

It Takes a Village: Rethinking How We Engage Families

A fall festival reaches out to involve parents and the community.

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Middle school is a period of transition and a critical phase of growth and development; therefore, a welcoming, positive learning environment in which students enjoy school and make positive connections with others is paramount. Establishing such an environment is especially important in schools where students are affected by issues of poverty.

Hilsman Middle School is a diverse urban middle school located in Athens, Georgia, where the poverty rate hovers around 80%. Many of our students' families are among the working poor.

Our faculty must think innovatively to provide opportunities to connect with our students and their families and build relationships that will benefit our students both in and out of school throughout the year.

In the spring of 2013, our sixth grade teachers were feeling frustrated, defeated, and helpless. They knew we needed to do more to engage with our students and families in a positive manner early in the year.

Rather than relying on the traditional open house, we wanted to connect with our families on a more personal level. During brainstorming sessions, an idea began to form around holding a festival-type event modeled after a local music festival called AthFest. The driving vision of our event, which we named HilFest, developed from the idea behind the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child."

We wanted to create a relaxed atmosphere in which positive conversations could take place. Creating a festival-like atmosphere, complete with food, games, and entertainment, would be central to achieving our goal. This type of event would also allow us to bring together not only our students and faculty, but also our students' families and our community. It would also demonstrate firsthand how much our business community believes in our students and wants to be a part of their education.

Involving Stakeholders

One goal of Hilsman's strategic plan is to create a partnership with families and community members based on mutual trust and respect to serve the needs of our students. Involving community members in HilFest is a primary way we work to achieve that goal. Through their participation, our "community vendors," as we call them, are able to introduce their businesses or organizations and share information about how they can help our students reach their goals and become productive members of our community.

The vendors set up tents on Hilsman's soccer field and host



Hilsman counselors are ready

activities in which the students can participate. Business participants include local restaurants, fitness centers, artists, banks, and insurance agencies, as well as those who cater to families with children such as a shop specializing in board games, a trapeze studio, and several martial arts studios. A local pet shop brings animals for students to learn about

to greet families and offer information.

Even the "big box" businesses get involved! For example, students and families love making birdhouses with the assistance of employees from a large home improvement store. When asked why they participate, one vendor stated, "HilFest gave us a chance to get involved in our community and put faces to our customers. We really believe in the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. We will be at HilFest in full force every year."

Our partnerships with school and district departments are also important for the success of HilFest. The health, family engagement, counseling, district transportation, and nutrition departments all have booths at the event, and parents and students can receive information they will need for the year. Our PTO also has a booth where they sell spirit wear and share information about how parents can get involved.

One of the highlights of HilFest is a photo booth. Students, families, and school faculty put on costume items (e.g., crazy hats, oversized sunglasses, feather boas) and pose for pictures. The photo booth is created, organized, and run by professors and teacher candidates in the University of Georgia (UGA) middle grades education program, which is part of a larger school-university partnership with UGA's College of Education. The photo booth pictures are then posted on the HilFest website for students and families to download and enjoy.



Students enjoy a variety of fun activities during HilFest, including a sing-along.

Our student ambassadors play a critical role in the success of HilFest. They set up tables and chairs on the field, lead tours of the school building, welcome our community vendors when they arrive, and ensure our community vendors have everything they need during the event. Our ambassadors take pride in their work for HilFest and work hard to guarantee its success each year. Throughout the year, our HilFest ambassadors serve as student leaders.

Challenges

Our first event was organized by a small committee in a matter of weeks, and was held on a Saturday between our school's spring break and our state testing window. As one might imagine, helping faculty members schoolwide see the need for such an event was a challenge. We asked key faculty members in other grade levels to become involved and help build buy-in for the event. Some teachers joined in willingly; others were more hesitant and participated out of compliance.

