

Getting Parents Involved in the School Library Media Center

Article

by Julie Harris, May 2015

Parents offer a powerful voice in our schools. It is important to maintain a positive relationship with them and keep the lines of communication open. When parents know you are working diligently to develop and implement a library program that helps their children be successful, they will become important advocates for your library program. Some parents might not be sure how to connect with the school library media center, where to begin, or when. The following are ways in which to communicate with parents throughout the school year and help them become involved in their child's education.

1. SPECIAL SCHOOL EVENTS

a. *Open House:*

Open House Night is often scheduled at the beginning of the year, giving parents the opportunity to visit classrooms and the library media center. Host an orientation session in which parents can get to know the media center. As they enter, introduce yourself and maintain a welcoming attitude. Answer any questions they might have, and show them what your media center has to offer. Direct them to various areas you have set up:

1. Project a continuous PowerPoint presentation about your library program and what a typical classroom or individual student visit would be like.
2. Place brochures on the checkout counter which provide information on school library usage.
3. Have computer monitors on so parents and their children can search the catalog, student software programs, and library databases.
4. Set sheets on the counter or near the computer stations of favorite age-appropriate websites.
5. Select a shelf that can be prominently seen and display books with a decorative sign that reads "New Books."
6. On a table, place notebooks labeled by grade level that contain poems or stories students have written.
7. Hand out a library newsletter that includes library events, the school media center website, hours of operation, and the e-mail and phone number of the media specialist. Additionally, create a special "Parent's Page" with tips for reading. Include popular children's/YA book lists by age level along with mini reviews of these books.
8. Let parents know to contact you if they have any questions, concerns, or if their child needs additional help such as locating specific books, researching a topic for a classroom assignment, or citing sources for a bibliography or works cited page.

b. *PTA/PTO Meetings:*

Talk with your principal about setting up a PTA/PTO meeting, preferably early in the school year, that focuses on the library media center. To encourage attendance, let teachers know that the grade level or homeroom with the most parents in attendance will receive a monetary prize to be used for the students in the winning class. Enlist local businesses such as banks, restaurants, or stores to provide you with donations so you can offer a larger monetary prize. During the meeting, show parents what you have to offer related to their child's educational interests and needs.

Present a colorful, eye-catching PowerPoint that gives an introduction to your library media center. Areas you can include are:

1. Learning is the media center's mission. Students are the number one priority.
2. The media specialist helps prepare students to be successful in the 21st century.
3. The media center is a place where students can develop lifelong learning and information skills.
4. Students are offered access to print materials (books, magazines, newspapers) as well as a network of technology such as online resources, computerized card catalog, databases, and electronic reference material.
5. Research indicates a dramatic impact on student achievement when a strong library program is in place which includes:
 - A. A full-time professional media specialist on staff
 - B. Students who use the library on a regular basis
 - C. School library media specialists collaborating with classroom teachers
6. Student skills that are emphasized in the media center:

- A. Applying critical thinking skills
 - B. Using multiple forms of literacy (print, digital format)
 - C. Integrating information
 - D. Using different technologies
 - E. Finding reliable, authoritative information
 - F. Using information resources in an ethical way²¹
7. Provides instruction to classes, small groups, and individually
8. Special programs offered:
- A. Story hours
 - B. Book/writing/poetry clubs
 - C. Book fairs
 - D. Guest authors/poets/speakers
 - E. Visits from the local public librarian
9. Together the parents and library media specialist can accomplish the following:
- A. Help the child develop a love of reading.
 - B. Enable the child to have the help and resources needed to succeed in school.
 - C. Organize special programs such as family or literacy night.
 - D. Allows parents to volunteer as aides in the library media center.
10. Discuss the library media center website:
- A. Provide a handout to go along with the PowerPoint that provides the website address, your e-mail and phone number, and hours of operation.
 - B. Show where the website details library events, book lists with grade levels and summaries, and other library-related information.

c. Family Literacy Night:

