

A Parent Liaison's Story . . .

Three very short years ago, my youngest son Ronny started the 6th grade at Talbot Middle School in Fall River, Massachusetts. I cannot believe that I will watch him graduate from the 8th grade next week and begin high school in the fall. I can remember how apprehensive I was at the mere thought of my "baby" leaving his very small, very secure and sheltered elementary school, only to be thrown into this scary, middle school zone. As I attended the open house for new students and parents, I promised myself that I would become as involved in my son's school life as humanly possible. Then one day it happened . . .

I received a hand-written letter from one of my son's 6th grade teachers, inviting my husband and I to attend a PTO meeting (at that time, we were still a PTO). Her letter was very complimentary to both of us and out of general curiosity we decided to attend the next meeting. After all, I had been "talking" about becoming more involved (not just your regular parent-teacher conferences of a whole five minutes) with Talbot Middle School. A few days before the meeting, I was reading the school calendar that my son brought home from school and noticed that Talbot Middle School was looking to hire a "Parent Liaison". I thought, hmmm, I wonder what that is all about. It is only 8-10 hours per week – could work. Well, I waited (and procrastinated) and then another notice came home and again, I read that Talbot Middle School was still looking to fill the "Parent Liaison" position. Well, I decided I had nothing to lose to inquire about the position so I made a call the very next day to set up an interview with the Principal.

Three weeks later, I joined the PTO (not as an officer or anything like that, only as a "silent" parent... now, for those of you who know me, that sounds pretty ridiculous, "silent" yeah right!!) and sent my resume to Mrs. Karol Coffin, the Talbot Principal, so that she could review my credentials to see if I qualified for the job. She called me in for an interview and before I knew it, I was hired.

Normally, I am NOT the "quiet" type and I knew that my opinion was going to count. I was going to make the very best of my new status as Parent Liaison. I implemented all the ideas that I had mulled over thus far. The first thing I did was attend several training courses through Title I (who, by the way, pays my small salary through the Title I grant). **My number one goal was to get more parents involved in their child's education. It is proven and documented that when a parent/guardian is actively involved in their child's education, that child succeeds and does much better than when the parent does not become involved.**

The following school year I was voted onto the Talbot School Council. This is a forum in which teachers, parents and administration meet on a monthly basis to discuss the Talbot School Improvement plan (SIP) and how we can meet the needs of the District's improvement plan. One particular thing I am very proud of is a newsletter that I created that year. It is called The Talbot Times. I send this newsletter to parents every other month in an attempt to inform them of what is happening in the Talbot Community and in their child's classroom. It started out as a 4 page newsletter and has flourished into a life of its own. My last issue was 16 pages long. Needless to say, my 8-10 hours a week position has turned into a labor of love! This newsletter is then copied by the office staff and sent home to parents. It lets the parents know what is happening in the Talbot Community. Many of the teachers submit small articles to me and then I work with graphics to enhance each article to make it more appealing to both the parents and the students.

Another way I have worked to reach out to parents is to coordinate various parent workshops. I was able to work with the Parents PLACE representatives who offer free workshops for parents. They have several topics to choose from. This year we held three workshops through Parents' PLACE and one hosted by our Science and Math Departments. We offer refreshments and free babysitting (through Title I). The workshops we chose this past year were "Parents are Powerful" (one in English and one for Bilingual parents English/Spanish/Portuguese) and an informative workshop on the MCAS exams (English/Spanish/Portuguese).

Another way I was able to reach out to parents was being elected President of the PTO last June. I had the entire summer to mull over where I wanted to take the Talbot Middle School PTO. When I held my first meeting I had a very clear vision of the things I wanted to change. The first thing I needed to do was to persuade the staff to become a larger part of the PTO. I feel that when we have all three components working together (administration: principal, vice principal(s); teachers and parents) we become a much stronger community. Parents are able to work with their child's teachers in a more laid back manner instead of the regular stringent parent/teacher conference which sometimes can be a tad negative. I am very proud of the staff at Talbot because they try to send at least one member of their "team" to each meeting. I also started to have refreshments at the meeting. Sometimes the teachers don't even go home and stay until the meeting begins at 6:00PM. The dedication here at Talbot is truly amazing!! The second goal I had was to recruit more *dependable* parents to be actively involved with the PTO. The third goal was to turn the PTO into a PTA. I am thrilled to announce that Talbot is officially a PTA as of June 1, 2006. I wanted to become a PTA because of the many benefits and prestige that comes with being part of the National PTA.

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"Three 4 me" website was truly inspiring and I think that was the beginning factor in making the change. The people I have met through the PTA have not only been extremely professional, but have been incredibly friendly and helpful. I can't thank Michelle Tremont, the Massachusetts PTA President enough for all of her encouragement and helpful suggestions that she presented us with.

This past year we've had several fundraisers that enabled us to pay for many different things for the school. Every year we give away four \$100.00 scholarships to 8th grade students. The students have to fill out an application and write an essay on how Talbot has been an influence in their lives. The top four scorers win the scholarships that are presented at the 8th grade graduation which is held at Durfee High School. We also pay for decorations for the graduation and this year, with a little creative financing, we were able to not only pay for the DJ for the 8th grade dinner dance but we also were able to decorate the room. We have raised funds to help defray the cost of buses for various field trips. This year we were able to help out our Science Departments on several occasions. We paid for the membership for Talbot to be involved in the National Science League. We were also able to supply milk for the MCAS breakfasts and purchase the graduation cakes and beverages for 8th grade class day. These are only a few of the many ways we try to help out the Talbot Community. Our goals next year is to run a new fundraiser that we never tried before. We are going to sell Frozen Pies before the holidays. Hopefully, we should raise some decent money doing that.

My last day in office will be June 30, 2006. My son Ronny is graduating from Talbot and attending Durfee High School in the fall and I feel very strongly that I allow myself enough time and availability to be actively involved at Durfee for the goodness of my son. As I've mentioned before, it is imperative that we, as parents/guardians, remain involved in our child's education. I intend to follow my own advice!! I will, however, remain at Talbot as the Parent Liaison in the fall and also the elected Parent Liaison of Talbot's PTA. The new President will be Sheri McCallister who has been an officer in the capacity of Secretary for several years now. She offers not only experience but a true sense of loyalty and dedication – all the qualities needed to be a good leader.

The next big hurdle we will be tackling is implementing mandatory Spirit Wear (uniforms) at Talbot Middle School. The Fall River School Committee voted unanimously to approve the spirit wear polo shirts, t-shirts and sweatshirts to start in September. Of course, with change, there will be opposing voices that will need to be heard, however, when we prove to those voices that spirit wear will undoubtedly change the culture of our school and be a positive influence for our students, the opposition will come around!!

In closing, I will leave you with the four slogans that our Principal, Mrs. Karol Coffin, started when she came began her tenure as the Principal at Talbot Middle School. These slogans have stuck with the children and the teachers and the parents and are written or painted in each and every classroom and in all the corridors. They ring true every day at Talbot Middle School. **YOU CAN DO IT! I WON'T GIVE UP ON YOU! EFFORT MAKES A DIFFERENCE! THIS IS IMPORTANT!!!!**

Debbi Dumais, PTA President, Talbot Middle School and Parent Liaison for Talbot Middle School