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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two ways that schools can enhance their reputation: the annual back-to-school night and recognition programs for alumni. For back-to-school night, guests should be welcomed with enthusiasm and parents should be informed of the school's achievements. Since many staff members have never been coached on parent-friendly behavior, teachers should receive training for dealing with parents. Teachers should greet parents at the door, should make sure that their presentation fits into the allotted time, should show enthusiasm for the students and the curriculum, should dress professionally when dealing with parents and the community, and should be prepared to answer some of the common questions that parents ask. Parents will also be interested in seeing how graduates of the school have fared in their professional lives. A wall of fame can serve such a purpose. A key element for a successful wall of fame is the formation of an organizing committee to set criteria for induction. Once the honorees are selected, the school can host a reception for inductees, and recognition plaques can be prominently displayed in a special area. Furthermore, the honorees can interact with students, thus serving as inspirational role models. (RJM)

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How To Enhance Your School's Reputation

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How To Enhance Your School's Reputation

Looking for ways to build the positive reputation of your school? Each day your staff members are in situations that can make or break the reputation of your school. As a school leader it is one of your responsibilities to create a pro-community relations attitude and positive effective training for your staff.

Two common events that enhance a school's reputation and create confidence are annual back-to-school nights and recognition programs for alumni. Both events can boost your school's image if executed properly.

Annual Back-to-School Night

You may have a good back-to-school program now, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement. A great back-to-school night means parents feel confident about the school and their kid's teachers when they return home. A great program means they feel attending the meeting was a good investment of their time, they know their children will have a successful school year, and they are glad their kids go to your school.

Tips for a Successful Back-to-School Night

• *Welcome Guests with Enthusiasm*

Enthusiasm is infectious and sets the tone for the evening. In addition to welcoming attendees, principals should thank the group for choosing their school. Parents today have more options than ever before about where to educate their kids. An acknowledgement that you are pleased to have their children and will do all you can to help them succeed starts the year off on a good note.

• *Give 'Em Something To Brag About*

Just about every parent loves to have some great facts to gloat about when talking about their kids' schools—especially when chatting with parents who send their kids to prestigious or well-recognized schools. Academic achievements, curriculum, credentials, accolades of staff members, and success stories of former students all fall into this important category. Remember, if you don't provide this information, who will?

• *Provide Back-to-School Night Training for Teachers*

Many staff members have never been coached on parent-friendly behavior, and some say that their fear of facing a classroom of parents ranks on a level with a root canal procedure. Provide training or information for your staff to help them feel confident about the encounter.

• *Greet Parents at the Classroom Door*

Make eye contact, shake hands, and thank each one for coming. Do this as quickly as possible so parents can get to their seats. Do not put sign-up sheets or handouts outside the classroom door because lines may form and parents will miss half the presentation.

• *Plan, Time, and Practice Presentations—12 Minutes Is 12 Minutes*

If 12 minutes is allotted for a presentation, help teachers understand they must plan for it. More often than not during a back-to-school night, the bell rings and a teacher says, "I can't believe our time is up! If you have questions, contact me," without telling parents how to do this. Such comments cause parents to question a teacher's time management skills and ability to plan regular lessons. Encourage teachers to practice their presentations, have all pertinent information on a handout, and use the time with parents to discuss goals for teaching their children.

• *Show Enthusiasm for Students and Subjects*

Remember that most parents have an image of a great educator—and that image probably includes a caring attitude toward students, a love of the subject taught, and the ability to bring the subject to life for students. Parents remember enthusiastic principals and teachers, and that enthusiasm can go a long way in making a great impression. Educators should be themselves, but turn up the enthusiasm a notch or two during back-to-school night.

• *Provide a Handout*

A handout is very important because it reinforces the message of the presentation. If parents miss something during the presentation, they can refer to the handout and find who to contact for more information. Encourage staff to distribute handouts that cover their presentations—class curriculum, special projects, deadlines, homework amount and philosophy, class expectations, and grading—as well as professional information about themselves. They should also include key contact numbers and preferred times and methods of communication. Demonstrate your commitment to helping students learn and make sure to communicate your expectations of students and their families.

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Tips for Principals

• *Dress Appropriately*
Times have changed, and casual attire is acceptable in many schools today. However, ensure that you and your staff dress professionally when dealing with parents and the community. Dress like a professional and more parents will be inclined to think of you that way.
• *Avoid Killer Phrases*
The following is a list of phrases to avoid. The rationale—from a parent's perspective—is self-evident:

- "I'm sorry I don't have enough handouts." (A sign of botched planning.)
- "Your kids are great, many of them know more about _____ than I do." (Some parents will question why you are teaching their child if you don't know the subject matter.)
- "See me after this session for more information." (This means they will miss the next teacher's session, and your next presentation will begin late.)
- "I don't know what we will be teaching next week." (The truth can hurt.)
- "I'm not sure what all these standardized tests are for." (If you're not sure of an answer, refer parents to someone who can provide that information.)
- "I was given this class because they couldn't find anyone else who would teach it." (Not a confidence booster for parents.)

Back-to-school night is one of the key reputation-building moments for every school. Utilize this opportunity to make a positive impression on your community.

Wall of Fame

Here's a project that can serve two purposes—enhancing your school's reputation and raising funds. Your school can capitalize on the success of graduates by creating a wall of fame. Consider asking your school's foundation or other major funding group to sponsor the program. Key elements for a successful wall of fame include:

1. Form an organizing committee to set criteria for induction to the wall of fame. Include community leaders as well as school staff, and make sure the selection criteria encompasses all areas of accomplishment—not just financial success. The best programs honor 3-10 graduates each year, including doctors, lawyers, clergy, and teachers. Other honorees may include those involved in community activities, outstanding citizens, professional entertainers, or sports figures. The important thread is that all honorees are well respected and attribute a portion of their success to the time they spent at your high school.
2. Host a reception or induction event. Some schools celebrate the induction with a community luncheon or dinner, while others host a black-tie community dance with proceeds covering expenses plus a donation to the foundation. Paid advertising in a keepsake program is also a good way to offset costs and raise funds.
3. Arrange for honorees to interact with students. Consider having each year's inductees visit with current students and invite local media outlets to cover the interaction. This helps students understand the steps they need to take to be successful, and provides an opportunity for the school to generate positive media attention. Publish anecdotes by the honorees about memories of their school years for the community to read.
4. Set aside a special area in your school for plaques of the winners. Your wall of fame will become a special spot for parents and students as they learn about the successful tradition and wonderful reputation of your school.

Back-to-school nights and the wall of fame are two events that will draw positive attention to your school. In today's competitive—and sometimes negative—climate, all schools need positive attention to build confidence, morale, pride, and a lasting reputation.

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