An informal survey of past parent committee members reveals what makes for useful parent meetings.

By Joseph Haviland
For several years now I’ve served on validation teams for the Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools. Validation teams spend three or four days in a member school that is seeking re-accreditation from the association to corroborate the school’s assertion that it meets the association’s standards for continuous growth and improvement. It’s clear that good high schools are not all alike—although they do seem to share much in common. For example, those who seek the association’s “accreditation for growth” agree that students, parents, and the community at large should be invited to join teachers and administrators in shaping the vision of where the school should be headed; determining which paths are to be taken; and deciding how progress is to be measured. The association argues that effective administrators work to create collaborations among the constituencies that compose the school community (Nicklas, DeLucia, & Evans, 2000).

The Survey
Positing that regularly scheduled meetings with parents are valuable instruments for building and maintaining parent interest in and support for the work of the school, I invited those who had served on the parent-teacher executive committees of one member school to answer three questions:

• What purposes are or ought to be served by regularly scheduled home and school meetings?
• What are the elements, features, or characteristics of a successful home-and-school meeting?
• What are the elements, features, or characteristics of an unsuccessful home-and-school meeting?

Twenty-eight invitations went out to men and women who had served as president, vice-president, secretary, or treasurer of the Penncrest High School Parent Teacher Group in Media, PA, sometime between 1975 and 2002. Sixteen people answered all three questions in writing, e-mail messages, telephone calls, or face-to-face conversations. What follows is an attempt to identify what parents want in a parent meeting on the basis of the opinions expressed by these 16 parent executive committee members.

The parent meeting is successful if parents view the time as having been well spent. Time and again, parent group officers voiced the opinion that parents will attend meetings when agendas include activities that are worthwhile for them and that allow for discussions that are meaningful for them. “If I learn anything, even one thing, the meetings are time well spent. Since most parents seem to be so busy, I think it’s important to keep to a schedule, start on time and try to end on time,” says Suzanne Phillips.

Meetings that respect parents’ busy schedules by treating issues squarely and discussions expeditiously and meetings that begin and end on time are almost universally applauded. Principals would do well to ensure that each agenda carries consequential matters, that these matters are addressed in a way that welcomes a broad representation of disparate points of view, and that the agenda is planned in such a way that makes it likely the meeting will end on time.

Several people who responded to the survey were critical of meetings that seemed to drag on interminably. “The successful meeting,” according to Norma Ader, “is kept short and to the point.” Ader noted that one principal with whom she worked fielded parents’ questions and either answered them on the spot or promised to research answers for subsequent meetings. Rumor swapping and speculation were discouraged. This cut out a lot of rambling commentary from ill-informed parents. “Wow,” Ader wrote, “did that cut out a lot of boring time!”

Successful meetings serve to keep parents informed of school happenings. Parents think that meetings have been successful when they feel that they leave with useful and interesting information. Barry Radcliffe observes that because teenagers are often close-mouthed about school affairs at home, the parent meeting is often the first time parents learn about school-related matters of interest and importance. According to Radcliffe, parent meetings that function as a “double channel” of information delivery (i.e., providing parents with information their teenagers have but are loath to share) serve parents well.

Among the kinds of information interviewees cited as contributing to a good meeting were cameo introductions of new school employees their children were likely to encounter, such as new teachers, secretaries, custodians, and food service workers; students speaking about special programs or experiences, such as the Physics Olympics, the upcoming school play, the championship soccer team, or the art major program; foreign exchange students who contrast education in the United States with that in their home countries; the school nurse or school physician, who can answer questions about health issues affecting teenagers; the school psychologist who, in the wake of an adolescent suicide, discussed the signs of adolescent depression; and an explanation of the need for a change in school policy or practice—especially one that the students may have found controversial.

Successful meetings encourage two-way communication. Ann Binder, parent organization president in 1999
and 2000, judges two-way communication a first priority for successful meetings. “The all important purpose of home and school meetings,” Binder said, “should be to facilitate communication between families and schools. There needs to be collaborative effort between them to support students. Parents need to have a voice and be able to ask questions and receive accurate, up-to-date information. This dispels rumors and builds confidence and trust.”... With good teamwork, things get done.” Maureen Fleming, president of the parent organization in 1990 and 1991, echoed the thought: “The purpose of a regularly scheduled parent meeting is for a two-way communication between parents, teachers, and school administrators.”

