
PARENT ACTION

FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Barb Flis

www.parentactionforhealthykids.org

Barb Flis, Founder of Parent Action for Healthy Kids, insists that every parent has the power to make a difference. Barb is a parent guru, and published expert in advocating for children's health. Her focus lies in connecting families, schools and communities on children's social, emotional and physical health. She designs and implements trainings and workshops for parents, teachers, school administrators, public health professionals and community-based organizations. Barb is a motivational speaker whose passion makes her a sought after presenter throughout her home state of Michigan and across the United States.

Barb cites her grass-roots PTA experiences as the first step on the journey that has led her to serving on an expert panel for the American Academy of Pediatrics to write guidelines for family and community involvement in health, mental health and safety in schools; being named chair of the schools committee for the Michigan Surgeon General's **Michigan Steps Up** Campaign; and a Michigan and Indiana core team member for the American Cancer Society Coordinated School Health Leadership Training Institute. In 2005 Barb was appointed by Michigan's Governor Jennifer Granholm to coordinate the **Talk Early & Talk Often** initiative which is designed to help parents gain knowledge and skills to talk to their middle school children about abstinence and sexuality. A tribute to Barb's work is evidenced by her recent invitation to Washington D.C. as one of ten participants to provide input in developing the First Lady's **Let's Move** initiative which is designed to reduce childhood obesity and raise a healthier generation of children.

Advocating on behalf of parents and children for more than twenty years, Barb's "parent-to-parent" style in communicating has won her great praise and national media attention. She brings to educators and other key stakeholders at the local, state and national level, a unique parent perspective which has broadened collaboration between parents, communities and schools.

Action for Healthy Kids®

A CONVERSATION WITH BARB FLIS MICHIGAN TEAM MEMBER WORKS TO ENGAGE PARENTS

Barb Flis is passionate about engaging parents to make a difference. As founder of Parent Action for Healthy Kids, she is channeling her passion to connect parents, communities and schools in Michigan to improve the health and wellbeing of children. Barb believes parents are the most powerful champions of children. Through her work, she helps parents understand how to communicate to schools about what is important to them and how they can help. As a mother of two daughters, both of whom are now adults, Barb recalls being a parent of school-aged children and seeing both sides of the coin – parents' frustrations and the challenges schools face to implement changes. Given this disconnect, Barb wanted to bridge this gap of how information is delivered and communicated to parents, and to do it in a meaningful way.

Too often, Barb has seen school districts go on the offense when parents voice concerns. Her efforts focus on building relationships and trust between parents and schools because parents should be part of the process and the solution. Barb believes that Wellness Policies are critical to understanding that both schools and parents want the same thing – to provide what is best for children. With the emergence of Local Wellness Policies, parents are more engaged with schools because of their interest in the health of their children.

Barb cites her grassroots PTA involvement as the turning point which led to serving on an expert panel for the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines for Family and Community Involvement in Health, Mental Health and Safety in Schools. In addition to leading Parent Action for Healthy Kids, Barb serves as co-chair of the Michigan Surgeon General's *Michigan Steps Up Campaign*, and was appointed in 2005 by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm to coordinate the *Talk Early & Talk Often* initiative to help parents gain knowledge and skills to talk to their middle school children about abstinence and sexuality.

She was connected to the Michigan Action for Healthy Kids Team in 2002 when the Team learned about her work with parents for the Michigan Department of Education. She was asked to join the Team's steering committee as a parent advocate of the *Eat Healthy, Play Hard* conference, and has since stayed involved with the Michigan Team. This year, Barb is conducting a series of 10 workshops to engage parents in school wellness, made possible by a grant awarded to the Michigan Department of Education through the United States Department of Agriculture.

According to Barb, parents don't need research to understand why changes in school wellness are necessary because, "they already know their kids need time to eat and time to run." She cites an example of an elementary school parent who wanted to increase the 30 minutes of time provided for recess and lunch. After creating a pie chart, the parent articulated to the school board that the 30 minutes provided, only afforded students 4 minutes to eat their lunch, and more time was needed.

When it comes to engaging parents, Barb's approach is simple and direct – “Here’s the problem, this is how we got here, let’s understand the circumstances without playing the blame game, and agree on solutions that both parents and schools can be a part of.” At each workshop, which also involves school principals and food service personnel, she encourages parents to think of an action step to take as a result of their participation. It starts by developing a ‘mini’ action plan. But, she cautions parents to not set their goals too high. “Progress begins by taking small steps, and parents often don’t realize they are already doing small things in their children’s lives that can have impact,” she says. Such as the parent who created a pie chart to demonstrate that children weren’t provided enough time to eat lunch in school.

Parents can initially take simple steps to become more involved in school wellness. Barb encourages parents to better understand the Wellness Policy of their child’s school; to eliminate using food as a reward; to work with sports teams to provide healthier snacks; and to substitute junk food with more nutritious foods at children’s birthday parties in school. Eventually, parents can play a role in leading to more sustainable changes such as advocating for physical education in schools. Barb reminds parents that, “the blame cannot lie with schools as long as Wellness Policy is an unfunded mandate.”

School staff members also play a role in encouraging children to make healthier choices by leading by example, such as providing more nutritious food at staff meetings. Teachers are a source of influence to children and there is an opportunity to make positive decisions when it comes to nutrition. Barb offers the example of children seeing teachers smoke, before schools instituted non-smoking policies. Barb encourages teachers to not walk into the classroom with a can of soda but rather to pour the beverage in a mug so children are not influenced by a daily soda habit.

Barb credits the tools and resources provided by the Michigan Action for Healthy Kids Team to contributing to the effectiveness of her workshops, specifically *Tips and Tools for Physical Activity* and *Tips and Tools for Healthy Foods and Beverages*. Based on her experience, she emphasizes that tools should be created at the state level so local schools that don’t have the time to develop materials, can focus their time on engaging parents.

The success stories of parents are what keep Barb inspired. Given her enthusiasm and dedication, it’s easy to understand the impact of her work with parents.