

THE VALUE OF A PARENT SURVEY

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As a school group, we can move mountains. We can plan events, gather support, and raise funds to build \$20,000 computer labs, \$45,000 playgrounds, and much more. When we work together and combine our experiences, talents, and viewpoints, the result can be several events that fulfill our group's plan.

Working together as a group is important, but as a parent group leader, knowing how to access information and capitalize on key talents of individuals can mean even greater success. How do you tap into this information? Ask. Yes, it's as simple as that. Ask your school parents, teachers, and administrative staff to complete a questionnaire early in the school year and provide you with the information.

By surveying these individuals you'll be able to determine if you have access to an accountant that could help with finances, a skilled writer who could write articles for the website or newsletter, or perhaps someone who works construction and could help build games for the annual carnival.

By obtaining contact information from parents and staff and information about where they work and their special skills early in the school year, you will have on file a valuable reference tool - a tool you can use to your advantage all year long and may even use as the center of a profitable fundraising event.

The purpose of the survey is to collect contact information as well as gather information that could help operations, plan fundraisers and events better, and plan better fundraisers and events. Include requests for the following:

- student name(s) and grade(s)
- parent names
- address
- phone numbers
- both parents' email addresses
- both parents' work information (company name, address, type of business, position)
- hobbies, talents, and special skills (photographer, artist, graphic designer, gardener, etc.)
- the PTO programs with which the parents would be interested in helping

As you can see, the questionnaire includes the basic contact information and allows parents to indicate exactly on which committees they may be willing to assist; but even more importantly, this form asks parents to provide their occupation, hobbies, talents, and special skills. This is a very important part of the questionnaire that many schools neglect to include.

Your classroom teachers, specialists, and administrative staff should absolutely be included when you distribute the questionnaire. You will find that they have many skills that go far beyond their positions at the school.

The information you collect will be useful all year long and into the future. A basic filing cabinet or 3-ring binder located somewhere at the school that all present and future board members can easily access is a convenient system. Unless you have the ability to protect personal information placed in an online database, I suggest the old lock and key filing cabinet.

Initially, two board members reviewed every returned questionnaire. Any person that clearly expressed interest in helping out on a particular committee was immediately contacted by phone by the chairperson to welcome them to the committee, provide them with the meeting dates, and discuss exactly how they could help. The surveys were kept on file for later reference by committee chairpersons planning events - events like the one I planned for a private K through 8 school.

This past year, I helped plan an educational conference as a school fundraiser. Being a brand new venture for this school, we were starting from scratch. We didn't have any files filled with prior speaker and sponsor names, forms, or schedules. We had to create every piece of promotional material and pull together a group of qualified people who could make it a success.

The conference format was such that we were planning to host sixteen, 60-minute class presentations on business marketing. This meant that we needed to find sixteen qualified speakers to present each class. Building the program from the ground up, we began by making an initial list of topics we wanted to offer. These were based on current trends such as Building a Website, Introduction to Graphic Design, Blogging to Build Your Client Base, and Owning a Franchise.

This is where the questionnaire that was sent out earlier in the school year became a valuable tool; which, by the way, also resulted in an increase in parent involvement. Let me show you how.

The questionnaire we distributed was a one-page form distributed to school parents, teachers, and administrative staff. The form was initially placed in the staff's mailboxes and sent home via the students' backpacks. Each week for about four weeks, reminders to return the forms were emailed to parents and staff, with the original questionnaire form attached to each email. Next year we plan to also hand it out to parents at the annual welcome-back-to-school night in early September and personally ask them to complete it that evening.

We received about 20% of the surveys back. While this number may seem low, further analysis shows that the 20% was equal to about 40 individuals. Since it included information from both parents in the household, at least half were names that had not actively been involved in our parent group in the past. Also, keep in mind that this list is cumulative. Each year the survey is distributed, means that names and information will be added to these files. Even when school parents turn into alumni, they can still be used as valuable references.

In the instance of the conference, we were not only able to book several speakers by matching up the class topics with parents who were skilled in those particular areas, we were also able to add to the list of presentation topics based on parents' and staff's experience.

You will be amazed at the expertise and talents people possess. Qualities and experience you may not

have thought of otherwise unless they told you about them. I found that many people didn't even realize they had something of value to offer until I explained that we needed professionals to speak on business marketing topics.

Let me give you an example. The questionnaires I received back showed that one parent was an experienced seller on Ebay. This immediately sparked my interest as it fit in well with our overall business marketing topic. When I asked her if she would be a speaker at a class titled *How to Sell on Ebay*, her response to me was an overwhelming, "Wow, of course I will. When I filled out your questionnaire, I didn't think I had anything to offer, but now I see I do."

Our surveys revealed that we had a website developer who could teach a class on setting up a business website, a photographer who could teach a class on how to take better photos for your website or blog, a small business owner who could teach a class on the steps to take to set up a small business, and a social media expert who could speak on using social media to effectively increase your customer base.

As you can see, this questionnaire along with the conference fundraiser opened up opportunities for more parents to share their valuable experience and help the school. We received positive results by knowing who to approach and then personally asking them to get involved. As a matter of fact, they were actually honored to have their talents recognized by others and were happy to help.