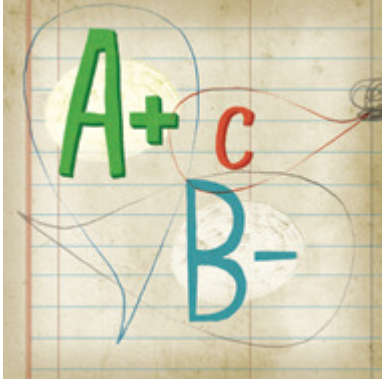


Dads in the PTA

By Lisa Belkin



Education

(Illustration by Barry Falls)

to school, attending class events, helping with extracurriculars and talking about education with other fathers than in a similar study nine years ago. (If you go to their Web site, take a look at the Watch D.O.G.S program — Dads of Great Students — which is designed to bring fathers into the classroom and is being used in 800 schools in 30 states.)

And those changes, in turn, are partly the result of a concerted effort, on both the local and national level, to get fathers more involved. Two years ago the PTA polled 3,000 fathers in families where Mom was a member of the organization but Dad was not. Why hadn't they joined? Far and away the two most common answers were: 1) I don't have the time, and 2) nobody asked.

Addressing the time crunch “excuse,” the PTA created a program called “Three for Me,” which is a contractual agreement between the school and “the adult role model,” Saylor, the new PTA president, says, for three hours of volunteer time over an entire school year. The point, he says, was to show men that they didn't have to give their lives over to the PTA in order to make a difference.

“When you dial it down to minutes, you're only talking 180 minutes,” he says. “I ask them, ‘How many of you can go to a movie, watch the movie and come back home in less than 180 minutes?’ It's a light-bulb moment. It seems like a less than daunting task.”

And it is a bet on the part of the school that those 180 minutes will lead to more. “If anybody goes into a school, for one hour, two hours, three hours,” Saylor says, “they're going to come back.”

In response to the second reason, the feeling that “no one invited us,” the invitations started coming. The ones with the highest RSVP rate weren't from the PTA, or the school principal, or the classroom teacher, but from the children themselves. At the Monroe Trotter School in Dorchester, Mass., for instance, few fathers were coming to the “coffee hour” scheduled especially for dads, until the school renamed it a “Dads Club” and had children hand-print notes asking their father, uncle or other adult male in their life to come. Now upwards of 50 show up.

Why all this effort? Because it is good for children. They do better in school and in life when their fathers are involved. The National Household Education Survey by the US Department of Education found that:

Students whose fathers were highly involved at school were 43 percent more likely to receive As.

Children of highly involved resident fathers were 55 percent more likely to enjoy school than those with uninvolved fathers.

Students with nonresident fathers who participated in even one activity at school were 39 percent less likely to repeat a grade and 50 percent less likely to experience serious disciplinary problems.

Been to school lately?