

Training Topic: Joining Nights

Commissioner's Monthly Training Topic:

Joining Nights

The school sign up night is probably one of the most important district/unit functions within the Boy Scouts of America. While many unit leaders believe that the school night sign-up is primarily a *unit* function, it is actually a *shared function between the unit, district, and council*. In order for any council to function, it must have active districts with active membership; for a district to function, it needs not only to have the support of an active council, but it must have active units with active adult and youth membership.

It is from these school nights that give the units a new infusion of youth and adults so that they may continue. Unfortunately, many unit leaders do not take them as seriously as they should, and youth that might have remained committed to the program will sometimes drop out within the first few months. It is essential that Joining Nights be as carefully planned and organized as would a district camporee.

As commissioners, we can actually assist the units in achieving its recruitment and retention goals from school night sign ups. While the commissioner should not dominate or control the event, we can assist in the planning, coordinating, and operations of school night. The success of any Joining Night depends on the efforts of the unit and the district, acting through the district membership committee and commissioner staff, to achieve our recruitment goals.

The commissioner's role in the Joining Night is that of *follow-up and support*. Unfortunately, most parents will judge the unit's program based on how well organized the school night is. Things such as too small of a meeting space, running out of forms, and tensions between district staff and unit leaders can actually kill any momentum of support parents might otherwise have for the program. There are some key areas where the commissioner can really make the difference in how productive a school night can be. Here are some things that commissioners can do to make a difference:

- ❖ **Assist in the scheduling of the school night:** Although this sounds pretty easy, this is an extremely important part of the event. The district executive will provide the dates of the school "Boy Talks" to unit leaders. As commissioners, once we have the date of the school rally, we should make every effort to assist them in having a Joining Night within 72 hours of the school "Boy Talk". After 72 hours, youth excitement from the rally decreases by nearly 60%.
- ❖ **Assist in the planning of events of the school night:** Each unit is different. Some may want to have a mini-Pinewood derby with pre-made cars; others will want to put on some demonstration of scout skills, while others will expect the district leadership to run the entire thing (**note:** from the early planning stages, encourage unit participation as this will increase parental confidence in the unit's leaders.) Whatever happens, the Joining Night needs to be well planned and well coordinated. Here are some guidelines to follow when helping plan the Joining Night:
 - **Try to avoid having it on the same night as a normal scout meeting.** This removes the focus from the potential scout and their parents and places it on trying to maintain order.

- **Make sure the location of the meeting is large enough.** Nothing turns off parents more than to be confined in a small room with another 20 parents that feel the same way. This can actually be seen by parents as a lack of planning. Better to have too much space than not enough.
- **Make sure that you have plenty of forms for the Joining Night.** The District Executive has an estimated available scouting population for each school in the district (total available youth or TAY). Research indicates that the *best* turnout is usually about 35% of the school's TAY attending a Joining Night. Therefore, make sure you have at least enough applications – both youth and adult, to cover that amount.
 - **Another form that is underutilized in the scouting program is the Parent Survey.** If the unit is not using these forms, try to encourage them to. Pass a youth and adult membership application, background check form, and parent survey to every parent in attendance at the meeting. If the unit leader does not want to use the parent survey, they can be forwarded to the district membership committee who then would have the benefit of knowing the skills and interests of adults whose children are in the program - which creates a pool where potential adult leadership can be recruited from.
- **Make sure that arrangements for audio-visual equipment has been made.** Sounds easy enough, but if the unit is going to show the *highly recommended introduction to Scouting* videos available, then it is essential that such equipment be available for use.
- ❖ **Remain in contact with unit leaders until two weeks after the Joining Night:** This is probably the most essential step. This allows you to avoid the surprises that can accompany school nights and allows you to follow up on any applications or monies that were not collected on the sign up night. Although the unit commissioner is to visit/make contact with the unit once a month, the school night should be followed up
- ❖ **Be prepared to answer any parent's questions that are deferred to you:** while this may sound easy enough, there are times that you are the only district person attending the event. Because of this, there are times that the unit leaders may defer a question to you. If you do not know the information, **do not make up an answer**, but inform the parent that you do not have the answer, but get their phone number and follow –up with them. You will earn their respect more that way than by giving out the wrong data.
- ❖ **Make notes about the school night – record good with the bad:** This allows you to keep a record of what worked and did not work. What worked for your school nights may work at a unit that is having problems meeting recruitment goals.
- ❖ **Make sure to be in and promote the official BSA uniform for the program:** The uniform identifies us as part of the Boy Scouts of America. For commissioners, it is important that we wear the uniform and by example, encourage the unit's leadership to do the same.

Make no mistake about it; the Joining Night is extremely important in the health of our council, districts, and units. Many times, the first impression that we give the parents who attend this meeting will be the impression that sets their tone as to how they will support their child and scouting. As commissioners, we can help make this a positive experience for both the unit and the parents.