

## **PAC is more than just fundraising**

*School Watch by Katherine Wagner  
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Teachers, principals, politicians, and parents speak highly of parental involvement in education.

Indeed, when [51 research studies from 1993-2002](#) were analyzed, the links between family involvement and higher student academic achievement, improved attendance and better behaviour were clear.

All education partners are quick to agree -- parent involvement is a great idea. However, stakeholders are often reading from different dictionaries when defining the term parent involvement.

When the recently drafted Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows school district mission, vision and value statements lacked any reference to parent involvement, local trustee Stepan Vdovine took note and proposed amendments.

"There are still some parents who continue to struggle for a more meaningful involvement and in some cases for simply decent and fair treatment. Parents don't have the protection of a labour union or a professional association and they deserve the recognition from their elected representatives."

The School District #42 Board of Education has not yet decided if it will recognize parental involvement within its guiding principles.

There are six types of parent and family involvement activities proven to improve student achievement. Building support for them into every nook and cranny of our education system is a cost effective way to improve schools.

First and foremost, parenting is essential. When families value education, their children do better at school. Parenting includes supervising to ensure homework is completed, as well as making sure kids get enough sleep and eat nutritious foods.

Second, a key form of parental involvement is providing a home environment which encourages and supports learning. This includes reading with children, providing access to books and a place to study, along with an emphasis on educational experiences.

Parents are children's first and best teachers. Many parents, incorrectly, feel the responsibility for learning shifts entirely to teachers when children start school.

A critical third aspect of parental involvement is effective two-way communication between home and school. The number one predictor of parental involvement is what the school does to encourage it. Most parents will respond to a personal and specific

invitation. In the absence of an invitation, parents should be aware they have a right under B.C.'s School Act, Part 2-2,7(2), to consult with the school about their child's education.

Organized parent structures provide a fourth avenue of involvement. B.C.'s legislated structures are DPAC, PAC, and parent representatives on SPCs. The student achievement potential of these organizations has yet to be fully realized.

In part, this is because organized parental involvement is controversial. Often other stakeholders, including some parents, act like this form of parental involvement is a threat to education rather than a support. It is a short-sighted, Jurassic-era viewpoint.

In reality, parents can often connect with other parents and communities more effectively than a school can.

School District #42 DPAC president Kathy Froelich has some advice for parents. "It is important parents be informed about their roles, rights and responsibilities. They also need to understand the roles, rights and responsibilities of their organizations. It all ties together."

DPAC vice-president Todd Hill adds that, "many parents seem to think PACs are just about fundraising. It is a misconception. The PAC role goes beyond fundraising."

Both Froelich and Hill feel this school year will be pivotal for parental involvement in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows because of the pending closure of up to six schools. DPAC plans to spend more time at their monthly meetings gathering PAC perspectives on issues important to parents.

Froelich notes: "The goal for DPAC is providing parents and PACs with accurate information and support. I would also expect the Board of Education to use the structures that are in place, SPCs, PACs and DPAC, to consult with parents before making school closure and repurposing decisions."

Organized parent groups also exist outside the formalized structure of the education system. They often effectively advocate for changes that benefit students. Most common are parent groups, which focus on the specific learning needs of students with disabilities.

Fifth, parents can seek out volunteer opportunities to support their child's school and classroom.

A critical sixth involvement for parents is the important job of holding school and district leaders accountable. Parents do not have to be experts to ask good questions. Educators and elected officials should provide jargon free responses.

Despite the obvious benefits of these six forms of parent involvement, there is resistance to recognizing and fully supporting their implementation.

Where parental involvement is low or absent, many believe the fault lies only with the parents. Indeed, there is a tendency to disproportionately assign blame to parents when students do not succeed.

Research is uncovering some truths about the barriers to parental involvement.

School barriers include a lack of planning for the involvement of parents and, as already noted, differing views about what constitutes parent involvement. Particularly at the secondary level, schools are not designed to fully support family and community involvement.

Barriers parents may encounter include language and cultural differences, difficulty obtaining child care or transportation, and concerns about whether they are welcome or have the necessary skills to get involved.

There are many compelling reasons for schools and districts to pay more than lip service to parental involvement.

Parents have access to a lot of information about schools and they also have alternatives - - public school choices, private schools and home schooling.

When parents find themselves dissatisfied with aspects of a school they are more likely to stay and work to help improve it, if they believe their efforts will be welcomed. In other words, they are less likely to abandon the school for other options if they are engaged and included in decision-making.

Parent involvement -- in all its forms -- strengthens school communities and improves student success.

*Katherine Wagner welcomes comments and suggestions for future columns at [educationwatch@gmail.com](mailto:educationwatch@gmail.com).*

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