



THE PORTRAIT OF A CLASSICAL SCHOOL

Seven Keys to Healthy Parent Organizations

by Brian G. Daigle

Parents are a vital part of a healthy classical Christian school. Not only are parents the primary educators of their children, they are also the greatest advocates for the school, within the school and outside in the community. Parents are the most important marketing tool available to the school. They are the most numerous volunteer group available to the school. And parents can often be the pool in which great talent, even new employees, may be found. Parents are also the largest group in the community that is most aligned with the school's mission and vision, more than clergy and more than corporate or political allies. Therefore, it is both a strategic and philosophical matter to ensure parents are incorporated well into the school, from their first interaction with the school to the last. To that end, classical Christian schools ought to create a Parent Organization which is able to efficiently and enjoyably incorporate parents into the life and needs of the school.

- 1) **Organizational structure.** Any parent involvement must fit clearly within the organizational structure of the school. This means, however, that the school must have a clear, published, and working organizational chart. This responsibility ultimately falls on the Head of School, with the counsel of the Board. If a school is not well administered, parents will get lost in the disorganization, and well-meaning parents will often find their way into curriculum, décor, and accountability decisions that eventually makes for an unhealthy organization. Or ill-meaning parents will find avenues to insert their authority in ways that will do great harm to personal relationships and the institution as a whole. So, the first principle is that if we want parents involved and involved in an enjoyable and constructive ways, the school needs to have the organizational structure which facilitates that involvement.
- 2) **One parent organization.** One parent organization, not many, needs to be created which houses all other parent involvement, even having sub-committees of this single organization as the school grows. That single organization would include volunteer opportunities, feedback or focus groups, and all other ways parents will formally interact with the school. It then ought to be in the life and culture of the school that if a parent wants to help or be involved or give feedback, it is done by this avenue and no other. This means there will not be ambiguity as to how parents are to be involved and where. There will be clear roads for parents who genuinely want to get involved, and there will be clear boundaries for parents who need structure so as not to overstep their role at or relationship with the school.
- 3) **The leader(s).** The leader(s) of this parent organization ought to be a school administrator who can ensure the mission and vision of the school is maintained through parent involvement or a trusted, capable, and long-time parent who works well with school administration. This is someone who is well-organized, committed to the school, communicates well, and can be



both strong and approachable to do the work required of them. If a parent, this leader needs to consider this a substantive volunteer position. Regular meetings should be set up between school administration (especially the Head of School) and the leader of the parent organization. The leader also ought to have clear responsibilities and tasks laid out within the organizational structure to ensure not just organization of persons but also of responsibilities. Parents may even be given the freedom to choose, according to their talents and interests, what responsibilities they want to do within the parent organization.

- 4) **Communication and volunteers.** Communication should happen early, priming the pump for opportunities and expected participation. This communication should happen on three platforms: 1) informational meetings (or prospective parent meetings) in the fall, 2) at the end of the spring (at parent orientation for the following school year) as parents gear up for the school year, and 3) through email in July and August as the school year sets sail. The opportunities to serve should already be established before admissions opens, so that parents know, from their earliest commitment to the school year, that their participation will be expected and appreciated.
- 5) **100% participation.** It should be in the communication and culture of the school that we want 100% participation in the parent organization. Full participation accomplishes a few goals. First, it helps offset the cost of running a school by having parents, who are already committed to the school's mission and vision, help carry the joys and burdens of running a private Christian school. Second, it brings parents into proximity with one another, where relationships are built and community organically grows. Third, it brings vitality to the school, energy that otherwise the administration, faculty, and board cannot manufacture by themselves. In all, full participation helps grow and build the school through parents' time, talents, and treasures being given to the parent organization. For anyone receiving financial aid from the school, joining the parent organization and volunteering should be required in order to maintain that financial aid.
- 6) **Opportunities to serve.** Once parents commit their time, the school ought to honor and respect that valuable commodity. This means that the school needs to have its act together, not leaving parents or volunteers guessing on "What comes next?" or "What am I supposed to do now?" The ways parents are going to help that year need to be clearly decided, laid out in a simple form, and easily collected long before the school year starts. Parents should be given options in two areas: *events* and *projects*. Events include galas, banquets, cookouts, etc. Projects include ongoing and periodic work: cleaning the kitchen, helping as a room parent, helping with hot lunch, etc. (A list of possible projects and events can be found at the end of this document.) Once collected, the leader can begin organizing the parents within the school calendar and the events or projects for which the parents volunteered.
- 7) **Gratitude.** Find consistent and creative ways to tell parents "Thank you!" This could be through "Thank You" cards or a brief meeting or email from administration. This includes board members and administration being aware at the event or project who is helping, and



saying “thank you” in real time, then doing it formally at a later time. Following up with gratitude is important for the morale and ongoing culture of the parent organization. Are parents seen? Do they feel valued? Are they appreciated? Is that appreciation privately and publicly acknowledged? Whatever the case, those who give to the school their time, talents, and treasures need to hear “Thank you” as often as possible. A spirit of gratitude is necessary for a healthy school and healthy parent organizations.

