

Engaging Modern

Dads

in Schools

BY JOHN BADALAMENT

Iwalked down the hallway at the University School of Nashville (Tennessee) and confidently assured Vince Durnan, the head of school, that we'd have a fine turnout. That evening was the first-ever Dads' Dinner at the school — initiated by Caroline Blackwell, director of the office of multicultural affairs. Like many independent schools I visit, University School of Nashville didn't have a long history of dads' involvement in the school beyond sporting events, drama or music performances, and parent-teacher conferences. And, like many heads today, Durnan knew his school should do more to reach them; he just wasn't sure how.

As we stepped into the school's all-purpose room, Durnan's eyes lit up; sitting at tables, talking, laughing, and eating, were nearly one-third of the school's dad community.

The presence of so many dads — at the University School of Nashville and elsewhere — is a significant change from years past, but this scene wouldn't have been so exceptional if the dinner were the end of the story. As we know, plenty of schools do *something* dad-oriented — Donuts with Dad, a dad-driven fund-raiser, the Annual Fathers' Breakfast, etc. For most schools, however, these events are usually one-shot deals. What makes the University School of Nashville's story so impressive is — following that dinner — the sustained, school-wide effort to integrate fathers and father figures into the fabric of the community in ways that have palpably strengthened the community.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE STREETER

Modern Fatherhood

Over the last five years, I've spoken to thousands of fathers in schools across the country and abroad. I've researched, written, and made a documentary film about what it means to be a modern dad. In the process, it has become very clear to me, as a practitioner and a dad myself, that, for most men today, fatherhood is as challenging as it is rewarding. As women have moved into the workforce, many dads — some by choice, others by necessity — have begun to be more active at home. Despite continuing to do far less housework and childcare than mothers (working or not), dads have nearly tripled the hours they spend focused primarily on their children.¹ And, without question, they are getting more involved in their children's schools. I've also come to realize, however, that most schools don't quite know what to do with their volunteer dads — or how to engage those on the sidelines.

When I do my parent workshop, *Modern Dads: How Men's Lives Are Changing and What It Means to Families*, I am often warned not to expect a big turnout. "Our dads are very, very busy," people say. Yet, with few exceptions, parent turnout is very high and fathers almost always make up the majority of the audience. True, some are "strongly encouraged" to attend. But they show up and they stay for two hours of dialogue and lecture. Dads, in other words, are clearly hungry to learn more about the impact they have on their families, to discuss their experiences of fatherhood, and to consider their role in school. And, as the children of "Generation X" parents (ages 20 to 39) reach school age, educators will encounter even more dads who are used to being actively involved in their children's lives. They not only spend more time with their children, but increasingly say they value time with their families over money and career advancement.² Schools that understand these changing family dynamics, especially the emerging role of the modern dads, will not only be at a competitive advantage, but be in a bet-



ter position to meet the needs of their prospective families.

Why Dads Matter in School

Independent schools have a vested interest in learning how to best engage their community of fathers and father figures. We know from research that when fathers are more involved in the school community beyond sporting events — volunteering; attending classroom, grade-level, and whole school events; showing up for conferences; and getting involved in the parent association — children have been shown to get better grades, go further with their education, and actually enjoy school more.³

In a recent talk at the European Council of International Schools Conference, psychologist Michael Thompson cited the lack of male involvement in schools as a contributing factor to the trouble many boys are having in schools. Similarly, I believe that one reason for the increasing achievement gap between boys and girls is related, in part, to the lack of men showing up at school. When dads only attend sporting events, they send a clear message to children, boys especially,

about what they think matters most. If, on the other hand, children see dads reading in class, volunteering at school events, attending parents' nights, or participating in a dads' club (more on this to follow), they get the message that men value education, take parenting seriously, and care about the school community. Even though many dads help with homework in the evenings, it is simply not the same as physically showing up at the school.

Not only do children do better, but schools go further towards fulfilling their mission when they truly serve *all* parents. Teachers discover untapped resources. Mothers — including single, widowed, divorced, or those in same-sex relationships — gain access to a community of adult male role models for their children. Recently, a widow with two young children told me that she would rather her children see different models of real adult men at school than the one-dimensional — and unflattering — images of men they see in the media. Finally, dads learn about their children's lives, connect with other adults, and feel like useful participants in the school community.

The Undiscussables⁴: Why Haven't Dads Been More Involved?

For far too long, most schools have expected very little from dads. In all fairness, dads haven't exactly been knocking down the doors to volunteer for the parent association holiday party committee. "Typically," a middle school teacher recently told me, "I see dads when there is a problem. They usually play 'the heavy.'" Add to this picture a societal legacy of gender roles in which most aspects of childrearing (including schooling) have been the domain of mothers, and it's easy to see the challenge before us.

