



# Promoting Parental Involvement

**Teachers don't need statistics to tell them that the best partner in any child's education is an involved parent.** They witness the results every day in the classroom when the students whose parents express an interest in what's going on in school are consistently higher achievers, more active participants, better readers, and higher scorers on standardized tests. These same students also attend school more regularly, have enhanced self-esteem and increased motivation, are enrolled in more advanced-placement classes, and are much more likely to complete higher education. Parental involvement and encouragement at home is vital to unlocking a child's learning capabilities and realizing that child's potential for success.

Educational experts agree: Today, more than ever before, it's crucial that parents become an integral part of the education process. School-age children spend some 70 percent of their waking hours outside of school. When it comes to student achievement, activities outside of school, especially at home, can be just as influential as what happens inside the classroom. Even President Obama recently chimed in on the issue. At an October town hall meeting in New Orleans, Obama told the gathering that successful schools need involved parents, emphasizing, "Parents need to insist on excellence from their children or we won't succeed."

Schools across the country are embracing parental involvement, some of them even developing "parent universities" where workshops and training sessions guide parents in best practices for working with their children at home and partnering with teachers to become advocates for student achievement. Other schools do whatever they can to go beyond the traditional open house nights to keep parents informed of what their children are doing and how well they are performing in class. This includes sending home newsletters and events calendars, emailing and calling parents on a regular basis to provide quick updates, posting teacher and class websites, utilizing parent-volunteer coordinators, and meeting with parents face-to-face several times a year to discuss student progress reports, test scores, and suggestions for student success. The goal of these programs is to get parents excited about their roles in the educational experience, and commit to taking an active part in preparing their children for future success. As one educator noted, "Without their support, we really can't do our jobs. Most parents want to get involved, but don't necessarily know how. The sooner we get everyone on the same page, the more successful we'll all be." Teachers unanimously report that parents who may have thought they weren't a necessary part of the education process before have come to realize that exactly the opposite is true.

## Londa S. Della explains how publisher ETA/Cuisenaire is working with schools to encourage parents to help their children become literate

Research recently released from the Michigan Department of Education shows that family participation in education is twice as predictive of students' academic success as is family socioeconomic status. And, the more intensely parents are involved, the more beneficial the achievement effects, with some more involved programs showing success rates up to ten times greater than any other factors.

Communication is an essential ingredient to getting and keeping this involvement, and today, with stressed-out working parents, ethnic and language differences, and ever-growing economic issues, it has become a number-one priority for teachers and administrators whose new motto has become, "You can never communicate too much."

All of these reasons are precisely what prompted educational publisher ETA/Cuisenaire to develop new products like its recently released Home Team Advantage. "We were aware that educators were beginning to hold special family nights and do everything they could to get families involved in the learning process," explains Jemilah Senter, ETA/Cuisenaire's senior manager of Marketing Communications and Merchandising. "We felt we could make a real positive contribution to that effort with a product that would enhance and strengthen the links to the regular school day, as well as carry the continuity of the learning experience into the home. What better way to get the parents on board than to offer a program that asked them to participate as an equal partner in their children's learning process?"

"In addition," Senter says, "Title I funding actually mandates that any elementary or secondary school in its second year of school improvement is required to spend a portion of its monies on family involvement programs to fully comply with federal guidelines. These Title I funds are designed to help increase academic achievement for instruction that takes place outside the regular school day. So, it's clear that the need for at-home and after-school programs is critical right now."

To develop a program that would support national and state standards and curriculum requirements, yet not overwhelm parents or other family members who would be called on to facilitate the lessons at home, ETA/Cuisenaire teamed up with a large urban school district to test products and resources that would work. The result is an at-home learning program consisting of hands-on resources that are academically focused and aligned to school curriculum. Home Team Advantage is specially designed to increase student achievement and accelerate progress for grades K-8 with resources designed to engage families in their children's learning and academic development.

Beyond implementing specific take-home resources, there are several other easy ways to involve parents in the student-learning process. These include:

- Encouraging parents to read books, magazines and newspapers, and discuss with their children what they have learned from them. Sharing important, funny or particularly interesting articles and discussing current events is a good habit to develop. Especially today, when most households are perpetually busy, staying in close touch is a vital link that children need to know they can count on.

- Hold a Family Reading or Storytelling Night. Ask for volunteer parents to lead the group in reading a compelling story and then talking about it. Consider acting out the story, or have a parent and child take turns reading in character. Afterwards, share snacks or treats and share the camaraderie.

- Introduce a Saturday Book Swap. Encourage students to solicit book donations from their friends, families, and the community. Ask parents to volunteer to help with the exchange. Categorize the books you collect and talk about how and why the different genres are important and what they can mean.

- Assign a parent/student project. Ask them to collaborate on writing a story or publishing a book. Have the parents join the class to present the finished products and discuss how they selected their topic, research they conducted, how they developed their characters and ideas, and more.

- Videotape a typical day in class and hold a special screening, complete with popcorn and soda, for parents and families. Reserve time for a Q&A session and share classroom anecdotes and stories.

Bottom line, as the Michigan Department of Education's research showed, the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children at home. The more families support their children's learning progress, the better their children will do, not only in school, but in life. With increased understanding among school staff across the nation that parent involvement is more important now than ever before, families and schools alike will continue to reap strong, positive benefits, and students will succeed and thrive long after their school days are behind them. ■

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