Classical Christian schools can utilize a healthy parent organization to do a number of activities throughout the school year: plan meals for school families in need, help fundraise, offer opportunities for parent education (e.g. lecture nights or reading groups with parents), help with marketing and outreach to the city, and help engage local churches. Healthy classical and Christian schools exist because parents want this education enough to support it, to lean in, to commit their children and time and treasures and talents to it. A healthy parent organization will capitalize on those natural motivations, helping mature more than just the child’s academic journey. A healthy parent organization will also fulfill another part of a classical and Christian school’s responsibility: to guide parents in their own gifts and growth within a distinctly Christian institution.

Salvador Dali’s Paintbrush

As alluded to above, there are a few ways that parent organizations can lose their way, allowing the portrait they present to slide away from the ideal. Parents at a classical and Christian school have an especially important role for representing and reinforcing in the home the standards of intelligence and conduct required within the walls of the school. If a family does not do this, they are undoing much of what they have asked the school to build in their child. An unhealthy parent organization within the school will cause the same kind of counter-productive tendencies. Parent organizations are prone to become distorted in a few noteworthy ways:

- 1) *Administratively overstepping.* This is when misplaced pressure is placed by the organization on administration, the board, faculty, or other parents on items that belong to the administration, board, or faculty to decide and implement. The word *misplaced* is important. Parent organizations do certainly have a place in the discussion among admin and faculty on important items, but those items are for the administration to decide, and the timing of those conversations are also for the administration to decide. That is to say, the parent organization should neither be seen nor implemented as an extension of the administration, or even as another school administrator. The parent organization is there to serve at the direction of its leader, who is put in place to work with and serve the leadership of the administration. It can happen that parents, in the name of *helping*, can overstep their relational bounds with the institution. Sometimes this is accidental and innocent. Other times it is malicious and intentional. Whatever the case, to keep a healthy portrait of a classical school on this canvas, the school ought to avoid the expectation that this will become another full-time job for the parents.
- 2) *Gossip groups.* When any group gathers, there is always potential for it to become something other than what it was intended to be. One of the ways this can happen in parent organizations



is that parents gather to serve their own agenda and not the agenda of the group. And this may manifest itself when parents gathering to speak with one another about topics which do not pertain to them: a teacher's weaknesses, that student's failings, the administrator's reputation, or some family's problems. A parent organization can become a gossip group in whole or in part, wherever the emotional and practical tone of the group becomes hidden conversations meant to meddle in happenings that do not belong to the individuals involved in the meddling. If the parent organization has not been tasked with the work of institutional accountability and cleanup, then their conversations should reflect this. To keep a healthy portrait of a classical school on this canvas, the school ought to ensure conversations at parent organization meetings and events are on topic, profitable, and decorous.

- 3) *The burdened few.* It is the case that in most institutions ten percent of the people do ninety percent of the work. But it doesn't *have* to be this way. If communication and structure are what they should be, and giving hearts are abundant throughout the institution, the workload should be adequately distributed among those who have agreed to help, and, as was already noted, that should be 100% of your parent body. Of course, there will be those few individuals who are work-horses, who would be happy to do everything, and they are helpful, but they should also allow the structure and organization to spread the burdens and joys of serving among those who have agreed to help. To keep a healthy portrait of a classical school on this canvas, the leader ought to ensure labor and involvement is adequately distributed among volunteers.
- 4) *A collection of cliques:* The parent organization is not an opportunity to create social clubs. To be sure, friendships will form and socializing should be happen. However, if cliques are beginning to form, even factions, within the parent organization, it may be time to rethink organizational strategy, communication, and purpose. It may be time to refocus the group on why the organization exists and how it can best serve the school and student body in the coming months. Partiality should be avoided by the administration and leaders within the parent organization, even if deep friendships exist. To keep a healthy portrait of a classical school on this canvas, the leader ought to pair volunteers with families they know and families they don't know, encouraging cross-grade, cross-family, and even cross-church relationships to be built.
- 5) *Another full-time job.* Though all are expected to participate in the parent organization, that degree of participation will differ, and that is okay. Some may give all, but all should give some. What some parents can give, especially with their time and talents, may be far above what others can give. The leader must be careful not to make this "another full-time job" for other parents volunteering their time. No doubt, the director will find some who are able to lean in more, and that is necessary. But that same degree of leaning in cannot be expected of everyone. This is why having the volunteer options clearly communicated and laid out allows people to decide what and where they can serve without over-extending themselves or their families. To keep a healthy portrait of a classical school on this canvas, the school ought to avoid the expectation that this will become another full-time job for the parents.



Below are some ideas of how parents can get involved with the parent organization, taken from Oak Hill Classical School (OakHillClassical.org):

Projects

(choose two)

- Assist with hot lunch once a month
- Assist with donor care and relations
- Join and assist with Gryphon Flight Team
- Help with marketing and city outreach
- Stock and clean teacher coffee bar once a month
- Clean kitchen once a month
- Organize and clean library once a month
- Assist as a Room Parent

Events

(choose two)

- Meet and Greet the Faculty
- Teacher Training
- Convocation
- Muffins with Mom
- Backyard BBQ
- Donuts with Dad
- Prospective Parent Day(s)
- Fall Association Meeting
- 5th Annual Pumpkin Race
- Fight for Christian Education Fall Fundraiser
- Winter and Spring Celebratio
- Pastor's Brunch
- Oak Hill Spring Banquet
- Grandparents' Day
- Oak Hill Olympic Games

*This article is a chapter in the book *The Portrait of a Classical School*. To see this article in its updated form, please reference that book.