



# 50 Ways to Engage Local Schools

From the Lewis Center for Church Leadership

## Learn and listen

- 1. Learn about schools in your area. Study basic demographics and statistics. Drive or walk around the neighborhood.
- 2. Introduce yourself to the principal, head of school, or chief administrator. Because they have tremendous influence within a school, it is critical that they know who you are, what you are doing, and that you want to help.
- 3. Make an appointment for a group from your church to visit your local school to observe and learn what is happening.
- 4. Hold conversations with teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, athletic directors, and the school nurse to get a sense of the most pressing needs within the school and among students and their families.
- 5. Go in without an agenda or preset ideas about what is needed. Ask simply, "How can we help?" Be willing to listen.

## Start smart

- 6. Determine if programs to support schools already exist in your community, school district, or inter-faith networks. Don't reinvent the wheel if you can partner with another group or work through an existing channel.
- 7. Put child safety first. Learn and comply with your school's volunteer guidelines and security protocols as well as congregational or denominational policies regarding child safety.
- 8. Prepare volunteers with adequate training. Help them understand why they are doing what they are doing and process what they experience. Cultivate an attitude of servanthood.
- 9. Be sensitive regarding church/state boundaries. While you do not want to hide that you are from the church, it is never appropriate to pray or proselytize in a public school setting. Witness through actions not words.

- 10. Start small. You might begin by focusing on just one classroom, grade, or subject area, rather than a whole school.

## Build relationships and trust

- 11. Show up at school activities and events — big games, performances, fundraisers, etc. Make a point of talking to students and teachers.
- 12. Get plugged into the room parents' network, if one exists, as school and classroom needs are often communicated through this channel.
- 13. Attend PTA meetings to stay abreast of school issues and demonstrate to the principal and parents that you care.
- 14. Drop by the principal's office on the first day of the school year to wish them well and offer help. Strive to maintain an on-going, face-to-face relationship with the principal, especially if he or she is new.
- 15. Partner with other churches or non-profits, and invite others in your community to support what your church is doing. This increases the efficacy of your work and demonstrates that you are not in it for yourself.
- 16. Under promise and over deliver. Neither school nor church is well-served if you launch an overly ambitious plan but cannot deliver. Consistency and follow through build credibility.
- 17. Stay the course. Long-term commitment is essential to successful institutional partnerships and in one-on-one tutoring and mentoring relationships with individual students.

## Cultivate congregational support and awareness

- 18. Preach and teach about the value of education. Pray for the administrators, teachers, staff, students, and families in your local school and for educational policy makers.
- 19. Hold a Children's Sabbath.

- 20. Stay abreast of local education issues and needs. Hold information sessions. Invite the principal or a panel of other school leaders to speak at your church.
- 21. Announce major school events — such as graduation, big games, or performances — and ask church members to show up and show their support.
- 22. Be a cheerleader for schools and kids. Share success stories about teachers and students who are trying to do well.

### Supply student needs

- 23. Collect books to be used in classroom reading programs or to be given to children at the end of the school year. Ask teachers or the librarian for appropriate selections.
- 24. Develop a program to outfit kids with needed school uniforms, shoes, or athletic gear. Some churches use an “angel tree” system. Others set up a giveaway or exchange.
- 25. Fill backpacks with school supplies to be given away at the beginning of the school year.
- 26. Collect coats, hats, and mittens. Donate socks and underwear for the school nurse or other staff person to give away when younger children need a change of clothing.
- 27. Fill “snack packs” or backpacks with food to be taken home over the weekend by children who rely on school breakfasts and lunches for basic nutrition.
- 28. Start a summer lunch program in your church or another suitable location.
- 29. Conduct giveaways with dignity and discretion to avoid stigmatizing recipients. Seek the school’s guidance on where needs exist and the best way to distribute items.

### Help students succeed

- 30. Involve volunteers from your church in tutoring, mentoring, or after-school programs. If your school does not have programs to plug into, spend time investigating models and best practices.
- 31. Create and support a computer lab either in your church or your school.
- 32. Organize and resource a summer academic enrichment program in your school or church to counter summer learning losses.

- 33. Start a “graduation ministry” to assure that children are making academic progress, graduating from high school, and preparing for college.
- 34. Offer college-bound students SAT prep-sessions, guidance on college selections, and help in completing financial aid forms and applications.

### Offer spaces and places

- 35. Organize a volunteer workday to spruce up school facilities, helping with cleaning, painting, landscaping, facilities repair, play ground upgrades, etc.
- 36. Make church facilities available for team banquets, parties after school dramas, offsite meetings, or other school-related activities.
- 37. Host a community celebration at the beginning of the school year. This might be an occasion for a school supply giveaway, an immunization clinic, or a school uniform exchange.

### Support and affirm the work of teachers

- 38. Host an event to celebrate and recognize teachers in your congregation and community.
- 39. Start a teachers’ group within your church for educators to resource, support, and affirm one another in their vocational calling.
- 40. Encourage a culture of speaking positively about teachers to counteract the messages of disrespect and blame so rampant in some rhetoric about public education.
- 41. Send notes and cards of appreciation to teachers in your schools. Provide modest gifts as a token of appreciation, such as coffee shop or bookseller gift cards, plants, note pads, etc.
- 42. Ask church members or small groups to cater a special thank you lunch for teachers. Provide snacks for the teachers’ lounge occasionally throughout the year.
- 43. Contribute basic supplies to help teachers stock their classrooms — items such as pencils, paper, tissues, hand sanitizer, classroom decorations, stickers, and books that teachers often purchase with their own money.
- 44. Provide classroom volunteers. Many teachers value this help above all else.

## Support parents and families

- 45. Offer to support families and parents through parenting classes, crisis counseling, ESL or basic literacy classes, translation assistance, or by accompanying them to school meetings.
- 46. Offer transportation or childcare so parents can attend back-to-school nights, PTA meetings, or teacher conferences. Offer your church as an off-site location for these meetings if it would make it easier for parents to attend.
- 47. Work together with parents to foster their engagement in school issues and to empower them to advocate for their children and their school.

## Think systemically

- 48. Help church members engage in ways that open their eyes to the systemic injustices manifest in public schools. Encourage them to go deeper and ask “why.” Examine and address root causes of poverty and inequity.
- 49. Be an advocate for public education. Keep up with the work of local school boards as well as relevant state and federal policies. Support more adequate and equitable school funding.
- 50. Expect transformation! By engaging local schools, churches can build bridges of hope within their community that can lead to stronger schools and stronger churches.

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