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How to Revive Your Neighborhood School

by Amy Cardin Suardi

Everything seemed perfect about our new neighborhood – except for the elementary school. Hardly anyone from our Arlington neighborhood went there, choosing county magnet schools instead. The talk on the playground about the school was, "Half the kids are on free or reduced lunch," (read: poor). Or, "They bus in kids from rough neighborhoods," (read: scary). The special focus schools were great, but I longed for the sense of community that a walkable, neighborhood school could bring.

Then one day last spring, the principal of the school gave an impressive presentation at my daughter's preschool, and a few parents became seriously interested. I was thrilled. It sounded like the beginnings of a turnaround. Although the school had gone through a period of decline, I could see when I visited that it was flourishing with a new principal, innovative curriculum and rising test scores. The children – many from lower-income Latino households – were bright, curious and respectful. However, public perception still lagged way behind.

Even though my daughter would not be kindergarten age for another year, I knew it would take at least that long to bring families back to a school with a tarnished reputation. I decided to form a group to connect prospective and current parents and to create a positive buzz about the school.

It has been a year since we formed FANS, or Friends of Abingdon Neighborhood School. We went from three to more than 70 members and, through our simple public relations effort, have dramatically changed the image of the school. I knew we had come a long way when a mother on the playground recently said with a smile, "Oh, you're sending your daughter there? That's great. I see a lot about that organization, Friends of Abingdon Neighborhood School. They believe that if you get the community involved, schools can really flourish." Bingo!

Here's how we were able to attract more neighborhood kids and put our school back onto the map of viable choices.

Find Core Supporters Then Add Members

Although you may be doing most of the work yourself, it's important to have a few close allies. The most logical place to find enthusiastic people is the school's PTA. Small PTAs often don't have time for public relations and would welcome your efforts to spread the word. If you aren't up for creating a separate organization, you could propose to be their community relations chair.

While it's imperative that you have the blessing of the principal, it can make a big difference to have other power players on your side. Look to civic leaders and school board members. Perhaps one of them had children at your school and would be happy to back your efforts, even by appearing at a meeting or two.

Speaking of meetings, you'll also want to find others who are interested in the school. The best way to do this is by holding an initial meeting where you can gauge interest, state your goals and gather contact information. (See "How Others Have Succeeded.")

Regularly Publicize School Programs and Special Features

If your neighborhood has a newsletter, excellent. If not, try speaking to local citizens' associations for ideas. Consider starting a listserv for your neighborhood where you could begin to spread information about the school. Post flyers in public places like community centers, playgrounds, pools, grocery stores, post offices, on tree trunks – anywhere to get the word out.

After writing articles about the formation of our group, I began interviewing the principal and teachers and highlighting ways our school was special. Remember the unique selling point marketing strategy: What does your school have that no other area school has?

Create a Logo and a Simple Brochure

While not necessary, these tools will do wonders towards showing the community that a group of committed parents is rallying around the school. Do you have a friend or family member who is artistic? A logo – which could be a name, an image or both – should be simple and eye-catching. Perhaps the school's art teacher would be willing to help.

A brochure can be as low-tech as folded photocopies. I found directions on creating trifold brochures using Word at www.officearticles.com and tips for preparing text in the brochures section of www.dcfb.com/brochure-writing.html. After I copied them on colored paper, I posted the brochures at playgrounds and at school events, especially those open to prospective families.

Organize a Few Get-Togethers

Events could range from a cozy mom's night out to a potluck picnic or a trip to a pumpkin patch. We have had success with a series of Sunday afternoon playdates at the school playground. We asked the school to send out flyers to everyone who attended the kindergarten orientations, and the PTA provided refreshments. The first playdate was so successful that we decided to repeat it

the last Sunday of the month for the rest of the spring and summer.

If you can work with the principal to hold an event inside the school, even better. Negative comments often come from people who have never been to the school or whose kids attended ages ago, points out Eileen Kugler whose daughter attended a school with a high immigrant population in Northern Virginia. In her book *Debunking the Middle-Class Myth: Why Diverse Schools are Good for All Kids*, she explains how important it is to get people through the front door, especially those with young children who are swayed by rumors and often move out of the area in search of "better" schools.