The most common reason dads cite for why they are not more involved at school is the classic: *I'm too busy*. Undoubtedly, the demands of work life are enormous for most independent school dads. Affording a top-notch education requires great sacrifice. School involvement, however, should not be one of those sacrifices. Plenty of

working moms, and increasingly more single dads, manage to stay involved in schools while keeping up with the demands of their jobs. Interestingly, a study by the National Center on Educational Statistics found that single dads were just as likely to be as “highly involved in schools” as mothers (working or not) in two-parent families. In this light, the I’m-too-busy comment should be a reminder for dads to re-evaluate priorities, not an excuse for maintaining the *status quo*. As one dad so courageously said to a room full of other hardworking dads, “I put in as many hours as anybody here. But at the end of the day, it really does come down to values. Am I going to read to my kid’s class today or finish this report I’ve been working on?”

A less openly discussed, yet common, explanation for dads’ under-involvement is that the school environment is “too feminine.” One dad at a school I recently visited remarked, “I sometimes feel as if my masculinity is in question when I volunteer in my son’s class during ‘working hours.’” Though this may seem trivial, it is a very real barrier to increased father involvement. It isn’t difficult to see how dads could equate schools, especially in the lower grades, with femininity. Starting with early childhood education, right up through middle school, school faculties are predominantly female. Similarly, in my experience, the vast majority of independent school “parent” associations are composed of mostly, if not all, mothers.

I can personally attest to how strange it initially feels to be the only dad at a parent association meeting. As I entered the room full of women, I felt welcomed, but also under tremendous scrutiny, and instantly thrust into the role of spokesperson for all 200 dads at my daughter’s school. Was the flood of thoughts and feelings just my imagination or was it real? I would argue that it was both. In my many candid conversations with mothers in schools across the country, I’ve heard comments like, “I’ll admit, I thought to myself, ‘This guy must be a loser.

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Shouldn’t he be working?” And, yet, the overwhelming majority of mothers I’ve spoken with are enthusiastic, supportive, and welcoming of more dads getting involved.

If dads’ perceive the school as a feminine environment — and, thus, unwelcoming — this should be a jumping-off point for dialogue with the school, not an excuse to stay away. Stepping into this discomfort is both the challenge and solution for dads. It means the dad who felt that his masculinity was in question at the parents’ meeting should have the courage to return the following week. Reciprocally, the engaged mothers’ challenge is to learn to embrace the presence of more men in school and resist stereotyping those who show up. Finally, schools bear equal responsibility for providing a forum in which to openly address questions such as the gender composition of its faculty or parent association.

Assessing Current Dad Involvement

How do we get more dads involved? The first step is to assess their current level of involvement, as well as the school’s desire to reach out to dads.

In just a short one-hour consultation, the faculty and administration at The Willows School (California) surfaced very useful information

about the school’s relationship with fathers. Some teachers, for example, realized that not only was it rare for them to call a dad at work, but many didn’t even have his contact information. They discovered that, as a school, much more could be done to reach out to dads directly, including offering some dad-oriented events and continuing the conversation with the parent association.

To do an assessment, a school needs to look at four areas of dad involvement:

- *Decision-making:* Do you have father representation on your parent association? Do you actively cultivate interest among dads about serving? When are meetings held? Is dads’ involvement limited to powerful positions, such as the board?
- *Communication:* Does the father of the child — or another significant male — participate at parent-teacher conferences? Do you actively and continuously encourage him to participate? Do you assume that fathers are unavailable? Do you encourage some fathers, but not others?
- *Parent Education:* What do you do to educate parents? Are any programs or events geared specifically towards fathers? Do you make specific efforts to encourage fathers to attend? How do you know you are addressing the particular concerns of fathers?
- *Participation in Their Children’s Education:* Do you actively and continuously encourage fathers to participate in classroom, grade-level, or whole school events? In the classroom, what are your expectations for fathers’ participation? When you enlist parents as volunteers or chaperones (in class or for field trips), do you seek men as well as women?

Doing this kind of assessment usually reveals some obvious barriers that are easily removed. The results of an assessment don’t always lead to quick fixes, but they do lead to critical reflection that can lead to change.

school matters

Assembling a Steering Committee

I met Annmarie Torres, the assistant head of Charlotte Preparatory School (North Carolina), at a conference in June, 2007. The following fall, she invited me to speak at her school. Prior to my visit, I asked her to assemble a steering committee whose charge would be to explore a range of options for increasing dads' involvement; during my visit, I ran a strategy session to help the group set reachable goals.

