

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS



While you may not have daily contact with parents of athletes, communicating effectively with this group is just as critical as communicating with athletes. In many respects, your effort of communicating with parents may be as important or more so as with any group of people you have to deal with as a coach.

Being proactive, clear and consistent should serve you well in this effort. While parents may not always agree with all of your coaching decisions, being kept in the dark will only exasperate them and create potential problems.

There are several well-established methods for communicating with your athletes' parents. There is no need to re-invent the wheel. As with most aspects of coaching, tweak each approach to your setting.

PRE-SEASON PARENT MEETINGS

While many schools have utilized pre-season parent meetings for many years, this effort is still very effective and should not be overlooked. There is no substitute for being able to head off concerns, answer questions and establish your expectations before your tryouts and season get under way. This proactive evening will result in many positive dividends and prove invaluable. Whether your athletic department hosts a session for all sports or you are on your own to set up the meeting, there are several suggestions to make this evening more successful.

As with most aspects of coaching, planning and preparation are critical. Not only do you want to make sure that all necessary points

are covered, but you also want this presentation to be as polished and professional as possible. Parents will either form a first impression or reinforce a previously established one.

What should you cover in your meeting? The answer is: everything necessary for mom and dad to understand how you will operate your program and what your expectations are for the players and their parents.

There are four items that are absolutely essential to cover, because these topics are the basis for 95% of all concerns and problems. It only makes sense to explain in detail the following:

- Team rules.
- Criteria for selecting the squad.
- Criteria for earning a letter.
- Sportsmanship expectations for athletes and fans.

Beyond those four vital items, there are a host of other topics that you may want to present to your parents considering your setting.

- Academic requirements for athletic eligibility.
- Your coaching philosophy.
- Your team's style of play.
- How practice sessions are conducted, including the length, when they normally start and finish and why or why not fans are permitted to attend.
- The athlete's attendance expectations at practice sessions and games, including any which may be held over vacation or holiday periods.
- The athlete's responsibility for issued uniforms and equipment.

- How, when and for what topics a parent should contact the coach.
- The athlete's responsibilities when using social Internet sites.
- The dangers of hazing and harassment and the efforts to prevent it.
- The procedures you will follow if an athlete is injured in a practice session or game.

Regardless of what you cover in your meeting, try to make the presentation as enthusiastic and positive as possible. This means planning, preparation, effort and even perhaps a little practice on your part. Your presentation is a chance to gain parental support.

While you should provide time for parents to ask questions, you also want to guard against any one or a small group of parents taking over and dominating your meeting. They may have a hidden agenda or personal vendetta. If you sense this, invite them to schedule an appointment with you at some future point.

If an issue or question arises which you cannot answer or is extremely problematic, don't be afraid to say that you don't know. Offer to get an answer and get back in touch with them. This is also a good opportunity to direct this individual to the athletic director who can handle the unusual or unique situation.

HANDBOOKS, BOOKLETS OR HANDOUTS

In addition to discussing many features of your program at pre-season parents meetings, it is also wise to produce and distribute written documents featuring many of these items. There are several benefits of providing these materials and one is that parents can use them for reference.

You can go into much greater detail and depth in handbooks or individual handouts than in an oral presentation. This is good in order to cover all aspects of your policies and procedures. You can also revise documents for future seasons in order to cover any loopholes or new concerns.

In the event that parents cannot attend your pre-season meeting, you can send the written materials to them. While those missing the meeting won't have the advantage of hearing everything first-hand and being able to ask questions, they will ultimately have all of the pertinent information.

One last major advantage of utilizing written materials is that a verbal explanation runs a greater risk of being interpreted to meet varying perspectives. Individuals normally accept things that are in alignment to their own beliefs and disregard items that don't support their position. Documents that are carefully crafted can help eliminate misinterpretations.

You can also post all these important documents on a team page associated with your school's Web site or as part of an Internet scheduling site. This provides another avenue for parents to get the necessary information. You will want to be careful to also update this site if you add to or edit your materials.

Before distributing any written documents—including team rules, expectations for practice sessions, team travel and many other aspects—you should have your athletic director read and approve them. In this manner, you will be sure that you are in compliance with all school procedures and policies and will have administrative support in the event that there is a problem.

At the very least, you should consider providing parents with the following written documents:

- Team rules.
- The criteria or matrix used for selecting the squad.
- The game and practice schedules—this information is important for families to plan ahead for transportation and meals.
- Sportsmanship expectations for athletes and fans.

Whether at the conclusion of the pre-season parents' meeting or by providing copies of your various documents, it is a very good idea

to have your parents sign a form indicating that they have received everything. Their signature does not mean that they necessarily agree with all items, but it does indicate that they have read your materials.

Unless an athlete is from a single-parent family, it is important that both parents sign the form. If only one of the parents attends the meeting, the one who missed the meeting could always respond with, “I didn’t know or agree to those provisions. I didn’t sign anything.”

The signed policy forms or parent contracts should be kept on file for reference. Should a problem develop during the season, having a parent’s signature is an important piece of ammunition in your arsenal and would be part of your first-line of defense regarding the disrespect of any policy or procedure. A sample copy is included in the Appendix.

