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Bringing Parents to School

By Nora Carr

Despite the current trend of holding teachers and principals solely accountable for student learning, research underscores the power of parents.

In fact, most top scholars note that, while teachers have significant influence on student achievement, non-school factors outweigh those controlled by educators by a two-to-one margin.

The impact parents have on student achievement can be profound. A 2006 study of National Assessment of Educational Progress data revealed a 30-point difference in scale scores between students with involved parents and those without.

Other studies have shown that parent involvement, both at school and at home, is associated with a number of positive student outcomes, including higher levels of motivation, attendance, and homework completion as well as better grades and test scores. Children of involved parents also show more willingness to tackle tougher academic courses and have greater college aspirations and acceptance rates.

Definitions of what constitutes parent involvement may differ based on cultural perspectives and biases, but most experts now agree that engaging parents is as important to the mission of the school as instruction.

As a result, engagement efforts are focusing more on boosting the capacity of parents to support learning at home as well as at school.

A model program

Given the need to reach out to today's diverse families in new ways, more school districts are emulating the success of Miami-Dade Public Schools'

Parent Academy. Rather than offering one-time programs or leaving parent training to individual schools, the academy provides workshops, classes, and other resources on a year-round basis.

The brainchild of then Superintendent Rudy Crew, Parent Academy started in 2005 to help children by helping their parents acquire more knowledge and skills. Today, fueled by a multimillion-dollar grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the academy offers dozens of free workshops each month in English, Spanish, and Creole at schools and community locations.

For tech-savvy parents, the Miami-Dade website offers online classes, videos, and access to the same digital academic content teachers and students use. Classes are geared toward adult learners.

Yet starting or maintaining a new initiative for parents, however worthy, is a tough sell as teachers lose jobs and core academic programs are slashed due to state budget cuts. Many districts use Title I funding to pay for the program, but others are turning to local businesses and foundations for assistance.

North Carolina's Guilford County Schools (GCS), for example, has received \$750,000 in seed money from its business community to start its new Parent Academy, which features online access to the district's reading, mathematics, and science curricula. GCS also is broadcasting more parent education content on its cable access channel, GCSTV-2.

Topics include bullying, managing stress, assertive discipline, developing character, preventing teen suicide, and other issues relating to student and family social-emotional health. Digital online and broadcast content is provided by Houghton-Mifflin, Active Parenting, and Connect with Kids, a multimedia company that tailored its award-winning television programs to meet GCS' needs.

Similarly, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) has raised about \$1 million to support its Parent University program. Major funders include Wachovia/Wells Fargo, AT&T, and Target, along with local foundations.

CMS' Parent University has grown from offering 56 classes and serving 2,700 individuals during its first semester of operation to 184 classes serving 4,300 participants this past fall. Like Miami-Dade and Guilford County, CMS relies heavily on community partners. Hospitals, churches, synagogues, mosques, social service agencies, businesses, and nonprofit organizations host and teach workshops and help to promote the program.

"I've been very impressed and pleased with the external buy-in for the program," says Jerri Haigler, CMS executive director for family/community services and Parent University. "We have created some wonderful partnerships with agencies and organizations that serve families."

In addition to making programs more convenient and more welcoming for those who feel uncomfortable going to their child's school for help, the partnerships also reduce costs.

Fundraising, grants, and in-kind donations from partners pay CMS Parent University's \$235,000 annual operating budget. The district provides office space and contributes \$600,000 annually, which covers personnel costs for the department's eight staff members.

Keeping it personal

Even the best programs will fail if parents do not know about them, or do not think it matters if they don't show up. As Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy noted in the October 2010 issue of *Professional School Counseling*, "Parents must feel 'welcomed' and 'wanted.'"

When it comes to parent engagement in more formal education activities, whether held at school or in the community, research shows that parents respond best to personal invitations extended by their child's teacher.

After teachers, parents respond most often to requests made by their children. More generic or general invitations -- including flyers, posters, principal memos, newsletters, workshop catalogs, and voice mails distributed by mass notification systems -- aren't nearly as powerful.

According to the National Network of Partnership Schools, schools can boost parent confidence and participation by creating a more welcoming school climate, by involving parents in program decision-making and planning, and by developing families' strengths.

Adults do not respond to deficit models and thinking any better than students do. If educators want to boost parents' confidence, they need to affirm their abilities and welcome them as equal partners with different, yet complimentary, roles.

Haigler says those wishing to start a parent university or academy should collaborate internally with teachers, psychologists, social workers, counselors, assistant principals, principals, central office directors, and executive staff to secure internal buy-in and support.

“They not only can serve as instructors for classes, but play a critical role in being ambassadors to promote the program,” Haigler says.

CMS’ family services staff help promote the program by assisting schools and reaching out to families who have typically not been involved. The district also markets its Parent University program through its website, print and online catalogs, regular media coverage, Spanish radio, a monthly e-newsletter, advertising, and school-based communication efforts such as voice mail messages, fliers, PTA, and school marquee announcements.

“Although participation may start small, as you develop relationships with parents, schools, and external partners, you begin to see the participation numbers increase,” says Haigler. “The feedback from parents indicating that they now know how to support their children at home and they enjoy being involved in the schools is what it’s all about.”

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Starting a parent university

Starting a parent university or academy takes vision, planning, partnerships, and funding. Here are some tips for getting started:

- **Begin with parents at the table.** Programs planned with rather than for parents are more likely to succeed. Get parents involved in advisory teams and committees, and continually seek new ways to expand their participation and leadership.
- **Conduct research.** Survey parents to find out what topics they are interested in, which content delivery methods they prefer, what times and locations are best for them, and which communication channels they trust and prefer.
- **Build relationships.** Start small and gradually build more involvement. Add new parents and partners with each step along the way.
- **Focus on the details; logistics are tricky.** Each workshop requires coordination with the presenter, school, or host site.
- **Recruit volunteers.** Volunteers serve as greeters/program facilitators, and can help coordinate registrations, evaluations, handouts, audio/visual equipment, and other details.

- **Invest in technology.** From online surveys to delivering digital content and program evaluation, having a robust technology infrastructure will save time and money in the long term by increasing efficiency and expanding access for more parents and families.
- **Secure private funding.** Offset concerns about using taxpayer resources for parents rather than for students by securing grants and in-kind donations from local businesses and foundations. Start with family-friendly companies.
- **Time program offerings to match interests and concerns.** Parents are more likely to attend programs geared toward specific, time-sensitive concerns, such as preparing for state tests in the spring, or getting more out of parent-teacher conferences in the fall.
- **Remove barriers.** Offer programs in parents' native languages, and provide meals, child care, and transportation vouchers.
- **Offer incentives.** Attendance certificates, gift certificates, award celebrations, recognition ceremonies, school board recognition, continuing education credits, and other incentives can boost parent participation.
- **Evaluate progress.** Collaborate with district professional development and assessment staff as well as with local university professors to stay on top of parent preferences.