

How to Attract Meeting Attendees

With so many demands on their limited time—and the perception that meetings are a waste of that time and a form of slow torture —parents often choose to bypass the PTA meeting. If this has been a challenge for your unit, you might do a survey to try and figure out why people aren't coming to the meetings. Is it lack of interest? Not enough publicity? Work schedules? New comers feel unwelcomed and left out? Once you can identify the barrier(s) to participation, you can start to take steps to address them. We want members to feel that they have a stake in the group and a voice in its decision-making—and meetings are one way to accomplish that. So here are some ideas for boosting the numbers at your next meeting.

The Basics:

- Publicize meeting dates through your newsletter, website, school calendar, school sign, poster on school office door.
- Sends out reminders a week or two ahead of time, with agenda and committee report-outs.
- Print meeting announcements, posters and publications in the languages that are spoken by the families within you PTA community.
- Provide interpreters for non-English speakers at meetings.
- Provide accessibility for those who are physically challenged.
- Board members need to shake hands and meet and greet new parents at every meeting and event.
- Board members should not sit all together so new comers don't feel isolated at the end of the table.
- Avoid too much PTA jargon.
- Keep PTA business brief but informative, taking a moment to explain and make eye contact with new comers will help them feel welcome and part of the meeting
- Serve refreshments!

#1 - Hold Fewer Meetings & Make Them Shorter

Most units have done away with the monthly association meeting and are now holding only three or four per year. This should give units more time to plan a tight, thoughtful agenda.

Have a "One Hour PTA Meeting" and advertise as "we know you are busy, if we promise to get you out in an hour, will you come"? If you are able to stick to the time, you will gain a reputation for concise meetings, which might boost attendance the next time.

- Cut your meeting time by eliminating unnecessary discussion about details. Nothing kills the energy of a meeting more than the minutia of planning events. Committees don't need to report out before the whole association – a handout with committee report summaries will do.
- Do not read your previous minutes out loud – appoint three people prior to your meeting to review the minutes and approved.

- If discussions begin throughout the meeting, encourage people to come up after the meeting so you can have a more in-depth conversation. An association meeting is not a discussion meeting – it is an informational meeting where certain actions need to be approved.
- A few days prior to the meeting, e-mail the agenda, current financial reports and any other handouts that can be read ahead of time. Have copies available at the meeting as well.

CONSIDER: Have a combined meeting with another PTA unit so that parents who have children in both schools will only have to come out once.

#2 - Vary the Meeting Time

- Surveys are one way to discover what times best suit your population; variety is often appreciated. To accommodate parents' schedules, perhaps hold meetings on rotating days, hold one or two evening meetings, with the others in the morning or after-school. Have the morning meeting time after the morning rush. Parents drop their kids off, come down to have a cup of coffee and socialize, and within an hour or so they're on their way.

#3 - Vary the Meeting Place

Just as Tuesday night isn't necessarily the best day for meetings, neither is the school library the only place to conduct parent group business. Diverse locales, while perhaps not as central, offer other appeals.

CONSIDER:

- Holding one or more gatherings a year at a local restaurant or hold a potluck dinner meetings at parents' homes or the school's multi-use room.
- During baseball season (or other sport), perhaps meet in the corner field at the park, while kids are at practice. You may not get increased attendance, but you will probably get some different people.

#4 – Add a “coffee with the principal”

- Many people would like to have an opportunity with meet with the principal to hear what is happening at the school and ask questions. Hold “coffee with the principal” meetings right after school begins and in the evenings.

#5 – Plan a “What Dads Can Do”

- Many men would consider getting involved at their children's school if they simply knew how they can help.

#6 - Offer Babysitting and Food

Make it easier for parents to attend by eliminating reasons why they can't, especially when it comes to childcare. Do you offer something for the kids to do while you are having your meeting? Make it a program for them as well, so they also look forward to the event. Do you have an open gym with some volunteers to supervise? Can you have high school students who will babysit?

CONSIDER:

- Offer a program for kids while parents meet across the hall: movie night, hire a local college-age magician to entertain the children, or invite a volunteer with a local museum or arts organization to come in and do some hands on activities.
- With the approval of the teachers, offer a Homework Pass for each parent who attends. Their child(ren) must present the pass to their teacher, who then determines which homework activity they are able to skip. This is your way of recognizing that an evening at school (and away from home) is a time commitment and that you appreciate it.

If your meeting will be in the dinner hour, then offer food. A family dinner night is a great way to have a meeting in the evenings and still be sure that parents can attend without having to worry about making arrangements for dinner or spending too much on an unhealthy fast food meal. An inexpensive pasta or pizza night is a great idea and you can combine that with your meeting. It can be a way for families to come together at the table and also stay in touch with the PTA.

