Potential Actions: Building Partnerships with Parents
Ways to Reach Out to Parents and Community Volunteers

A strong parent involvement program provides a variety of options for parents to support student achievement.

* Help parents understand how to support learning at home.
Parent involvement is not just something that happens at school. It really begins with how parents support school activities and learning at home. Encourage teachers to be specific with their students' parents so that they understand how to help student learning. Should parents review homework? Listen to children read? Provide specific elements of a "learning friendly" environment (ample quiet time, space for homework, etc.)? What do teachers expect parents to do in support of academic achievement? Parents need to know how to be involved.

* Create flexibly scheduled opportunities.
The majority of families in North Carolina have two working parents, which can make it difficult for them to attend school activities held during the day. In order to accommodate the variety of family work schedules, schools can schedule regular days of flexible work schedules. By opening schools to parents from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. on a monthly or quarterly basis, for example, parents of nearly any schedule would be able to visit the school. Consider providing a more flexible schedule on a regular basis so that parents can use school computers and media resources. "Flex days" also would be excellent times to schedule parent-teacher conferences or even parent training opportunities.

As you look for ways to operate on a flexible schedule, keep in mind that classified personnel, such as custodians, teacher assistants, technology/computer assistants, etc., are required to follow the federal laws of the Fair Labor Standards Act. That means schools would have to adjust the work hours of classified personnel to remain within the 40 hour work week requirements of federal legislation. Professional employees, such as teachers, principals, assistant principals and licensed instructional support staff are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Adopt parent involvement policies for birth through high school graduation. Strong parent involvement programs do not just happen. They require deliberate planning in order to get off the ground and succeed.

When developing your parent involvement policy, be sure to involve key stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, community and business representatives, parents, and students.

Strong parent involvement programs contain:
* opportunities for parents to be involved in all phases of parent/family involvement programs and development of school policies and procedures affecting their children;
* outreach opportunities to encourage participation or parents who may have low-literacy skills or whose native language is not English;
* professional development opportunities for teachers;
* links to social service agencies and community groups;
* strategies to involve parents of students of all ages and grade levels; and
* recognition of diverse family structures.
Keep records to identify parents who come to school to assist and support the school and the child in the learning and teaching process.

Do you know who your school's parent volunteers are? Without a good record-keeping mechanism, you may not realize the full scope of parental involvement in your school. By placing a special column on your school's visitor sign-in sheet, you can better track your school's volunteers. Because schools require all campus visitors to sign in and out while at the school, this would also give you a way to tally the number of volunteer hours provided by parents.

Other ways to do this include:
* Having a volunteer notebook that all volunteers complete when they check in at the school office.
* Requiring teachers to report parent volunteer work that is done for them by parents or others. Sometimes, these activities may not take place on school grounds.

Why keep these records? Knowing who your volunteers are and how much time they spend on behalf of your school allows you to broaden the pool of individuals who are recruited to serve in specific ways, such as on the School Improvement Team. Volunteers can provide a much-needed lift to your school's tutoring program. Non-working parents and community residents, retired teachers, senior citizens, and even fellow students can help boost students' reading and mathematics skills with just one hour a week of one-on-one tutoring. It's important that your volunteer program contain a strong orientation and training component, particularly when it comes to tutoring.

Keeping volunteer information also provides you with a record of all the people you need to thank at the end of the year. Holding a volunteer recognition meal, sending home a simple note or card or printing volunteers' names in your school newsletter are all good ways to say thank you.

* Consider ways to recognize parents who consistently support learning at home. Some of the most crucial parent involvement activities take place at home. Consider ways to recognize parents who have a strong record of signing off on student homework, for example, or providing other "at-home" support that is crucial for student success.

* Use volunteer and retired teachers/senior citizens to read to students and provide tutoring assistance.

* Don't forget to include an opportunity for feedback. Being "in the trenches" so to speak, volunteers provide valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses of your parent/family involvement program. Near the end of the school year, ask your volunteers to complete a short questionnaire as to what's working well and what can be improved in your program. You may want to consider a "sweet" treat to encourage completion and return of as many questionnaires as possible.

* Conduct parent meetings in community centers, churches, etc. Depending on your school system, your school's students may not live near the school building. In those cases, especially, consider taking school meetings or events to the families you serve, rather than always requiring them to come to the school. Community centers, churches, synagogues and mosques and other facilities are usually friendly to school requests to use space for meetings with parents in their neighborhoods.

Found at http://www.ncpublicschools.org/involvement/partnership_guidelines.html