



REAL ENGAGEMENT IS THE SECRET FOR

Schools of Excellence

By Pat Fontana



A school that involves parents in their children's education may have them sign up to volunteer for an event or send home a note each week about the students' progress. A school that engages those parents, the students' extended families, and the community, to interact with teachers and staff, to share in initiatives, and to realize the benefits together, is a school that earns the distinction of "excellence" in the eyes of everyone involved, most notably the National PTA.

To New York State's PTA executive director, Kyle Belokopitsky, engagement and collaboration are not just buzzwords. They are the true reasons that students in the public school system succeed.

Belokopitsky gets very excited when talking about the impact that schools, families, and communities can have on a child’s education. As she sees it, it “takes everyone in the school community to see that a child succeeds.”

Belokopitsky is equally excited when talking about the seven schools in New York that were named 2017-2019 National PTA Schools of Excellence. This is a top honor, she noted, and is a “very prestigious award.” Across the country, less than 150 schools earned the honor and it is quite an accomplishment for the state that seven of those schools are in New York.

The National PTA sets standards that these schools must meet as part of a yearlong action plan. All of the standards are focused on collaboration and engagement, with the end goal being the success of every child (emphasis on *every*).

Standards include:

- Welcoming all families into the school community
- Communicating effectively
- Supporting student success
- Speaking up for every child
- Sharing power
- Collaborating with community

Maple East Elementary School

Maple East Elementary School in Williamsville has actually won the award this year for the second time in a row. Principal Cathy Mihalic is thrilled that her school was recognized for the 2015-2017 honor and continues to be honored by the 2017-2019 award. Mihalic says that the school’s emphasis on character education, evident throughout the school and spilling out into the community, plays a huge part in her students’ success. Even Maple East’s mascot, Moxie the Mountain Lion, is tied to character education!

Mihalic has been in the education

field for 28 years, starting out as a kindergarten teacher and spending the last nine years as principal at Maple East. She sees her school as a “warm, welcoming place” where teachers, students, staff, families, and the community all come together to help students succeed.

When asked to describe how she gets parents involved, she says that a big part of it is the community. They “love the school.” She adds that “our teachers really reach out to all families on a pretty personal basis, creating working relationships whenever possible.” She also attributes much of the school’s success to the staff, noting that “everyone is very positive and engaging.”

With just over 600 students, communication is truly one of Maple East’s keys to keeping families involved. Electronic communication has helped Mihalic and her team reach out to families, to keep them informed and engaged. Each day she sends out at least one message using Twitter, a relatively new tool for her, and the school website is kept up to date with important news for students, families, teachers, and staff.

She also takes advantage of a district-wide tool called Williamsville Information Tracking System (WITS) that enables her to send emails to a grade level, a class, or the entire parent population of the school. The parent portal on WITS gives parents a view into their children’s grades and assignments, keeping them active in their child’s work and progress.

The Maple East PTA also takes steps to communicate regularly with the school’s families, including publishing and distributing a monthly newsletter in conjunction with the school’s staff and teachers. Another effective communication piece is the Maple East Minute, an email that goes out every Monday to the PTA about events going on that week.

The PTA takes the lead in a number of engaging activities throughout the year. Mihalic is happy to note that 100 percent of the school’s teachers have joined the PTA, which runs a number of family-focused events at the school. A welcome back event in mid-September features a book fair

and an ice cream social, with teachers and staff serving families who attend, in an effort to make them feel welcome as an integral part of the school. In October, PTA decorations abound at fall fun night, attended by hundreds of students and family members.

A multicultural school with a number of different languages represented, Maple East works very closely with families of students whose first language is not English. Their ESOL teachers get to know each family during the year and reach out whenever they need to in order to help the families, using a telephonic interpreter service to hold meetings with parents who may need interpretation into their native language.

Maple East is very enthusiastic and proud of its fine arts emphasis. Almost all students play an instrument by the fourth grade. Last year, Mihalic notes, they held a huge event with food trucks that featured a jazz band that their music director participates in and that included some of the students who learned how to perform with the band.

Community outreach for Maple East is as close as the hospital next door to the school. They have an ongoing partnership with Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital as well as with Canterbury Woods, a nearby facility for seniors. The school chorus performs at both sites a couple of times a year.

The Maple East fourth-graders interview their senior partners at Canterbury Woods and then give a presentation about what they’ve learned from their elder counterparts. Students also team up with residents who act as classroom “grandparents.” True family and community engagement abounds at Maple East.

Across the state, two schools in the town of Ballston Spa were also honored as 2017-2019 National PTA Schools of Excellence. Gordon Creek Elementary and Ballston Spa Middle School both earned the designation by demonstrating their commitment to meeting and exceeding the PTA standards.

Ballston Spa Middle School

Pam Motler is beginning her

seventh year as the principal of Ballston Spa Middle School, after 20 years in the field of education. With just under 1,000 students spread across three grades, Motler has been challenged with both the younger students' (and their parents') transition into the school as well as a need to make the school feel a bit smaller for all students.

Middle school can be challenging for students, families, teachers, and staff. Students want to be more independent but can get lost, virtually and logistically, in a bigger school. Families want to hang on to the elementary school days, but realize their older middle school student may not feel the same way. The school's teachers and administration want to see everyone succeed.

