

Parent Involvement is Critical To Middle School Success And, By the Way, It's Not Just About Volunteering!

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It has been well known for years that parent involvement (PI) increases student success. Nevertheless, research shows parent involvement peaks during the elementary school years and drops off substantially as students move through middle and high school. This is unfortunate because the life-altering physical, psychological, and social changes that students experience during these adolescent years make parent involvement all the more important to both students and parents making it through without losing their minds.

In order to keep your PI momentum going and not be part of a declining statistic, it is important to understand what PI is and how you can stay an involved parent. Contrary to popular belief, parent involvement is not defined by the number of volunteers a school has, nor by the number of hours volunteers work. Rather, parent involvement is defined by six standards each contributing to the success of a student. Descriptions of these standards along with suggestions for putting each into practice follow.

Standard #1 - Communication. *Communication between school and home is 2-way, meaningful and frequent.* This is the most critical of all six PI standards because it is the basis for every other standard. Here are some tips:

- **Take advantage of every opportunity to meet face-to-face with school staff**, whether it is PTA meetings, School Council meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or other school events (even social events), make it a priority to be there. In-person opportunities build familiar, trusting relationships something very difficult to do with email and phone calls.
- **Set up appointments with teachers and staff when a concern or issue arises.** Remember, it is easier to solve big problems when they are still little, so don't wait to talk until a little problem grows bigger.
- **Phone the front office to speak to a staff member on urgent concerns, but use email for all else.** Staff email addresses follow an easy format based on the first and last name of the staff member: (e.g., firstname.lastname@cowetaschools.org).
- **Check with your student daily for any communications** from teachers, staff or the PTA and respond promptly. Much depends on you getting the paperwork from your student in the first place. Take care of paperwork as soon as you get it or write down deadlines on your calendar; this prevents misplaced or forgotten papers.
- **Check the www.SchoolNotes.com website for classroom news.** You can even sign up to be notified each time a teacher updates the information!
- **Join the SRMS PTA.** Newsletters are e-mailed home every month. Members with e-mail addresses also get important news and updates weekly!
- **Visit our website at www.cowetaschools.org/srms**

Standard #2 - Parenting. *Parenting skills are promoted and supported.* It takes a whole new set of skills and understanding to be a middle school parent. People always find it hard to believe what “good kids from good homes” will do. In fact, it is not uncommon for parents to have blinders on when it comes to their children. As evidence, consider a recent Atlanta Journal Constitution article on teen sub-stance use that showed that parents believed that their teen's use and access to alcohol and drugs was much lower than what their own students reported to exist. To be prepared for anything when it comes your way during these difficult years, follow this important tip:

- **Take advantage of every opportunity to learn what you need to know as a middle school parent, so you can deal with student health, safety, and education issues before they become urgent problems!** This includes capitalizing on the many sources parents have for learning offered by local PTAs.

Standard #3 - Student Learning. *Parents are an integral role in assisting student learning.* A home environment that positively encourages student achievement is crucial. A few basic tips can help:

- **Talk to your child about what is going on at school**, in their classes, with homework and projects, extracurricular activities. Car time is often an easy time to chat the kids up.
- **Listening is much more important at this stage than telling your teen what to do.** Be supportive and positive in your communications. Logical reasoning takes on a whole new dimension with the developing teen brain. Listening to their contorted version of a logical argument will help you understand problems more than just calling your student “crazy.” Raising your voice at any time shuts down a child's ability to hear what you are saying, so keep the conversation going using the “indoor” voice you reminded your student to use all throughout elementary school.
- **Help your student stay organized with homework and projects.** Even the most organized students can change drastically when their brains and bodies go into chaos mode during the middle school years. Work together to achieve a healthy balance of school-work, diverse extracurricular and social activities, as well as free time.
- **Start exploring and defining with your students their career interests.** With your student, school staff, working together you can plan to make your student's post-high school dream come true. This effort is helped by the following tip...
- **Use every opportunity to relate what your students are learning to real life.** Students are motivated to excel in even the most “boring” subjects when they see how their learning helps them in the real world.

Standard #4 - Volunteering. *Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought.* Let's face it - volunteering IS different in middle school! Your kids don't want to see you there and the school has much different needs for volunteers. This doesn't mean volunteers aren't needed, or that you have to totally avoid your student while at school. Here are some ideas that keep you involved with your student while volunteering:

- **Sign up to work on a school committee or activity together.** Student volunteers contribute to the success of many PTA and school committees and activities. Your student may not thank you or recognize your efforts, but the respect and appreciation your student's friends show will make up for it *and* impress your student.
- **Volunteer for a committee that needs help outside the school campus and schedule.** Many volunteer needs can be completed during a gap in your workday or at home. Contact Lisa Colomb at 770-502-1633 or info@srmspta.org to find out where your unique talents, interests, and time constraints can best be used.

Standard #5 - School Decision-making and Advocacy. *Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.* A healthy, happy, safe, and well-educated adult doesn't just happen. Raising children is a series of decisions, each of which should be made with enough information to make a good decision. When it comes to your student's education it is important to stay informed and contribute to the success of our schools by actively contributing to decisions. Here are some ideas:

- **Attend open meetings on school issues and election forums.** Our elected school board, state and federal legislators make laws and policies that affect the quality of education our students receive with every decision they make. Stay informed on the issues, candidates' qualifications and views, then hold them accountable for performance after they are elected! Make your voice heard at every opportunity!
- **Support your local school council.** Every school in Georgia is required to have a council of school administrators and elected representatives of parents, teachers, and business leaders. The council's mission is to address academic achievement issues at schools. Bring up issues you want addressed with your parent representative or bring the issue up yourself at a school council meeting. The Smokey Road School Council meets at 9:00 a.m. every third Wednesday of alternating months. The last two meetings of this school year are on March 21 and May 16.

Standard #6 - Community Collaboration. *Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.* Learning doesn't happen just at school or home. Our community is full of great learning opportunities, whether they are academic, athletic, social, spiritual, cultural or creative. Some ideas:

- Pick a family philanthropy to support financially and as volunteers.
- Explore the various resources in your community that can help your student develop as a student and as a safe, healthy, happy adult. Museums, cooking classes, recreational areas, houses of worship, clubs etc., all have something positively enriching that can help facilitate a healthy relationship with your student if you look for one that you can enjoy together.

As individuals, we often set standards for our own personal goals, whether with respect to careers, health, community involvement, or personal interests. Consider adopting these standards as part of your personal parenting goals. By doing so, you'll find that your life, and that of your middle schooler, will be enriched in many ways, including academically!