- Offer 2 slices of pizza and a drink or pick up taco trays. Members pay small nominal price while nonmembers pay slightly more. Goal is not to make money but to cover some of the cost.

#7 - Encourage Attendance as a Responsibility

CONSIDER:

- Perhaps each room parent is required to attend PTA meetings as part of their role. This helps information flow back to other parents and teachers and also helps involve parents who might not otherwise attend.
- If you give out teacher grants, make it a requirement that the teacher (or a representative they choose) needs to be there to advocate their interests. You might find an increase in vigorous lobbying of teachers getting parents to attend. Have a grade representative give an update at each meeting - at least that child's parents would attend the meeting.
- Ask a different grade or classroom to serve as junior hosts for each PTA meeting. Have the students greet people, help find seating and distribute any handouts. (you will at least get their parents there)

#8 - Combine Meetings With Other School Events

When the meeting is held in conjunction with a school event, attendance can double or even triple.

CONSIDER:

- Hold meeting immediately preceding school concerts, movie nights, after the science and book fairs, walk/run-a-thons, or performances by the choir, band or play.
- Meetings in conjunction with quarterly student recognitions where parents are invited to see their child honored as a 'student of the month'.
- Experiment with simply having a presence at open house rather than holding an actual meeting. Set up a table where parents can fill out a survey about their own ideas for increasing parent involvement or sign up to volunteer at the fall festival.

#9 - Publicize/Outreach

Besides the standard of posting dates in your newsletter, website, fliers and posters ...

CONSIDER:

- Having PTA magnets made up with the school calendar and association meeting dates

listed. Or give each member a business size card with dates of PTA meetings on it. Encourage them to keep it in their wallet.

- On the morning of PTA meetings distribute stickers to the teachers that they place on every child as they leave school that day (the PTA store has stickers that say, "PTA meeting tonight!")
- Use your Room Parents network - have each room parent personally reach out to other parents in their class at drop off and pick up, or make phone calls about the meetings.
- Have your core group of people who always attend recruit additional parents to come with them. In other words, use the base of participation you have, and build upon it.
- Personal outreach is still the most effective. Being personally invited is flattering and will most likely make those people more likely to join you. Form a phone tree! If you had parents turn in an "interest" form with their membership, send them a personal email or call and invite them to the meeting.

10 - Add a Program

The flip side of the shorter "get people in & out" is to add a program to your meeting as the draw. You should experiment with both ideas.

- Connect your program to what their kids are doing in school: a science fair with projects by all the classes, an all school art show where every child has a piece of artwork on display, a cultural fair where each grade level studies a different country and then participants can taste different foods, do activities, learn songs and dances that are a part of each culture or a program where children recite poems they wrote.
- Sponsor a college financial aid workshop for students and parents
- Have parent round tables. Discussions should be about things that are relevant: homework help, saving for college, talking to kids about drugs and alcohol, saving money at the grocery/coupon swap, etc. Assign discussion leaders with a couple of leading questions to get the discussion started then they make sure everyone have a chance to participate.
- Add a "game night" of cards, scrabble, bunko, etc after the short of meeting.
- Honor your volunteers with a thank-you brunch/dinner prior to the meeting.
- Plan activities to include single parents.
- Honor your crossing guard- someone whom everyone loves!

#11 - Give Prizes

Because, let's face it, most parents don't care either way if you are going to spend money on an assembly or not--but they'll make a showing if they have a chance to win something.

CONSIDER:

- Door Prizes: When they come in the door, you get a ticket--if you bring a friend, you each get two tickets. Add \$20 per meeting to your budget for \$5 gift cards. Or door prizes could be leftovers from a fundraiser, or free pass to the Family Movie Night or some other paid event.
- Reward Prizes: make up cards to pass out at PTA sign up. Then when a parent and /or family attends a meeting or event throughout the school year, punch or stamp the card. At the end of the year, the families with the most punches would get entered into a raffle to win a great prize. (or track points – 1 point for attending meeting, 2 or more volunteering, etc). Perhaps the grand prize is that their child wins a \$50 gift certificate.

While poor attendance can feel like failure, the meeting is not the most vital part of PTA. Building parent involvement in other activities can be much more effective than trying to lure everyone to sit through a meeting. Meeting attendance will creep up slowly as your PTA starts connecting and seeing success in broad ways. If you host successful family events, some small percentage of the attendees of those events will grow closer to your group and—eventually—become “meeting attenders”.

CONSIDER:

- Holding a few non-business social mixers that are strictly just getting together to chit chat and meeting new faces. This will foster face-to-face relationships and get more parents to volunteer in events.
- Host a quarterly new parents meetings. “Welcome to ABC School Orientation” to welcome everyone to the school family. Provide a welcome packet.

Once you break the barrier and get people to experience a PTA meeting, continue to keep meeting topics relevant and meetings participatory and well-executed, and people will keep coming back.