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The Parent Factor *Schools embrace parental involvement*

By Joan Richardson

As a parent, Bianca Ochoa was frustrated with the lack of information she received about her sons' progress in school. As a teacher, she wanted parents of her students to understand more about what their children were learning but often felt she wasn't being as helpful as she could be.

Her opportunity to dramatically address those concerns came seven years ago when she joined the staff at Hillcrest Professional Development School in Waco, Texas.

The Hillcrest staff has overhauled the report card and developed curriculum nights as strategies for reaching out to parents with detailed information that would help them become more involved in their child's education.

"The better parents understand what the child is doing in the classroom, the better they will be able to help their child learn," she said.

Although parental involvement has become a buzzword in most school districts, too many principals and teachers still expect to see parents only at superficial back-to-school nights and call on parents only when extra funds are needed. A recent

report by Public Agenda indicates that a majority of parents say they know little about the curriculum or academic goals of their child's school or how their child compares to others in his or her grade.

But, whether in affluent districts or those with high numbers of low-income families, parents are eager to support the work their children do in school. However, in order to support it, parents need more information about teacher expectations for their children, said Kris Olson, director of communications for Parents for Public Schools.

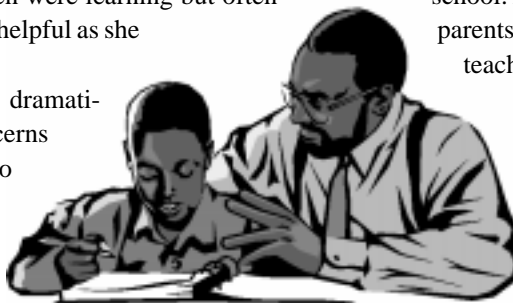
"Schools need to help teachers and parents have a shared language. When schools share information, they put teachers and parents on an equal footing so parents don't sit there uninformed," she said.

IMPROVING REPORT CARDS

At Hillcrest Professional Development School in Waco, Texas, redesigning the report card was the first of several efforts aimed at better informing parents so they could aid in improving student achievement. "We knew that parents needed to know more than the traditional report card would tell them," Ochoa said.

The staff began by identifying the specific skills and knowledge expected in each subject and

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Parental Involvement

Schools reach out to parents as a way to help students

Continued from Page One

each grade. They also agreed that, if parents and teachers were going to think differently about the report card, the school needed a new grading system. They replaced the traditional ABC system with XYZ — X means performance is below grade level, Y means performance is at grade level, and Z means performance is above grade level. Although the report card includes an overall grade in each subject, it also lists several objectives for each subject. Each objective is marked in one of three ways — a check mark indicates mastery of the area, NM indicates the area has not been mastered, and a blank space indicates the topic has not yet been addressed in the class. (See sample report card on Page 3.)

When Hillcrest introduced the new two-page report cards, teachers met individually with parents of every student. The parent organization helped the staff by making the necessary phone calls to schedule conferences with all of the parents.

Ochoa believes the new report cards are much more helpful to parents — and to teachers. “Our report card shows everything students are doing and shows parents the areas where they need to improve. For example, saying a child needs help in math is too broad. But if you’re saying that a child is struggling with fractions, it’s much easier for me to give the parents materials to help at home in that area,” Ochoa said.

In her classroom, Ochoa said it’s also easier to identify sub-areas where children are struggling. “I can notice that four or five are having problems in one area and I can re-group and re-teach them,” she said.

Olson, a former parent at Hillcrest, sees benefits for both parents and teachers. “When you spell out the standards on the report card, teachers are forced to examine every one of their lessons and question whether that lesson moves students closer to achieving one of the standards,” she said.

“If parents understand what students are supposed to learn, then they can look at an assignment and say, for example, ‘I don’t understand how that assignment is going to help my child learn this.’ Or they can look at the work their child produces and see whether that work does or does not meet the standard,” Olson said.

“As a parent, I like knowing what my child is learning and where my child is in the learning process. I don’t just want to know whether she gets it or not. There’s a continuum there that parents need to understand,” Olson said.

CURRICULUM NIGHTS

Many schools across the nation are using curriculum nights as ways to communicate what happens in the classroom. (See Page 5 for sample plan for a curriculum night.)