We all know change is difficult; however, seeing is believing! Once teachers saw the excitement and enthusiasm the event created, they bought into our plan and even suggested that we use this format as a fall open house, which we did. As one eighth grade teacher said, "It was really cool to see the kids get excited about the community members who want to be involved in their lives."

Lack of resources and a non-existent operating budget were a challenge as well. Because so many of our families are affected by poverty, it is important that HilFest remain a free event for our families. We wanted to feed our families at the event, but with no operating budget, obtaining donations for food and other supplies became critical to success.

Food for the first HilFest in 2013 was prepared and served by a handful of staff members, a parent,

and two community vendors. Now, with an event that has grown from 350 to over 1,500 attendees, providing food is still an issue. The challenge of feeding more than 1,500 people for free has been met by an overwhelming response from our community members and fast food franchises. Hillsman families sample food from many of our local restaurants, and in turn, this helps our community businesses build their customer base.

As with any outdoor event, the threat of bad weather is a challenge. On the eve of HilFest 2014, the forecast was for a rainy Saturday. We were planning for approximately 1,000 people to attend our event the following day, based on the previous years' numbers. As with every other challenge the committee has faced, several members and other colleagues devised a plan to relocate the entire event indoors if necessary.

This was no easy undertaking, as we had to provide space for 30+ community vendors in addition to the various school-related booths. Within the span of a few hours, the team had solved the problem with a map that incorporated the use of the three large, open spaces in the school. Fortunately, the inclement weather held off until late afternoon on that Saturday, but the Hillsman faculty was prepared in the event we had to implement Plan B.

Successes

During the past three years and four HilFest events, Hillsman Middle School has recognized both immediate and lasting benefits from our new approach to engaging families.

- **Increasing community partnership.** With each HilFest event, the number of participating local businesses and organizations has grown. Members from the community contact Hillsman asking to be a part of HilFest. Business partnerships have grown and continue throughout the school year. Each year, more attendees remark about the sense of community they feel during HilFest. Without the overwhelming support of our community, HilFest would not have been so successful.
- **Creating a "one-stop shop" of student services for families.** After we decided that HilFest would be Hillsman's open house event, we were determined to invite representatives from every department in student services to participate. Each year, we have our bus drivers, school nurse, nutrition manager, social worker, counselors, registrar, and family engagement specialist available to answer parents' questions, provide access to required forms, and to make their own positive connections with families. This approach helps our families see that the entire school community is partnering with them to help their children be successful.
- **Strengthening a positive school climate.** Beginning our school year with HilFest has increased the initial positive connections with families and sets the tone for the school year.
- **Showcasing our professional development school partnership with the University of Georgia.** Hillsman has a strong partnership with the middle grades education program at UGA. Each year, we host middle grades education professors and teacher candidates for onsite classes, field experiences, and student teaching. Their involvement in HilFest provides opportunities for teacher candidates to realize the power of developing positive relationships with students and families and demonstrates to the school community that the university is committed to the education and well-being of Hillsman students.
- **Increasing collegiality, collaboration, and community among faculty members.** Bringing teachers together to meet a need showed us that although we had been working in teams, we



Hillsman clubs showcase their talents for prospective members.

were't truly harnessing the full potential of whole-school collaboration. Working closely to pull off a large event in a short amount of time built community among us and promoted new professional relationships.

Possibly the biggest success is that our faculty and staff opened themselves to exploring new possibilities and approaches to engaging families. What began as a way to make better connections with our families was quickly recognized as a way to transform our fall open house—the best time to make a positive connection with families.

Final Thoughts

HilFest, now Hilsman Middle School's alternative approach to open house, is one way we ensure a positive school climate. Our faculty members have become more aware of the importance of a positive school climate and how, as teachers and leaders, we can foster that climate.

HilFest kicks off the school year, but the principles behind the event are designed to carry out through the year. The sentiments of one eighth grade teacher sum it up best: "Holding HilFest as an open house event is a great experience because the students also get to meet their teachers, and previous students come visit their former teachers. It really is a community event."

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