

Why Schools Need To Engage Modern Dads By John Badalament

At a recent visit to a school in San Diego, I met two men who'd started a parent group called DADS (Dads And Dad Surrogates). As a school consultant who focuses on helping educators to better engage dads and teaching relationship skills to parents, faculty and students, I was curious about where these two busy men – Kyle, a 36 year old doctor and Peter, a lawyer in his 50's – found the time and interest for DADS. They talked at length about their passion for their children, the excitement of starting something new at the school and how little time there was for dads. But Kyle, the doctor, summed it up best when he said, "I want to be as involved in my kids' lives as possible. I don't want to have to be *told* to do more...I *want* to do more."

These men exemplify a major cultural shift we are amidst here in America: the desire many men have to be more actively involved in their children's lives – both at home and at school – than their own fathers were with them. Over the last 40 years women have reclaimed their assertiveness and power, entering the workforce in record numbers, becoming pilots, soldiers and CEO's, starting professional sports leagues, and running for every office in government; consequently, this has led to a radical shift in the lives of men. Most notably, the emerging expectations (from women and men) for what it means to be a good father today.

Having worked with thousands of fathers and families in independent schools, I have tried to capture the most significant changes about fatherhood by creating what I call *The 5 Ideals of a Modern Dad*. These are the standards that I see more and more men attempting to hold themselves to – Understanding the Legacy They Carry, Connecting Emotionally, Showing Up Physically, Engaging In Youth Culture and Challenging Stereotypical Masculinity. Similarly, these *5 Ideals* resonate with what I hear women wanting from their child's father.

So why does this matter to educators? If we want to best serve the families we work with, it's imperative that:

1. We educate our parents about the significant benefits to students, their families and the school climate when more fathers/father-figures are involved at school beyond only sports.

2. We offer ways for dads to be involved at class, grade and whole school levels on an ongoing basis.
3. We understand the changing culture of *modern fatherhood* and the implications for the families we serve now and in the future. Schools that do address dads' needs are at an advantage now, but in the near future prospective families will come to expect them to.

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..." is the constant refrain. With few exceptions, parent turnout is usually quite high; and fathers make up the majority of the audience (do I mind that some were 'strongly encouraged' to attend? Absolutely not). They show up and they stay for 1.5 - 2 hours and almost all of them sign up for my newsletter *Modern Dads*. Dads are hungry to learn more about the impact they have on their families and discuss their experiences of fatherhood. Where else are dads given the opportunity to explore their role as a father? At work? Rare. When they go out with the guys? Even more rare. In this way, schools can and must play a central role in family life.

We know from research that when fathers are more involved in the school community beyond just attending sporting events – volunteering at the school, attending class, grade and whole school level events, showing up for parent-teacher conferences and getting involved in the parent-teacher organization – children have been shown to get better grades, go further with their education and actually enjoy school more.¹ Because the topic of fatherhood has not historically been addressed in schools, many parents are unaware of the benefits a father's presence can have on their children or more specifically, their children's education. A natural and important venue for this education to occur is at school.

So, am I suggesting that 'if you build it, they (dads) will come?' For the most part, yes. But *how* you build it and how you *maintain* it will make all the difference. The number one way to *initially* get more dads involved at school is to plan a father/father-figure event or series of events (I use the word *initially* because once a culture of father-involvement is developed, the

¹ Nord, 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

approach will change) This might be an evening talk about how dads affect child development, a reading program where dads are specifically invited to volunteer, a Friday night open-gym for dads and daughters/sons, or a pancake breakfast for dads.

Language is important. Notice my speaking topic, *Modern Dads: How Men's Lives Are Changing...*, has the words *men* and *dad* in it. Like it or not, men are more likely to show up to a school event *initially* if they are specifically invited and if it's clear that some of their interests and needs are being addressed. This means general flyers or volunteer sign-ups are not always the most effective way to get dads involved. To many men, the word *parent* is still synonymous with *mother*.

Many schools already do a yearly father event – a one shot deal. The key to building something more durable and lasting involves using the pancake breakfast or evening talk as a beginning, not an end. This is the place to find the core group of dads, the few guys that will do most of the work. At my talks, I ask explicitly for a few men that are interested in getting more dads involved to speak that evening with the PA or school representative. This core group of dads may be 2 or 3 in size, but can accomplish a great deal. Dads need to be invited to participate *by other dads*. Many dads have said they would be more likely to volunteer if they knew other men would be there.

The first thing a core group of dads should do is to take a *father/father-figure interest survey* (I have different versions). The survey is a great publicity generator (it goes out to all families) and it yields very useful information; what skills men have, times they are available and ways they would like to be involved. This should be done in conjunction with an interested faculty member or under the guise of the Parent Association (I have heard of rogue dads groups that didn't work out so well!). With this information, the core group can determine a meeting structure – I recommend short monthly or bi-monthly open meetings – as well as plan a couple of easy events. One major survey of dads in schools found that men like activities that are concrete, achievable, and have clear expectations; a fix-it day at the school, a camping trip, a golf tournament, etc. ²

² “Dads Make A Difference,” retrieved from www.three4me.com

I work with schools and dads groups to make sure that they balance these kind of events with education and more meaningful activities (i.e., communication skills for dads and sons/daughters). It is far too easy for dad's groups to devolve into de facto networking-only events for men. This is where thoughtfulness, timing and training come in. It is also important that schools don't rush into increasing father involvement. Many schools and dad's groups get overly ambitious and try to do too much, then become disappointed and quit when attendance isn't high. A slow build is essential to the group's success.

We are in a time of transition; there are men like Kyle and Peter who started the DADS group in San Diego and there are others who are no less excited, but won't take the initiative. While there is more societal permission for men to push strollers or change diapers at a professional football stadium, dads still need an invitation to be more involved at school. It is, however, a two-way street; dads need to get over their fear of schools being as one dad described, 'feminine environments.' There is some truth to this, especially in elementary schools simply given the predominance of female teachers, but as I say to dads, it is not an excuse for low involvement; nor is being 'too busy.' Plenty of single working moms, and increasingly more single dads, have managed to stay involved in schools while keeping up with the demands of a job.

With that said, as the next generation of parents' children reach school age, educators will likely encounter more dads who are used to being actively involved in their children's lives, working hard and expecting the school to be amenable to their ideas and involvement. So, it's the school's best interest to understand what these families need. Will moms have trouble with what some see as men's encroachment on 'their domain'? Perhaps. Some mothers I've talked to do feel threatened, especially those who aren't in the working world and take their children's education as seriously as a job. However, most mothers welcome men's increased involvement and very much want the community of fathers and father-figures to play an active role at school.

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, it sends a clear message to children, boys especially, what matters most. If, on the other hand, children see dads reading in class, volunteering at school events, attending parent nights, or participating in a dad's club, they get the message that men value academics

and take parenting seriously. Even though many dads help with homework in the evenings, it is simply not the same as physically showing up at the school.

Schools have a vested interest in learning how to best serve the modern dads in their communities. Children do better, fathers feel more included and useful, families in general feel more balanced, and the school gains access to many previously unknown resources. I've known groups like DADS in San Diego, for example, to take on projects in fundraising, physical plant issues, career development, violence prevention, event staffing, and gender balance in academic achievement. For too long schools have expected very little from fathers, so now is the time to tap into the emerging culture of modern fatherhood.

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John Badalament, Ed.M., lectures internationally. His documentary film, *All Men Are Sons: Exploring the Legacy of Fatherhood*, aired nationally on PBS. John is a graduate of Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Currently he is working on a film about fathers and daughters and a book about *Modern Dads*. **For more info: www.johnbadalament.com**