



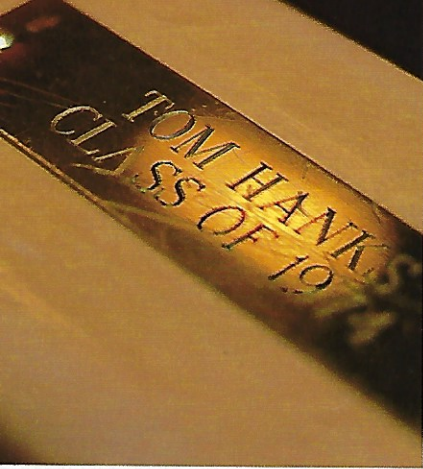
Skyline High's auditorium, once a hallmark of the school, had fallen into disrepair, and there seemed to be no money to fix it—until parents Kathy and David Kahn got into the act.

## CHANGE SCHOOLS FOR THE BETTER

Despite the busiest of schedules, parents across the country still find time to help make their kids' schools better. Maybe you can too. BY LISA LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARGOT HARTFORD

When Kathy and David Kahn's son, Daniel, entered Oakland, California's Skyline High School in 1998, the parents were dismayed when they saw the shabby state of the school's auditorium. A 976-seat venue used for several student productions each year, the auditorium had been the school's crowning glory once, but no longer. "The walls were stained, and many seats had been cordoned off with hazard tape," Kathy recalls.

The Kahns spoke to other school parents about the situation, and soon the Skyline PTSA Performing Arts Committee was born. The group's goal: a total overhaul—from removing decades worth of chewing gum on the floor to replacing the antiquated lighting system. Parents knew that the project would require a major outreach to others who



School alumni can be a powerful force to help parents make positive changes in their kids' school. The parents who helped revitalize Skyline High School's auditorium got help from dozens of successful former students, including actor Tom Hanks. Now the auditorium—named for Hanks' drama teacher—puts on several shows during the school year.

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cared about the school, so the Kahns and the committee put the word out to alumni. "The school's been around for more than 40 years, and we knew there were a lot of successful alumni out there," Kathy says. Using online alumni services, the committee gathered e-mail addresses of Skyline graduates and began a campaign. The committee also contacted Oscar-winning actor and Skyline alumnus Tom Hanks, who donated money and agreed to take part in the project. Hanks was on hand in June 2002 when the new auditorium was unveiled and renamed in honor of his former Skyline drama teacher. Kathy was thrilled that her younger son, Jeremy, has been able to enjoy the new auditorium during his time at Skyline. Most important, the former eyesore is once again a source of pride.

## Going back to school

Like the Kahns, many parents are taking active roles in their kids' schools to bring about positive changes. Examples range from better health awareness to finding creative ways to provide critical student resources when school budgets fall short.

In most cases, parents made the difference, even parents who might have thought themselves too busy. "You can get involved even in very small ways," notes Alicia Moag-Stahlberg, executive director of Action for Healthy Kids, a nonprofit organization that promotes better nutrition and exercise in schools. "Making small changes spurs more change."

It can start by questioning one line on a list. Becky Crabtree of Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, remembers the school supply list from her son's second-grade teacher. Along with pencils and paper, the teacher had requested two bags of candy to be used as classroom incentives for the kids during the year. That added up to 52 bags for one classroom of 6- and 7-year-olds. As a nurse, Becky knew the last thing kids needed was more sweets.

## Policing school policy

To provide alternatives to teachers accustomed to using candy as an incentive, Becky researched free programs such as Team Nutrition, a U.S. Department of Agriculture-sponsored effort that offers grade-specific nutrition and fitness guidelines. She discovered an alternative to her school's candy-as-reward system: Take 10!, offered by the nonprofit International Life Sciences Institute. Take 10! features low-cost training to help teachers incorporate exercise into the classroom through 10-minute bursts of physical activity. The kids love it. "When I see them get up and do a Take 10, the kids are grinning," Becky says. "They just love it—they jump out of their chairs!"

Becky and other parents went further. They established an advisory group to survey parents and teachers about current policies regarding nutrition and physical activity at school, ultimately leading to new guidelines adopted by the school council. Now parents are encouraged to send more healthful snacks to school, and the cafeteria vending machine features fruit snacks and baked potato chips instead of candy bars and cookies.

## Supporting special needs

In Michigan, two mothers were also spurred to action by what they saw in the classroom. Sandee Koski says she had to "reinvent the wheel" each year at school on behalf of her 10-year-old son, Nathan, who receives special education services. Sandee wanted Nathan to be around typical peers rather than placed in a special-education classroom. Each year she would meet with Nathan's teachers to discuss expectations.

Kelly Orginski waged the same struggle on behalf of her son Trent, 13, who has Down syndrome. "I kept pushing to have him included," she recalls. Both women learned that even when teachers were willing to include their sons in the classroom, the teachers >> on 159

often felt that they didn't have the skills to educate special-needs kids.

The two moms eventually learned about an education grant—the Everyone Together Project—sponsored by the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council and administered through United Cerebral Palsy chapters—and applied for funding. Their proposal was accepted, netting \$24,000 over four years. “We took the grant to the superintendent and asked, ‘How can we partner with you?’” Kelly remembers.

That fall, Kelly and Sandee helped organize teacher-training sessions that covered such topics as accommodating different styles of learning and developing lesson plans according to those styles.

Both moms have noticed a difference in the teachers' approach in the classroom. “There's a decided willingness to look at Trent as a learner and determine what he needs to know in his life,” Kelly says.

### Raising visibility

Sometimes parental involvement can mobilize an entire city. On Super Bowl Sunday in 2003, Bobbie Regan of Portland, Oregon, gathered with 15 parents to talk about something far more important than football. Because of a funding shortfall, their kids' school year was slated to lose 24 days of instruction. “It would have been the shortest school year in the nation,” Bobbie says. The state legislature wouldn't meet again to discuss the budget for two years. Portland's reputation for high-quality schools landed the city's funding crisis in the national news.

Soon after, the group Help Out Public Education (HOPE) decided that a countywide three-year tax increase was the best bet to keep school open longer. Within a few weeks, HOPE had signed up some 2,500 parents. Bobbie quickly became one of the group's spokespersons. Members met with business leaders and city and county officials, eventually working out a proposal giving 70 percent of the proposed tax revenue toward keeping schools open longer.

The next hurdle: muster media attention by using the city's renowned bridges. At a rally in February 2003, “parents and kids with signs were on both sides of every single bridge,” Bobbie reports. The referendum was placed on the ballot and was passed in May 2003, providing funding to last until the next state budget cycle.

Afterward, Bobbie ran for a position on the Portland school board and was elected. Although her new role makes her a board member, “I'm a parent first. I'll always be a voice for parent involvement,” she says. ☺

### GOOD TO KNOW

Web sites with information on how parents can help their kids' schools:

- Action for Healthy Kids: [actionforhealthykids.org](http://actionforhealthykids.org)
- Center for Parent Leadership: [centerforparentleadership.org](http://centerforparentleadership.org) or 859/233-9849, ext. 226
- Connect for Kids: [connectforkids.org](http://connectforkids.org)
- Parents for Public Schools: [parents4publicschools.com](http://parents4publicschools.com) or 800/880-1222

More at [bhg.com](http://bhg.com) [www.bhg.com/school](http://www.bhg.com/school)



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