NEWSLETTERS

Very much like pre-season parent meetings, newsletters are not a new concept. They can also be very effective and provide parents with needed information. This communicative effort is useful to update procedures, provide reminders of important dates and answer common questions that can help to stem possible concerns and eventual problems.

By using an E-mail distribution list, your newsletter can be delivered easily and quickly as an attachment. In this manner, you don’t have to worry about photocopying, addressing envelopes and postage. It couldn’t be simpler and your parents will sincerely appreciate your efforts.

E-MAIL BLASTS OR PHONE CALLS

If you have special announcements, especially if they require immediate or quick notification, you can utilize E-mail blasts. By using your E-mail distribution list, you can send a brief note—this should not be used for lengthy topics—to your parents in seconds.

Administrators can also reach parents with special announcements by using ConnectEd phone calls. If you have something urgent that your parents may need, you should check with your principal or

superintendent to see if one of their assistants could enable your use of this technology.

SPECIAL MEETINGS

In addition to pre-season parents' meetings, there are topics and situations that may be ideal for hosting a special meeting. Explaining the college athletic recruiting process, steroid abuse and concussion concerns are a few that are always worthwhile.

By utilizing this approach of hosting a special meeting, you have the opportunity to share a great deal of helpful, specialized information. Usually these meetings are extremely well received and appreciated by parents. This effort of help can create a very positive feeling and form a connection with the coaching staff and school.

NOTICES OR FLYERS

A notice or flyer may be a good way to get the necessary information to parents when announcing new fund-raising initiatives, special events or team functions. In the past, it would be common to mail flyers or ask athletes to take them home to their parents. The downside of this approach is the time and expense of mailing, and the distinct possibility that the athlete will forget or neglect to deliver the document.

There is another effective medium to get notices in the hands of parents. You can easily send notices via an E-mail attachment. If you use your existing E-mail distribution list, sending an attachment can be very easy and quick.

BOOSTER CLUB MEETINGS

Most individuals obviously think of booster clubs in terms of raising additional money for athletic programs. This is an extremely important purpose. In addition, however, these organizations also provide another avenue to communicate with your parents and community.

Asking for a minute on the agenda of a booster club meeting is an excellent way to make special announcements for upcoming events or

BEING PROACTIVE WITH PARENTS

In my second head coaching position, I was standing outside of our team locker room after finishing the post-game meeting and one of our parents approached me. Dad was unhappy because his son wasn't playing as much as he thought that he should. This father started with, "I coached Matt in the summer league and I know what he can do. He should be starting. And Matt got a great evaluation from his coach at camp."

While all parents love their children and may not be the most objective judge of their respective abilities, this confrontation required an immediate attempt to clarify several points. In reality, this young man was the 13th player at best on a 13-man squad.

As clearly and gently as possible, I explained to Dad: Playing time is earned in practice, during drills and scrimmage situations versus our players who are using our system. This provides a fair and accurate basis for determining who is best suited to start, who will comprise the substitutes and how long anyone plays.

In a summer league, you aren't using our system and, of course, not all of our players are playing. It is in no way comparable to our practice sessions or games.

All players get glowing evaluations at camps because the individuals operating the camp want your son to have a good experience and to return next year. We don't select our team based upon camp evaluations.

Matt's Dad heard my explanations and was satisfied. But being hit with demands from parents immediately after a game is nerve-racking and I learned a huge lesson through the incident.

From then on, I always made sure to develop and present parent expectations forms prior to the season. I always took the time to go over these expectations with parents at a meeting and provide hand-outs on them. I learned that being proactive with communication is vital to avoid potential problems.

to ask for help at a tournament or team function. Often a booster club may also have their own Web site and this provides one more outlet for your notices and announcements.

WEB SITES

Many schools have created and use their own Web site and others use Internet scheduling sites that offer team pages to all of the school's sports. Both formats are excellent methods of communicating with your parents.

In addition to being able to see your team's schedule, you can include everything pertinent for your team. Coaches can post their team rules, practice and travel expectations, pre-season preview and directions to upcoming opponents.

It is also possible to write brief articles about game results and highlight outstanding performances by athletes. You can list post-season awards won by your players and anything else associated with your team as long as it is done in good taste and in-line with your school's policies.

POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

A PowerPoint presentation is an important and effective tool to use for your pre-season, special or community meetings. Not only does this medium create a more professional and polished image, it also allows those in the audience a better chance to gather in and assimilate the important points of the message.

Even if you don't have any experience with PowerPoint, it isn't difficult to learn most of the basics. All it takes is a few minutes with a fellow coach, athletic director or media specialist in your school.

REFERENCES

Dicollo, J. *Utilizing a Website to the Fullest*. Interscholastic Athletic Administration, Fall 2009, p. 23.

Evers, J. *Conducting Productive Pre-Season Parent Meetings*. Interscholastic Athletic Administrator, Summer 2008, pp. 16-17.

Hoch, D. *Dealing with Parents*. Coaches' Quarterly, Fall 2005, pp. 10-11.

Hoch, D. *Make your Pre-Season Parents' Meetings more Effective*. Interscholastic Athletic Administrator, Summer 2006, pp. 18-19.

Hoch, D. *Pre-Season Parents' Meetings*. Coaches' Quarterly, Summer 2008, pp. 4-5.

Hoch, D. *The Real Solution to the Parent Problem in High School Athletics*. High School Today, November 2008, pp. 18-19.