

How to Develop a Parents' Organization in Your School

Parent/Teacher organizations, such as those in public and private school systems, have been important because they bring parents and teachers together to support each other and their school systems, increase parents' involvement in their children's education, and improve student achievement and success.

Those goals should be familiar to you, since they are actually some of the same goals of every martial arts school. You may not teach algebra or biology, but you do teach your students strong, positive character traits, important self-defense techniques and leadership skills.

Martial arts schools and their students and parents also deserve and require parents' organizations—and for the same reasons. All of the parents of your students went to academic school, so they know exactly what their children do all day; however, most of those same parents are not martial artists. That is why many arrive at an introductory appointment skeptical, filled with misconceptions and half-truths about the martial arts, and remain so for a number of their children's lessons.

A parents' organization seems critical to the success of your school and the advancement of your student for no other reason than it provides an opportunity to educate parents about the martial arts. Once parents understand the martial arts, they will be able to recognize its value and be more likely to support your school, and tell other parents about it.

Some martial arts instructors fear that if they allow parents to watch classes, state their opinions on various topics and help at special events, then parents will try to take control of the school, and create a variety of problems. That kind of unorganized, random parental involvement could very likely cause problems for you. The solution or strategy is to take a proactive and professional attitude, and develop a parents' organization with clearly stated, documented purpose and goals and roles for parents and teachers. You are then able to maintain control of teaching because the

document to which everyone agrees states that teaching is your domain, and parents will not interfere.

A documented agreement with purpose, goals and roles is not enough. Regular and clear communications in both directions are also essential, but that is easily accomplished within the structure of an organization. Improved parental communication is another reason why you want a parents' organization.

A marketing professional or consultant would tell you that the parents of your students are an entirely separate target audience than your school's marketing program. Parents require specific marketing messages because they have different expectations and needs. From that perspective, a parents' organization is also a marketing opportunity because when a target audience receives your message, some of them are apt to act, as you wanted—and that's also maintaining control!

The goal of this report is to help you understand the benefits of a parents' organization for your school and develop yours with a step-by-step system.

The Benefits of a Parents' Organization

Some of the benefits of a parents' organization include:

- Additional referrals and increased enrollments.
- Improved retention rate.
- A stronger brand or image in your community.
- More parents supporting your special events.

Additional Referrals and Increased Enrollments: Parents who join your parents' organization obviously want to be involved in your school and their children's martial arts education. There are probably many parents who will not join, who are equally committed to their children's training. Together, they are an extension of your marketing program. They are performing the classic role of a loyal customer: Telling others about the

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quality and benefits of a “business” that has benefited them. Word-of-mouth is still a powerful form of advertising, but you must start the words moving by delivering that quality, and formally organizing your parents, so they receive the right messages you want them to relay throughout the community.

Improved Retention Rate: Those students whose parents are members of your parents’ organization will tend to have above-average attendance. They know their parents are involved in the school, so they, as students, must set good examples; and they will be genuinely proud that their parents are active in their martial arts education. All these factors are likely to motivate students with involved parents to do well in class, practice more and continue to train. Because parents have more interaction and communications with you and your instructors through the organization, parents will have a better understanding of why their children should continue their training. Maybe best of all is that involved parents talk with new parents, and those interactions and exchanges of information can easily contribute to the new students of those new parents remaining with your program longer.

A Stronger Brand or Image in Your Community: “Brand” is that marketing term that refers to the image you project into your market area. The stronger your brand has penetrated the minds of your target audience, which is often parents, the more of them you will be attracted to your business. A parents’ organization is an excellent strategy, both to strengthen your image and project it strongly throughout your community. This benefit relates to “word-of-mouth” mentioned above. The parents who choose to be involved in your school also want to be identified as “doing the right thing” by their neighbors. The parents in your organization are also your “conduits” to the community’s many activities and events. They can easily help you plan and participate in community programs that are to your benefit. Many of those same parents may be the chairpersons of such events.

More Parents To Support Your Special Events: An active parents’ organization will not only provide you with

opportunities to participate in community events, but also plan and conduct more of your own events. Active parents want to be involved, so ask for volunteers to help you make your school events better planned, organized and attended. After all, your job is to teach and operate a martial arts school. Ask your parents to be events chairpersons. Because they often know the community better than you, they will be able to add elements and find opportunities that you just don’t have time to pursue. Parents can donate auction prizes and convince other parents to donate. Parents can help with many of the practical tasks of an event, such as scheduling, ordering materials, pickups and deliveries, operating games at carnivals, etc. Parental support of your special events is one of the greatest benefits of a parents’ organization and a role that parents always enjoy.

