Interest Circles: A Tool to Transform Parent Experience
Poughkeepsie Day School is the leading progressive school in the Hudson Valley, serving nearly 200 students, from PreKindergarten through grade 12.

Our steadfast commitment to providing an education that liberates the mind and ignites passion and purpose in our students has made us the region’s premier choice for education for eighty-five years.
We are a New York school, but we are not a NYC school. We are located about 85 miles north in the Hudson Valley.
Christina Powers
Director, Communications & Community

Member of Advancement Team for almost 10 years
Parent for 16 years

I've had an opportunity to see the school from two key perspectives, and over a time of major change...from recession to technology and communications changes
Ben Chant
Head of School

Fourth year in role
30 years in NYC schools

Enrollment: admissions and retention is primary focus
National Adult Volunteer Rate in Decline

Source: University of Maryland Do Good Institute • Created with Datawrapper
We tried many things to stem the tide...

- flexible meeting times
- cooler events
- guest speakers
- surveys (what the heck do you want??!!)
- more bite-sized assignments
- serving food and adult beverages
- virtual meeting technology
- increased communications about initiatives and outcomes
- defined job descriptions
- cooler events
Parent demographics changed and we all feel the strain of time and resources

- all parents working (single and couples)
- families migrated from New York City to live in the Hudson Valley, but still work in the city
- everyone is distracted by information and options

⭐ Parents consider themselves professionals, and want to lend their expertise in area of interest or passion
At the very same time, we looked hard at why our community made philanthropic gifts to the school...

There are many reasons people give, but at PDS "Giving Clubs" no longer seemed like an encouragement

In fact...they started feeling like a turn-off
This led us to address the need re-invent the way we build community and fundraise in a way that pays attention to important aspects of our culture.
PDS Interest Circles were born. We chose this shape because community feels like a circle.

“A circle is different because it's like a community. You talk, you see everyone's faces, everyone's reactions, emotions, and I feel like you connect much better." (Joseph, grade 12, Brooklyn)

Circles intersect for collaboration, which we knew that would be a key to success.
PDS Interest Circles

Arts  Sustainability  Making & Technology  Community Engagement  Athletics

"What's your passion?"
PDS Interest Circle: Pre-Implementation

- We didn’t use them as a replacement for the Parents Association right away, but as additional ways to create excitement and community.
- Board members were asked to co-chair. We paired them with parents that were passionate about the circle topic.
- Our first meeting was a brainstorming meeting including all circle co-chairs along with the head of school and me as director of community and communications.
- We brainstormed about HOW we would unleash circles on our community, and WHAT anchor initiatives made sense.
- A faculty liaison was assigned to each group.
In Year One 2018-2019

Arts
Parent Talent Show
Set building/design
Instrument Drive

Sustainability
Movie - Community
Atrium Garden

Making & Tech
Maker Faire
Workshops

Community
Cleanups
School/student
events

Athletics
School spirit
Alumni connect
PDS Interest Circle: Public Roll-Out

• Distributed one-page brochure announcing Circles and inviting folks to join (available at workshop)
PDS Interest Circle: Roll-Out

- Distributed one-page brochure announcing Circles and inviting folks to join (available at workshop)
- Posted Circles widget on parent portal so that parents could find out more about the Circle and RSVP to attend meetings
PDS Interest Circle: Parent Portal Widget
PDS Interest Circle: Parent Portal Widget

PDS Interest Circles

Community  Arts  Sustainability  Making  Athletics  📅

🌿 Sustainability

Sign Up Form: Sustainability Interest Circle
by Christina Powers on 2019/01/11

PDS Interest Circles Overview for Fall 2019
by Christina Powers on 2019/10/05
PDS Interest Circle: Roll-Out

- Distributed one-page brochure announcing Circles and inviting folks to join (available at workshop)
- Posted Circles widget on parent portal so that parents could find out more about the Circle and RSVP to attend meetings
- Included discussion and symbolism of Circles in new parent and beginning of school year events
PDS Interest Circle: Parent Events

Arts
Sustainability
Welcome Back!
Community
Make
Tech
Athletics
PDS Interest Circle: Roll-Out

- Distributed one-page brochure announcing Circles and inviting folks to join (available at workshop)
- Posted Circles widget on parent portal so that parents could find out more about the Circle and RSVP to attend meetings
- Included discussion and symbolism of Circles in new parent and beginning of school year events
- Included mention of Circles on all communications vehicles and in newsletters and other major communications
PDS Interest Circle: All Communications Vehicles -
PDS Interest Circle: Implementation
Lots of Communication

- announced meetings for each Circle everywhere
- meetings were always held in a public place during times of high parent traffic
- parents brainstormed about possible events and initiatives or weighed in on events that had already been planned in pre-roll-out
- news about events and initiatives were communicated, and all parents were always invited to each planning meetings and event
In Year One 2018-2019

**Arts**
- Set building/design
- Instrument Drive
- Parent Talent Show

**Sustainability**
- Movie - Community Atrium Garden

**Making & Tech**
- Maker Faire Workshops

**Community**
- Cleanups
- School/student events

**Athletics**
- School spirit
- Alumni connect
Example: Talent Show Event Collaboration

Arts Interest Circle

Calling All Parents Interested in Making the PDS Parent & Faculty Talent Show Beyond Awesome!

Thursday, February 20, at 8:15 am, Gilkeson lobby

Help needed with sound, lighting, recruiting talent, setup, decorating, ushering and getting all parents to attend this wonderful event!
Example: Talent Show Event Creativity
Example: Talent Show Event Celebration
Interest and involvement in each circle multiplied

- co-chairs recruited
- opportunities for connections grew
- involved alumni
- brought in greater community
Launched Circle Funds in March 2019
Major Fundraising Concern: PDS Interest Circles will eat the Annual Fund for breakfast!
Solution: A portion of gifts to Circles will go to the Annual Fund

- Arts: 70% Circle, 30% Annual Fund
- Sustainability: 70% Circle, 30% Annual Fund
- Making & Technology: 100% Annual Fund
- Community Engagement: 70% Circle, 30% Annual Fund
- Athletics: 70% Circle, 30% Annual Fund
**Intended Outcome of Interest Circles**

Engagement with our curriculum and community = Increased Retention & Giving

**Positive Side Effect:** Circles gave us a new way to partner with other organizations and market the school externally.
Exercise: What are your school's Passion Circles?

1. What four main aspects of your school curriculum are your parents passionate about?
2. What aspects of that passion lend themselves to building community and potential fundraising?
3. What events or initiatives could that lead to?
Year Two: 2019-2020

The Community Circle has now taken on initiatives previously handled by the Parent Association:

- Start of year picnic and coffees
- Book fairs
- Class/advisory parents help set up monthly community events
- Class photos
In Year Two 2019-2020

**Arts**
- Parent Talent Show
- Set building/design
- Concert promotion
- AV inventory

**Sustainability**
- Beer/cheese tasting
- Beekeeping
- Garden beds

**Athletics**
- School spirit
- Faculty-student games
- Cross-Country course cleanup

**Community**
- Student events
- Parent Association initiatives

**Making & Tech**
- E-waste event
Year Two Questions

• Getting board members and parents together was too much - is one leader enough?
• Be more deliberate about fundraising before it starts. Where should funds be channeled? Be careful what you restrict
• Wizard of Oz effect
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