At Ballston Spa Middle School, they have accomplished just that. To lessen the impact of the largeness of middle school, the sixth- and seventh-graders are grouped into teams. There are three teams in each grade level and the teams are organized by four core content areas. Motler adds that "teaming gives a smaller feel to a large building with many kids." In eighth grade, the students are "de-teamed" to prepare them to move on to the next phase in their lives, the even larger high school.

Motler and her team recognize that middle school parents "need to know they are still welcome at school." Even though there are no more "class moms," teachers "are very open to getting help from parents."

Another challenge in a middle school is the turnover, with a completely new group of families every 36 months. However, the PTA does a "fantastic job of passing the torch to the next officers in seamless transitions every year."

Motler notes that beyond the dances and activity nights, the school relies on the PTA and parents to have active membership on its Building Leader Team (BLT). For each of the team's priority areas, which include character education and making the school greener, there is a subcommittee that includes parent representation. These parents will then act as liaisons to share information with

other parents regarding the school community and all of its initiatives.

Communication and outreach are common threads in the middle school's goal of involving families and communities in the various aspects of the students' education. Teachers reach out to families through newsletters and team emails. The PTA has a presence at every school event.

The community is involved in school activities primarily through the parents, who enjoy sharing their expertise with classes and clubs. Sea Perch, the school's robotics club, gets valuable guidance and advice from parents who are engineers. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute sends "ambassadors" to the school's science classes. Middle school can be a huge transition for everyone involved. Families and members of the community feel welcome at Ballston Spa Middle School and that makes a huge difference to the teachers, the staff, the students, and the parents themselves.

Gordon Creek Elementary School

Also in Ballston Spa, Principal Celeste Keane reflects on the recognition of being a 2017-2019 National PTA School of Excellence, saying the "accomplishment means a lot to us." She and her team at Gordon Creek Elementary are thrilled that their efforts to connect families, students, and community have proven successful for their school and, most importantly, for their students.

Keane has been principal at Gordon Creek and its 520 students since November 2015. In that time, she has seen a lot of activity on the part of the PTA and the teachers, focused on making families feel welcomed and engaged.

The school makes full use of social media options to reach out to parents, sending out emails through a system-wide email blast, posting on Twitter, maintaining a Facebook page, and keeping the school's website up to date. Keane is also creating a newsletter this year, in conjunction with the PTA, that will be sent out to all families.

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Gordon Creek's staff is "very active" on Twitter and families are constantly encouraged to follow the feed to get the latest notices and news. This year, district technology coaches will actually be training parents on how to use Twitter, so they can stay in touch.

Last year, the school identified a need for a clear, defined way to reach out to families whose first language is not English. They developed a strategy that now includes translated mailings and signage, to make the school a more inviting place for all families. Their goal is to make sure all families at the school, regardless of language or culture, understand what resources are available so they can access the appropriate services for their children. The PTA at Gordon Creek has a relatively new slate of officers and they have already accomplished a lot, out of "love for the kids and the school," says Keane. One of their most creative endeavors was buying T-shirts for students in every grade level, with each grade being assigned a different color. Tie-dye shirts for the staff display all of the colors, representing the entire school. Students and staff proudly wear their shirts on school trips and to special events.

A back-to-school barbecue kicks off every school year with an open house for students and families. The school's teachers prepare and serve the food for all the participants, which this year included 500 students and family members.

An innovative "junior PTA" includes students in grades three to five who meet once a month with the adult PTA to talk about ways to improve school community. The students enjoy creating decorations for different holidays and initiating and coordinating fundraisers.

Community involvement at Gor-

don Creek runs in both directions. The school has a longstanding relationship with the local rotary and works with them on donating supplies and backpacks. They also reach out to local veterans who participate and share in their annual Memorial Day celebrations.

There is a school banking program, made possible by a parent who works for a local bank. The Penny Harvest Fund for fall raised a couple of thousand dollars and the bank also donated backpacks to the school.

Keane says, "As a school community we are always looking for ways to give back," and it shows in the school's outreach efforts. There are two giving tree efforts, one run by the PTA and the other by the building social worker. The building program is specifically for students in the school. The PTA program touches children in the community at large.

Students are active in making the community a better place as well. They collect toiletries and essentials that the staff boxes up and takes to Code Blue, a Saratoga County homeless shelter. The school also has a

strong relationship with the local food pantry and hosts several food drives throughout the year to replenish their resources.

Last year the school's teachers' union provided free books to approximately 2,000 students in the district. This year they are investigating a sponsor for a backpack program for Gordon Creek students. There are also a number of district programs that benefit families of Gordon Creek students who, once identified as struggling with poverty or homelessness, may receive winter coats, gift cards, and other assistance.

Eliminating the barriers help students - and their families - focus and succeed. Keane believes firmly that these district-wide, community-based events and activities are "the beginning of getting families active and involved."

NYS PTA executive director Belokopitsky also believes that there is "nothing more important than real family engagement in learning." She expands on the differences between being involved and being engaged by saying that involvement is "volunteer-

ing, bringing in school supplies, and attending sporting events" but engagement is a "two-way collaboration, a real shared power over how you are supporting kids in a school building." She goes on to say that "real engagement" is what a school of excellence looks for in its collaboration, communication, and outreach with families and community. These National PTA Schools of Excellence have certainly found their way to that engagement.

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer, with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

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