 

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