Ginny Falkenbach observed that the parent meeting may also serve as an opportunity for parents to talk with one another about common interests. For example, a portion of a meeting might be reserved for experienced parents to give tips to inexperienced parents about the college search. On principal instituted the practice of distributing index cards to parents at each monthly meeting. On one side of the card, each parent listed things that were going on in school that were good. These were dubbed “keepers.” And on the opposing side of the card, parents listed things that needed attention. These became known as “stinkers.” The instructions were intentionally left vague in hopes of capturing as broad a range of interest and concern as possible. For some, the keepers-and-stinkers segment of each meeting was a favorite. Each month, lists of keepers and stinkers were distributed in writing to the high school faculty and staff members, the superintendent, the central office staff members, and the school board members. And at year’s end they were submitted to the faculty committee that generated school-improvement goals for the coming year.

Interviewees appreciated principals reserving time on each agenda for parents to ask questions, to have rumors confirmed or refuted, or to voice a concern. More often than not, this was a role reserved for the principal. The principal, according to Sue Ballas, is expected to give parents the “straight skinny.” Principals who deal openly and honestly with parents and who show by word and deed that they value parent input, earn their trust and cooperation.

Several respondents were pleased when their principal devoted time to reviewing a policy or practice in detail and asked parents for suggestions for making it more efficient or effective. This was often cited as an example of how administrators can make parents feel valued as collaborators in the governance of their child’s school.

Successful meetings serve to reinforce or raise the community’s academic ambitions. For 18 years, while shepherding five children through high school, Russ Neithammer served on executive committees of the parent organization, on and off as president. According to Neithammer, parents should “bring to the attention of the principal not only the positive, but also [matters] needing correction and discussion.” By raising concerns, Neithammer felt he was serving the system by bettering the system.

Such service may work both ways. John Crowe Ransom (as cited by Atlas, 1990) observes that “a course ... may never rise above the intellectual passion of its pupils, or their comparative indifference” (p. 79). One wonders whether the same may be said of a community. If, as Sizer (1992) claims, school reform “starts with families, with their communities, with the culture,” principals may wish to consider including in their meetings with parents something that will raise or affirm already appropriately high ambitions for students.

Parents voiced appreciation for having been invited to help select works for inclusion on the list of required summer readings, were stimulated by a discussion of how to help their children acquire the habit of reading, contributed to the development of a list of social skills a student should have mastered by the end of high school, and fashioned a list of motivational sayings they wished to see displayed about the school.

Successful meetings celebrate people and performances worthy of emulation. Parents have heard about special people in the school. Why not invite one from time to time to make a cameo presentation to your parents? Let parents know that their children are spending time with adults in programs of quality. When a new school nurse was hired midway, she was invited to introduce herself and explain the role of the school nurse at the monthly parents’ meeting. And when a member of the staff is published, why not invite him or her to present the article at a parents’ meeting?

Parents may not be aware of some of the programs that make your school special. Why not feature one on the agenda of a parent meeting? Invite the student who made district band or the student whose art work was chosen to hang in county council chambers to describe the selection process and the curriculum that helped refine his or her talents and let parents get caught up in the enthusiasm that accompanies high achievement.

Successful meetings are inclusive; they make every voice feel welcome. A good meeting may be likened to a huddle in which the quarterback invites everyone to hear the play call in hopes that all will contribute to its successful execution. Most of the parents interviewed counted openness and inclusiveness as characteristics of successful meetings. The parents of the top students and the parents of low-achieving students must believe that they are equally welcome in school and that they are equally valued as collaborators in the education of their children.

John Lay observed that, on occasion, parents who have not attended college may feel lost in a school setting or may recoil from what they perceive to be an air of superiority affected by some teachers and some school administrators. By studying the audience and engaging as many parents as
possible in informal conversation before, during, and after the parent meeting, principals may be able to identify parents who feel this way and—with the parent group's executive committee—make a special effort to put these parents at ease and make them feel welcome.

**Good Impressions**

Lay contends that most parents believe that from little firsthand experience they can judge whether their children are spending their days in a happy and productive place. The parent meeting is one of several sources from which those impressions are formed, and principals would be well advised to ensure that their parent meetings yield the proper impression.

These 16 experienced parent-teacher executive committee officers believe that principals who want to encourage collaboration by their students' parents are well advised to conduct regularly scheduled parent meetings that make all parents feel welcome. Such meetings are venues for giving and soliciting ideas and opinions, showcasing what is worthy within the school community, and setting and affirming appropriately high academic and behavioral ambitions for students. Parents view such meetings as time well spent. PL

**References**