Starting Your Parents’ Organization

Step One: Creating a Parents’ Organization Category List

To start a parents’ organization at your school, first, make a list of the projects or activities in which parents can become involved, and then a list of specific tasks for each of those activities. Start with a short list of five to 10 targeted activities that do not require too many tasks and volunteers and too much time to complete. Gain some experience planning and working together on simple projects before tackling more complex ones. Starting simple will also help you determine the purpose and direction of your organization.

Below is a sample list of projects for a school’s parents’ organization, and possible tasks for the first two projects, as examples.

Parents’ Organization Projects List

- Project: Assist with the creation or updating of a student information area in the school.
Tasks:
 - Select a parent or a committee of parents.
 - Select location in school.
 - Create/design use of space.

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—Create content to be provided in student information area.

- Suggest ideas for increasing communication between parents and instructors.

Tasks:

Select a parent or a committee of parents.

—Schedule meeting to create document with ideas.

—Present ideas to next parent meeting.

—Vote on ideas to implement.

—Create a student/parent practice tip sheet with the head instructor to encourage home practice.

—Plan and assist with annual picnic.

—Help with a charity kick-a-thon.

—Organize a school “Spring Cleaning Day.”

—Schedule performances for the demonstration team in schools and at community events.

—Contact local schools and schedule free motivational talks, sponsored by the school.

—Establish beneficial relationships with area businesses, including employee discounts, co-op marketing opportunities and flyer distribution.

There is purposely a combination of short- and long-term tasks listed above, so you’re able to maximize the number of participating parents. Some parents have the time to chair a committee, while others only have an hour or two a week to help during an event.

Step Two: Select Parents To Lead Your Organization

Once you’ve completed a beginning projects list, approach three or four parents that you think are great supporters of your school and would serve as “model” parents for others. These parents should support all, or most, of your school’s events, and have demonstrated enthusiasm for your program and its message. They are also the parents you’ve seen talking with other parents, spreading a positive attitude about the value of your school.

Explain to each of the parents you’ve selected that you want to start a parents’ organization. It will help increase their children’s positive experiences, and will make the school a strong part of the community. Give

them a copy of your Parents’ Organization Projects List. Schedule a meeting with all of them and ask for their feedback and willingness to participate, even lead the organization. The leader (as chairperson or president) will be responsible for organizing and conducting meetings and creating committees to accomplish the organization’s projects.

At this point, you may decide to select a president of the organization, or ask one of the parents to volunteer. You may also want to consider that the other parents who will join your organization may not like the idea of you appointing a president, or simply accepting the first volunteer. Some may think that the selection of the president should be put to “a good old American vote.”

Ask the parents you’ve selected if they think it would be better to ask for volunteers or nominees for president and a vote during the first meeting, instead of starting the first meeting with someone already selected. Do what you think is best, but be aware that other parents may think they should have a choice as to who leads them.

Part of your discussion with potential leaders of your parents’ organization is to emphasize that the purpose of the organization is to create positive results for the children and the school. Its purpose is not to provide parents with a forum to complain, demand changes in the school’s operations, etc. Recommend that it should be a policy of the organization to direct those parents with complaints or issues to make an appointment to speak with you in private.

Step Three: Promote Your Parents’ Organization Meeting

The first task is to select group of parents to help you promote the organization and invite parents to the first meeting. Decide on a day, time and location (your school obviously), and create a first-meeting agenda, based on the projects lists you developed.

Start promoting the first meeting three to four weeks in advance with a number of different methods.

- Create a poster and display, where parents are sure to see when visiting your school.

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- Include a major announcement in your newsletter and on your Web site.
- Make class announcements.
- Distribute a flyer or letter during class; distribute flyers to all parents as they leave.
- Communicate with parents via email, phone, letters, postcards, etc.
- Create a sign-up sheet to display on a wall or your counter.

Ask one of your selected leaders to create and manage a sign-up sheet or other method to confirm parents will attend. Your selected leaders can also make phone calls a week before the meeting to confirm attendance.

Include in your announcement that all meetings will not exceed an hour-and-a-half, so parents are able to schedule sufficient time, including travel.

Your First Meeting

During the month before your first meeting, develop your first meeting agenda with your selected leaders. For your first meeting, spend the first portion of the meeting discussing the purpose of the organization and its goals, opportunities for parental participation, etc. Make sure you emphasize the positive purpose and benefits of the organization. Don't hesitate to tell parents that you're always available to meet with them and discuss any specific issues and challenges, but the parents' organization is not the forum for such discussions. You could go so far as to present these on a document that you ask each parent to sign as a symbol of his or her commitment.

Even if you don't take that extra step, it would still be a good idea to present each parent with a brief, one-page document that states clearly and concisely the purpose, goals and benefits of the organization and the opportunities for parental involvement.

As mentioned above, a major item on the agenda of your first meeting may be to vote for a president, depending how you decide to approach this potential challenge.