Remember, if you believe in your neighborhood school, you're probably not alone. Gather your courage, find a few friends and go for it. With a little work and a lot of faith, you'll be surprised at how quickly the tide can turn.

Amy Cardin Suardi is a mother of two daughters, age 3 and 5, and founder of FANS, Friends of Abingdon Neighborhood School (www.friendsofabingdon.org). She can be reached at fans@fastmail.net.

Use Technology to Sharpen Your School's Image

Get a dedicated e-mail address

Use the name of your organization or a catchy phrase for an e-mail address and a professional-sounding domain, like fastmail.net. Fastmail is free and comes with automatic forwarding so you can have all e-mails sent to your personal account (and won't have to keep checking several accounts).

Create a listserv e-mail group

These electronic mailing lists make it easier for members of a group to communicate with each other. Messages sent to a central address are automatically distributed to all subscribers. Educational organizations can apply for free service through NetPals (www.netpals.lsoft.com). Yahoo Groups and Google Groups both offer complimentary, easy-to-use services to the general public where members can post photos, files and calendar items.

Write a monthly e-newsletter

Instead of sending e-mail updates to members, create a simple e-newsletter. Use it to highlight a few news items, school events or special programs. A periodic newsletter helps keep the school in people's minds and makes it look like you really know what you're doing (even if you don't!).

A mail program that allows HTML coding, like Microsoft Entourage, will allow you to add your logo and some formatting. Don't go crazy with typefaces; unfortunately only "browser safe fonts" will look the same on everyone's computer. (Arial, Courier, Times and Verdana are safest.)

Create a website

With the SiteBuilder software that came with my Verizon online account, we were able to provide information about the school and our group that could not be conveyed in a playground conversation. On our interactive website, visitors can sign up to receive our e-newsletter, download articles about us and refer the site to a friend. Alternatively, you might consider raising a little money to pay for a site. You could ask local businesses or real estate agents to donate money in exchange for advertising space. An attractive, self-editable website designed by a small web design company, like TripleSmart.com, runs as low as \$800.

How Others Have Succeeded

Involve the Whole Community

When her daughter was only a newborn, Tessa Muehllehner began attending PTA meetings at Brent Elementary on Capitol Hill. She found a core group of interested parents on the Mothers on the Hill (MOTH) listserv. They organized a meeting in the park and announced it by leafleting every house in the area. Sixty parents showed up, and Brent Neighbors was formed. By reaching out to friends and neighbors – from professionals to retirees – the group was able to help the PTA get nonprofit status and win grants, renovate the library and beautify the school grounds, among other things. "We always look for the magic combination: a need in the school, a volunteer with a passion and a source of funding," says Muehllehner.

Demonstrate a Critical Mass

People usually don't like to take pioneering risks with their children alone. Prospective families should have a chance to know current students as well as other neighborhood families that are embracing the school. The Maury Online Community, a support group for Maury Elementary School in Old Town Alexandria, has an "All Aboard" page on their website (www.mauryonline.org), which lists neighborhood kids who attend or plan to attend the school. "To make people feel like they were part of a movement," says Muehllehner of Brent Neighbors, "we posted a map on our listserv that showed where all the kids lived." However, it should be clear to the school, she points out, that your group is not interested in "taking over" but rather seeing the school more integrated into the community.

Market to Your Target Audience

To attract neighborhood kids back to George Mason Elementary School in Alexandria, former principal Lois Berlin says, "We divided up the neighborhood and delivered flyers to every home inviting folks to bring their 4-year-olds to a puppet show and information session in October. We included our kindergarten and first graders in the puppet show so our visitors could see what great kids already attended George Mason."

Hooking up prospective parents with current ones gives people a chance to

meet satisfied customers. Berlin, who is now the superintendent of Falls Church City Schools, explains, "a George Mason parent held a wine and cheese party at her house and invited all the folks who attended various events like the puppet show."

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