Parents are the first teachers in a child's life and play a huge role in helping kids develop a love of reading. Many hours have been spent on reading before the child starts school. Once a child enters school, the media specialist builds on this foundation and becomes a partner with parents to help foster and support lifelong learning skills. The school library media center plays an important role in the school's curriculum and provides students learning support, recreational reading time, access to technology, and research resources. The media specialist can organize evening library sessions during the school year. You can develop family literacy programs based on seasonal, holiday, or special themes. If prizes are included, you could offer books, book bags, library pencils, coupons, or gift certificates. Ideas include:

a. Younger Readers

1. In December use a winter theme like *Frozen*. Have some of your favorite winter-themed books on display. Parents and students can share books together. When the media specialist reads a book at the end of the session, provide hot chocolate and cookies for patrons to enjoy.
2. Have a "Child Safety" evening where students and parents can browse, read or check out safety books on display or from a library search done on the catalog. Toward the end of the program, have a firefighter or police officer talk about home and school safety tips with children and parents. Pass out safety brochures to each family.
3. In February set up an "I Love Books and PJs" evening. Children wear pajamas, bring in favorite books and a stuffed animal, and read their books with the family. Toward the end of the session, parents may want to share a book with the group. Drinks and snacks can be provided during the reading session.
4. Have parents and their children produce "skinny books." This can be done by cutting out pictures from a magazine and writing a story to go along with the pictures, or cutting out pages from a discarded easy-to-read book. Provide a laminated cardboard cover for the book. Skinny books can be housed in the media center and read by students or checked out to take home.
5. After reading a story to students, the media specialist can have students design puppets from a paper bag based on the story. During *Family Literacy Night* students can perform a puppet show while the media specialist reads the story to the audience.
6. Other Ideas:
 - - Have a cakewalk with new books as prizes.
 - - Invite local authors, the principal, public librarians, police officers, firefighters, military personnel, athletes, doctors, nurses, local business owners, or senior citizens in to read favorite children's books.
 - - Organize a reading game night with prizes given out to winners. Prize donations may be given by the media specialist, local businesses, or the public library.

- - During National Library Week, set up a book fair for parents to help their child make book selections to purchase.
- - Let parents and their children write a short story together. Provide material so they can design a cover. If time permits, have them share their stories. Put the writing piece in a special short story container for other students to read during the school day.

b. Teen Readers

1. Set up computer literacy activities that students and parents can work on together, such as setting up e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter, Internet and database research strategies, homework help, job or college searching, or reading electronic media such as e-books, e-magazines, or e-newspapers.
2. Organize a paperback book exchange with the help of parents. Parents can collect donated paperbacks from home, family, and friends to be dropped off at the school library. Other donations can be collected from students, staff members, public library book sales (paperbacks are often sold for 25 cents or less), community members, or local businesses. On paperback exchange night, try to have at least 5-10 dozen or more book donations. Teens can bring in one or more paperback books to exchange. Parents or the media specialist can provide refreshments for those who attend.
3. To prepare for a digital storytelling night, the media specialist and classroom teacher can work with teens from a certain grade level on composing a digital story using writing pieces, audio, and video production techniques. A digital camera and Windows or MAC software can be used to create the story. When digital stories are finished, an evening program can be scheduled in which parents can attend along with teachers, students, and other interested community members.
4. Organize a "Reading Game Night" for teens and their families. Have each family bring a game that involves reading. Some games might include Scrabble, Monopoly, the Game of Life, or Trivial Pursuit Junior Edition. The media specialist can have extra games on hand. Provide prizes for those students who win.
5. Develop a *Jeopardy* PowerPoint presentation that focuses on reading categories such as Authors, Book Titles, Quotes, Fiction, Nonfiction, and Book Awards. Enlist the help of an academic coach to set up a system for participants to respond to clues by buzzing in. Have the coach keep score during each game. Invite teens and their parents, teachers, students, and others who are interested. The game is played like the television show in which students are presented with reading clues in the form of an answer, and students must phrase their response as a question. Features of the game include categories paired with money or points, hidden daily double boxes, single and/or double *Jeopardy* games, and a final *Jeopardy* answer which determines the winner. Winners of each game receive a new book or prize. A final tournament can be held at the end of the year to determine a school winner.
6. Other Ideas:
 - - Invite local authors to read or speak during your Family Literacy Night. Conduct a book signing at the end of the program.
 - - Set up book-themed events for teens and parents based on sports, holidays, mysteries, adventure, fitness, travel, or health and nutrition. Give out book prizes based on the theme of the event.
 - - Organize a skit night where teens perform short skits of their favorite books or characters. Refreshments can be served at the end of the skits.
 - - Plan a poetry night that features a local poet who shares his or her poems and writing experiences. A poetry workshop can be set up for the poet and media specialist to help teens compose their own poems. Plan a follow-up evening so that parents can attend and listen to students sharing their poetry.
 - - Set up arts and crafts tables to make seasonal items. Enlist the help of parents to provide supplies or help students make an arts/crafts project. Display the items in the library.