You will want to schedule a monthly meeting with the president or a committee of the organization to develop the next meeting's agenda. These would

include reports and follow-ups on the active projects, completed projects and new ones to add to your list.

An example of a first-meeting agenda could be:

- Meeting called to order by school owner or selected president.
- Welcome parents; thank them for taking their valuable time to attend; thank the selected parents who helped to organize and start the organization.
- Distribute a document with a brief overview of the purpose, goals, benefits and opportunities of the organization and the Projects List. You or your president reviews the lists with the entire group. Refer to the Projects List, according to the bullet points below.
- (Optional: Explain who has been selected as president or start the process to select a president.)
- Develop an organization database: Create and distribute a form for parents to complete with all of their contact information. You want to gather standard contact information, such as complete name; complete home mailing address; home, office and cell phone numbers; and email addresses, as well as information about their occupation, professions and/or special talents that could prove useful in the organization. Parents may be marketing professionals, printers, restaurant owners, etc., and be willing and able to contribute in many ways. Provide room on your form for parents to indicate their time availability to participate, and for which projects they would like to volunteer.
- Explain the Projects List and the specific tasks for which parents may volunteer.
- A discussion session to select projects to be completed. Ask parents for any other project ideas they may have in mind.
- Select and organize parents to volunteer and participate in those projects.

Conducting the First and All Subsequent Meetings

- Make sure that the first meeting starts on time, as should all future meetings. All parents and families operate within tight schedules, so their time and commitment should be respected.

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- At the beginning of each meeting, distribute a copy of the meeting agenda to all parents in attendance. This will help keep the meeting on-track and focused on the current projects and monthly goals.
- Welcome any new parents, and give them a Volunteer Information Sheet to complete and return at the end of the meeting. Assign one of your parental leaders to collect the information and update the master list regularly.
- This point is so important to repeat again! Clearly, but politely, communicate that the purpose of the meetings is the agenda, but if they have any questions or concerns about their children's programs or progress, then they may contact you privately to discuss them.
- During the first meeting, explain your exact involvement in the organization: monthly meetings with the president or committee to create the agenda, coordinating projects and tasks that the organization selects with the school's operations and staff, providing any support that will help to achieve the goals of the organization, etc.

The organization may reach a point of maturity that you do not need to attend entire meetings. Maybe you sit in the audience during the beginning and end. Whatever degree of involvement you have, please explain it specifically to the parents during the first meeting, so parents won't misunderstand your absence to mean that you have a lack of interest.

You should attend the first meeting in its entirety and maybe the next two or three. It all depends how well the leaders, or elected president, takes charge and moves the organization forward. During the initial stages of the organization, you want to be available to answer any questions and lend support.

Supporting Your Parents' Organization

Once your parents' organization has had its first few meetings, and there is clear evidence that parents want to participate and approach the organization with enthusiasm and support, then you want to demonstrate your support. Take some time to create a list of ways you're able to help them promote their

events and communicate information to other parents. Start your list with the following ideas.

Parent Resource Center: Designate a high-traffic area in your school, where the parents' organization is able to display and distribute information about its meetings and events. The Parent Resource Center could also include:

- Parenting information.
- A photo display of sponsored service and events.
- Information to interest other parents to join and become involved.

Newsletter: If your school produces a monthly newsletter, then provide the parents' organization with a column and/or space to announce/promote their events and meetings. If you already mail your newsletter to your students (and parents), then consider inserting a one-page newsletter from the parents' organization without the need for any additional postage.

Recognition: Make sure that you recognize the parents who have volunteered for the organization's projects and events. Include a "Thank You" message during your class announcements, write notes, use your school newsletter and include their names in any press releases to local media about school events. Recognition is volunteers' paycheck. The more positive recognition parents receive, the more positive they will feel about helping your school.

Remember, you are the catalyst, especially at the beginning, but you must remain ready, willing and able to support your parents' organization. Think of it as another type of leadership team for your school. The more help you provide; the more everyone will enjoy more benefits and success.

Member Results

One NAPMA member school, located in a small town of 9,000 people, and with the enthusiasm and involvement of its parents' organization, has generated "big-city" results:

- Increased student enrollment by more than 60.

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- Increased the number of paid seminars from one to nine a year, which should generate \$6,000 to \$10,000 for less than 15 hours of instruction.
- Increased the operating budgets of demonstration and competition team.

A parents' organization in your school will help you build stronger relationships with your students and their parents. Children will perform better and be more enthused about attending their classes when their parents are interested in help-ing. Parents will appreciate the opportunity to be involved, making the school a better place for their children to train. Your school will benefit from the added help, more referrals, better promotion of your special events and a larger, more positive profile in the community. Start planning today and you'll reap the benefits in the very near future!