

## **Build community support by inviting people into your schools**

If you want the community to know what's happening in your classrooms – your successes and your challenges – consider the following “friend raising” activities schools around the country are using with great results:

### **Principal for a School Day**

Identifying and inviting community leaders to spend part or all of a school day with your principals is a good way to show key people in your community what it takes to run a school. Making them a “school leader” lets them see the student learning in your classrooms and the challenges your schools face on a daily basis.

Key community leaders experience a principal's schedule and the diversity of issues that come up during a school day – discipline, employee relations, maintenance and food service issues, etc. And they have a front-row view of the variety of programs and learning activities in the classrooms.

Participants shadow the principal as he or she addresses each issue and task. This shadowing helps start an ongoing dialogue about what participants are seeing and experiencing. Afterward, participants gather at noon or at the end of the school day to discuss their experiences. The session is designed for district staff to get feedback about what participants learned and saw that's different from when they were in school. It's also an opportunity to discuss ways these leaders' businesses and organizations might partner with the schools on future projects and activities.

Organizing a Principal for a School Day experience requires:

- Commitment from building principals to participate.
- Identification of key community leaders to invite.
- Personal invitations to these leaders asking them to participate. These invitations need to include a combination of face-to-face, written and phone contacts.
- Sponsors or a budget for the lunch or an after-the-school-day reception.
- Follow-up thank yous to participants and participating principals. Handwritten thank you notes that include a certificate and picture of the person with the principal are most appropriate.

### **Senior Tours**

Are there neighborhoods, retirement communities or senior centers in your district? If there are, get acquainted with the neighborhood associations, managers or activity directors to plan a Senior Tour of the school district. Organizing a tour lets seniors see your schools from the inside and gain a better understanding of how their tax dollars are spent to educate children.

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As you start the tour, be sure to explain what they will see. Schools have changed dramatically since seniors were students. They may need an introduction to certain programs and teaching strategies before they can understand what is going on and how certain activities improve old practices. Be sure their visit includes an opportunity to learn about the business side of school operations, as well as an opportunity to eat lunch with students.

Some districts organize senior tour experiences as a superintendent's bus tour of the district to give seniors the opportunity to see school facilities and programs in operation and provide an opportunity for the superintendent to talk with these community members informally and answer their questions.

Organizing a Senior Tour is similar to organizing a principal for a school day experience. It requires:

- Commitment to participate from principals, program administrators and the transportation department.
- Identification of seniors to invite.
- Personal invitations to seniors asking them to participate. These invitations need to include a combination of face-to-face, written and phone contacts.
- Sponsors or a budget for the lunch.
- Follow-up thank yous to participants and participating principals, program administrators and the bus driver. Handwritten thank you notes with a picture of the person engaged with students make the best and most lasting impression.

**Other ways to bring seniors into your schools include:**

- Invite them to a Grandparents Day program, to have lunch or breakfast with students, to participate in an oral history project, to share their life stories or talents with students in a particular class or grade.
- Offer opportunities to the community, especially seniors, to use school facilities: the track, school grounds, gym facilities or hallways for walking or other exercise programs; a school library, a computer lab for high speed Internet access or other school resource (art facilities including the kiln, wood or metal shops). Some districts have even included a senior center as part of new school building projects.
- Offer services seniors may need, such as car servicing and repair in a high school automotive shop or computer courses taught by students.
- Provide free admission and invite seniors to attend sports, cultural, special academic (science fair) or social events. (In one high school, the older seniors are invited to an afternoon "prom" the same day as the school's "senior prom," so they can enjoy the same decorations and dancing during daylight hours.)
- Ask seniors to volunteer as tutors or as teachers in lifelong learning classes; to serve on a school committee or as an advisor to a school youth group or become a member of the school's booster club; to assist in establishing and tending a community garden on school grounds.

**Bring your schools to the community:**

- Taking school musical or theatrical groups to perform in community venues is always popular, but consider adding students who can talk about various academic programs to your list of available speakers for community groups.
- Establish and advertise a "students for hire" program, available to seniors, single parents or others who need someone to do yard- or housework, weatherize their homes for winter, shovel snow or take care of animals when they are away.
- If your school has a computer club, ask the club to form a "geek squad," to set up computer systems or help with computer, DVD or other technology issues. Use any charges or donations paid to the club for club activities or additional equipment.

- Enlist students and staff to participate in community food drives, beautification projects and other community efforts.
- If district insurance permits, consider letting the local senior center hire a school bus and driver for transportation to an activity in another community or part of town.

These ideas will help get you started. Use your imagination and your school's resources to add to the list. But, most importantly, make a commitment today to introduce key community leaders and seniors to your schools. Show them your successes and your challenges. Get to know them on a first name basis. The potential for partnerships and support is unlimited.

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