If you are looking for more involvement of dads in your school, a steering committee is a necessity. It should include a couple of already-involved dads, the parent association representative and president, and a few interested members of the faculty and administration. Instead of rushing to plan random events for dads, a steering committee allows for a thoughtful, site-specific process. The committee, for example, may recommend that the school offer a faculty professional day focused on dads,

or it may decide to ask the parent association to survey the school's dads about how to increase their involvement.

The steering committee at Charlotte Prep, whose members mainly corresponded online and met face-to-face once, decided to start a dads' group called CPS Dads. As a kickoff event, it planned to have me speak at the school's first-ever dads' dinner. On the afternoon of the event, I ran a strategy session with the steering committee on how to develop a successful dads' group. "We don't want it to be a few more activities thrown onto the school calendar," said Bryan Lewallen, head of the middle school and co-chair of CPS Dads. "We want to foster meaningful experiences between fathers and their children."

Starting a Dads' Club

Starting a dads club is also a great way to engage dads in the school and, ultimately, develop a culture where significant father involvement is the norm. Creating such a club does not mean that mothers become less involved; it

is not a zero-sum process. The fact is that, in many independent schools, dads are underrepresented in most areas of parent involvement. A dads' club (or network, group, association, etc.) is essentially a parent organization whose members consist of the school's fathers — including stepfathers, adoptive fathers, grandfathers, uncles, family friends, etc. Typically, the group will plan activities, perform community service, increase participation in already existing events, and provide an important social outlet for dads.

Dads' clubs are most effective when they are formally connected to the school — either as their own entity that communicates regularly with a faculty/administrative representative or as an extension of the school's larger parent association. Informal dads' clubs that have no line of communication typically don't last. I've also seen cases where an informal dads' club, still using the school's name, created conflict with the school administration. One such "rogue dads' group," as the headmaster called it, was holding

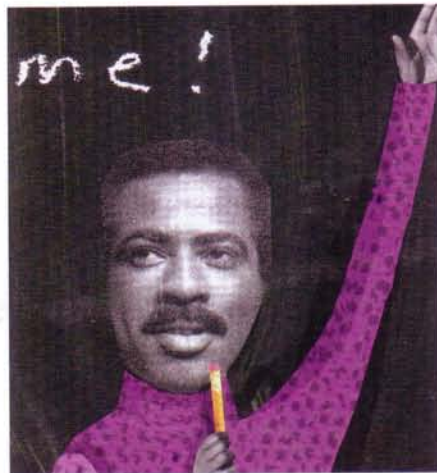
meetings in a bar, acting inappropriately and damaging the image of the school. While some informal groups may work just fine, a dads' groups that is integrated into the formal structures of the school is much more likely to succeed.

Developing a Mission Statement for a Dads' Club

Like any other volunteer organization within a school, a dads' club needs to be established with forethought. Just like the school, the club should be mission driven, with a mission statement that communicates its values. And, while a dads' club should serve the particular needs of its school community, the mission should incorporate the following four elements: (1) to be of service to the school, (2) to get dads more involved at school, (3) to foster healthy father-child and family relationships, and (4) to provide a social outlet for dads.

Many fathers' clubs make important contributions to the school community, but often miss great opportu-

nities to truly strengthen father-child relationships. In revisiting its mission statement, this year's fathers' club at Brother Rice High School in Michigan discovered it needed to plan more events directly in service of "develop-



ing healthy father-son relationships." One idea was to organize a father-son retreat focused on improving communication. Another idea was to make all of their events more interactive. So, for example, instead of just going to do a

father-son golf outing, they might have coffee/donuts beforehand and discuss the importance of positive self-talk or support. Something as simple as asking each father-child pair to answer a question or respond to a story-prompt on an index card can make a fun activity more meaningful.

Surveying Dads

Surveying all dads in the school serves two important purposes; it provides very useful information and raises awareness about a new dads' club or a specific event or initiative. At the International School of Dusseldorf, Germany, Hans Lauterbach (a board member) has been organizing events for dads over the last three years. This year, he decided to formally create a dads' club with the help of the school administration; as a first step, Lauterbach sent out a survey to both get to know the fathers better and gauge their interests: Which events would you like to participate in? What are your hobbies and skills? Which themes (e.g., child development, limit setting,

school **matters**

Internet safety, etc.) would you most want the dads' club to address?