2. PARENT VOLUNTEERS

The media specialist is in an ideal position to set up a schedule for parent volunteers, whether it is during school hours or for an after-school program. Positive learning experiences can be created by involving parents. At the beginning of the year conduct a meeting to give parents general training tips on volunteer work. Create a brochure for the parents to refer to throughout the school year on various areas, such as listening to children read, tackling tough words, reading aloud, choosing books, making reading fun, and tutoring tips.

Encourage fathers to be volunteers. Along with the activities outlined in the brochure, they can give a short presentation about one of their favorite books, what reading has meant to them in their lives, and how reading has helped them on their educational path and/or on the job.²⁴ Activities for volunteer work include:

1. *Tutoring Students*
 - A parent can read a book aloud and ask comprehension questions while reading.
 - Listen to a student read and proctor if needed.
 - Give out weekly spelling words where the student spells the words out loud and then writes them down.
 - Assist with reading homework.
 - Show word flashcards to practice vocabulary words.
2. *School Library Book Collection*
 - Help students use the catalog to locate books.

- Shelf books for the media specialist.
- Read a book out loud to a small group or individual student.
- Prepare new books by helping the media specialist stamp books with the name of the library on these areas of the book: inside front and back cover, on the title page, at the bottom of a page the media specialist has selected, and along the outside edges. Assist in covering the book with a protective cover.
- Help the media specialist weed books. Books may be weeded due to usage (last date stamped in the book), copyright date, or condition of the book's exterior. The media specialist can decide what books to withdraw after parents have pulled them off the shelf.

3. FUNDRAISING EVENTS

School media center budgets are not always adequate to help provide the media center with a full range of both print (book) and electronic resources (e-book access, tablets, or online database subscriptions). Some fundraising activities that parents can help the media specialist organize are a schoolwide book sale, an arts and crafts fair, a golf scramble, or collecting monetary donations from local businesses.

4. LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER WEBSITE

With so much of today's communication taking place online, setting up a website would enable parents to stay informed. Check to see that the school's home page has a link to the media center. Make sure the library website is easy to access and navigate. Along with your contact information, include some of these areas: catalog, research strategies for students, tools for accomplishing homework assignments, recommended books for different age levels, special media center events, and parenting material.

Take a few minutes every day to check your e-mails and phone calls. Send back a prompt response. If a parent has a particular concern, set up a conference during your planning time or after school so any issue can be resolved in a timely manner.

5. KEEPING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

While the media specialist works with the entire student body and may only see students once a week (elementary level) or when they visit the library (middle school/secondary levels), contact can still be maintained with parents. Some benefits derived from parent involvement are:

- - Research indicates that children perform better in terms of academic achievement when parents are involved in their educational experiences. Keeping lines of communication open with parents can help the media specialist better understand each child and their educational needs.
- - A school media center is the learning hub in a school with a variety of print and electronic resources. When parents become familiar with these resources (books, magazines, newspapers, computers, catalog, school library website, reference books, online access, URLs, databases), the parent is better able to give their child assistance at home.
- - No matter what age or grade level a student is in, reading remains center stage in a child's education. Whether reading for enjoyment or for schoolwork, how well a child makes this transition each year will determine much about the quality of their lives in the future. The school library media specialist is one of the most effective teachers in the school to help develop a student's reading skills.

The school library media center is central to teaching and learning in a school. When the media specialist establishes effective lines of communication with parents, it will not only give parents the opportunity to be more involved in their child's education, but it creates a positive impact on student achievement and lifelong learning skills.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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