

Parent Engagement and Student Fun Add up to School Success

BY MARY ANN MCQUEEN



It's September and we're back to school. The morning begins with an outdoor assembly of students, faculty, staff and parents. Announcements, prayer, the pledge of allegiance, birthday and student achievement acknowledgment are all a part of this practice. The school's mission reawakens each morning as students speak and receive recognition for citizenship, participation and achievement. Teams are congratulated for recent competitions, members of the musical theatre production are called forward, a service project is lauded — these are all a part of this important community gathering experience.

Believing that school should be fun for students and for their parents has driven many of the decisions that I have made as a principal around program innovation and calendar planning. Insuring that parents have many opportunities to gather in meaningful ways to get to know and appreciate each other is vital to a school's health. These events do not have to be costly to organize or host — actually the simpler the better!

Our Parent Action Committee is an integral part of the school. And, in September, their role is in full swing. Over the summer, they've contacted all the new families to answer questions, to invite them to a social gathering including other school families. Welcoming people into the community in a way that conveys their importance cultivates belonging and investment in the community.

September also brings adventure for the middle school. Students in grades five through eight go away for three days to camp each September. No phones, no calling home — just time to bond with classmates in a beautiful setting. This supports the social development of young people and gives them a digital holiday! And, after four years of having these experiences, the students' memories are made and remade. Sure, these endeavors take a lot of effort and planning. However, the benefits far exceed any costs in time or resources.

And, as we edge into autumn, the Fall Festival approaches. While it is a big logistical undertaking, with planning for rides, street closure on Coeur d'Alene Avenue, booths, food trucks and games, seeing the look on students faces as they run around unfettered in a safe and secure environment is well worth the effort. Memories are built and friendships forged as parents work side by side toward a common goal of building community for the students and for themselves (this year's Fall Festival will take place on October 13).

So, how does all of this impact student learning? Students who enjoy coming to school and perceive school as "fun" are more motivated and engaged. Their parents are more invested as partners because they, too, are part of the school's fabric. They have built and sustained meaningful relationships that tie them to the school. This is all great for children and families!

Mary Ann McQueen is principal of St. Mark School.

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