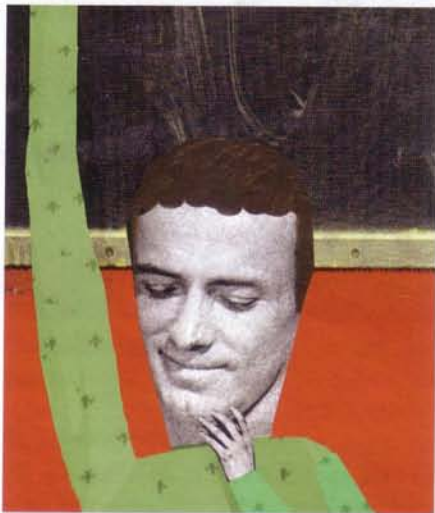
By using the results of the survey in its planning, the dads' club was able to respond directly to the wants and needs of the fathers in the community. In the process, it gained valuable contact information — often schools have a family e-mail, not a dads' e-mail — as well as a better sense of what resources dads have to offer.

Whether using a website like *SurveyMonkey.com* or doing it internally, online surveys typically generate a high response rate, as well as readily usable data. Ideally, the survey should be accompanied by a letter from the head of school in which he or she can draw attention to the importance of dads' responses as well as announce a new dads' club or upcoming event.

Finally, the parent association should also be surveyed so it can have input into the direction of the dads' club. Some schools even survey select groups of students for activity or event ideas.

Planning Events and Activities for a Dads' Club

The most effective dads' clubs plan a combination of events and activities that are fun, educational, useful, and meaningful. Fun activities that engage dads, dads and children together, as well as whole families, are especially important for newer dads' clubs. Using results from its survey, a high school dads' club may decide to run a soccer tournament



with dads and children playing together. Another may decide to host a bagels and bowling event for families or a movie night at the school. At the Francis Parker School (California), the D.A.D.S. (dads and dad-surrogates) club held a "Lightning Roundtable" where the dads discussed challenging topics (*e.g.*, limit setting, sexuality active teens, drugs and alcohol use, teen driving, etc.) for only 10 minutes, but allowing every dad a chance to share his experience. This fast-paced approach to parent education was very effective.

The Fathers' Club at Cranbrook Schools (Michigan) is a great example of a more traditional dads' group consciously trying to incorporate meaningful activities into its program. In addition to doing a yearly, school-wide service learning project, a fund-raiser, and a fathers' breakfast, the Father's Club (along with the school's multicultural programs) has prioritized strengthening the father-son and father-daughter relationships through the Dialogues with Dad Program. Teaching dads and children relationship skills, the program also offers

a much-needed cross-generational and parent-to-parent dialogue about issues such as body image, peer pressure, high expectations and perfectionism, and managing stress.

The Men's Association at Montgomery Bell Academy (Tennessee) is another example of a club that has created a unique mix of activities and events. By hosting a series of speakers addressing fatherhood themes, offering a range of volunteering opportunities for dads on campus, and doing father-child events, the Men's Association has helped to create a culture where the dads' involvement is not only expected, it's the norm.

There is no shortage of ideas for activities and events — donating food from a garden started by dads, a dad-daughter book club, a dunk-a-dad fund-raiser, etc. — that a club can organize. Those ideas must come from within the community. An important role of a dads' club is to get other dads involved in activities already organized by the parent association or other organizations within the school. A mistake some dads' clubs make is to become too exclusive. At my daughter's school, our dads' club, for example, co-organizes the year-end picnic event.

Embracing the New Generation of Dads

A Radcliffe Public Policy Center poll of over 1,000 workers found that more than 80 percent of men, ages 20 to 39, said that having a work schedule that enables them to spend time with family is more important than challenging work or a high salary. It is in schools' best interest to anticipate the changing needs of modern families, and find a way to get fathers more involved. It's a win-win situation. The school benefits from realizing the mostly untapped potential of half its parent body. Most of all, children benefit from a deeper, more meaningful, sustained engagement with fathers and father figures.

John Badalament is the author of the newly released Modern Dads Handbook and director of the acclaimed documentary for PBS, All Men Are Sons: Exploring the Legacy of Fatherhood. His work has been featured on NPR and in Men's Health, and the Los

Angeles Times. Currently, he consults with schools, parent groups, and organizations about fatherhood. For more information, visit www.johnbadalament.com.

Notes

¹U.S. Department of Labor. *The American Time Use Survey*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005.

²Meet the parents — demographic information on views of 25–34 year old American on parenting, marriage, homeownership — Statistical Data Included". American

Demographics. Jan 1, 2002.

³Nord, C.W. and J. West. *Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001.

⁴Barth, R. *Improving Schools From Within: Teachers, Parents and Principals Can Make the Difference*. Jossey-Bass, 1990.

⁵Levine, J. Dennis Murphy, and Sherrill Wilson. *Getting Men Involved*. Scholastic, Inc. 1993.



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