Hillcrest, for example, brings parents in twice during the year to learn more about curriculum. Each time, teachers design activities to introduce parents to each of the objectives — the same objectives listed on the report card. Parents observe the teachers working one-on-one with students on activities that can be recreated at home. Or students teach their parents how to do something, again in an activity that can easily be done at home.

Not all such efforts have to be completely homegrown. The Family Math program, which began in the 1980s, offers schools strategies for developing math nights at school for parents and children. A sister program called Family Science does the same with science concepts. (See Page 7 for contact information.)

Family Math nights are built around activities that are guided by math standards. Teachers identify the standards for each grade and then design activities parents can do at home with their children. Typically, Family Math nights occur as a series of four to six evenings so parents can learn a set of activities, do them at home, and return to learn more.

Family Math director Grace Coates

said it’s important to help parents become more comfortable with mathematics. “There’s a social acceptance of math phobia. People think that it’s OK to be afraid of math. If we admitted that we were afraid of reading, it would be a social embarrassment,” Coates said.

By introducing parents to math concepts, parents become more confident about their math knowledge and more willing to encourage and support their children in their math learning, she said.

Research on Family Math indicates that parents who attend Family Math nights tend to become and stay more involved in their child’s school, even if they were not previously very involved. The research also had noted increased parent involvement in other areas besides mathematics, Coates said. “Family Math parents indicate they have better communications with their children, perhaps because they’re able to ask more detailed questions about what goes on in school,” Coates said.

The powerful appeal of such efforts can be seen in one anecdote from a Mississippi school district. In the mostly rural Humphreys County school district in the Mississippi Delta, every teacher in the district’s only elementary school and more than 250 parents showed up for Family Math night last year even though tornado warnings had been issued for the area.

The threatening weather continued while parents and students learned how to make DNA strands using beads and pipe cleaners. They used vinyl and ceramic tiles to create polygons. They learned that playing checkers requires strategic thinking. They blew bubbles and learned how to measure them and predict when each bubble would pop.

At one point, a twister did touch down nearby and teachers, parents, and children scrambled to safety. Then they returned to finish what they had come to learn.

“We eventually had to ask parents to please leave. They wanted to stay and continue to learn. It was overwhelming,” said superintendent Joyce McNair.

Informational report card

This is a portion of a 3rd grade report card developed and used by teachers at Hillcrest Professional Development School in Waco, Texas.

STUDENT NAME _____

TEACHER NAME _____

SCHOOL _____

YEAR _____

	Grading Period				
	1	2	3	4	Avg.
READING					
Comprehension skills					
Uses prefixes to determine word meaning.					
Uses suffixes to determine word meaning.					
Uses context clues to determine word meaning.					
Uses context clues to determine meaning of specialized/technical terms.					
Recalls supporting facts and details.					
Sequence events.					
Identifies stated or paraphrased main idea.					
Identifies best summary of a selection.					
Identifies cause-and-effect relationships.					
Predicts probable future outcomes.					
Understands the feelings and emotions of characters.					
Distinguishes between fact and fiction.					
Decoding skills					
Demonstrates grade appropriate word attack skills.					
Demonstrates grade appropriate word recognition skills.					
Demonstrates fluency in reading.					
Study skills					
Alphabetizes for effective use of reference materials.					
Uses reference skills to locate and organize information.					
Follows written directions.					
Literature					
Identifies various types of literature.					
Identifies poetic sound devices.					
Describes setting of a story.					

	Grading Period				
	1	2	3	4	Avg.
WRITING					
Mechanics					
Uses correct spelling.					
Uses correct punctuation.					
Uses correct capitalization.					
Grammar and usage skills					
Uses correct grammar.					
Knows parts of speech (pronouns, nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives).					
Uses correct subject-verb agreement.					
Uses correct verb tense.					
Recognizes sentences, sentence fragments, and run-ons.					
Composition skills					
Uses writing process skills.					
Writes legibly in cursive.					
Writes in a logical sequence.					
Uses a variety of sentence structures.					
Writes compositions on a topic.					
Elaborates ideas in a composition.					
Arranges ideas and information in a composition.					
Writes friendly letters in correct form.					

GRADING SCALE

This X, Y, Z scale is used only for the main headings, such as Reading, Writing, Mathematics, etc.

- X = Performance is below grade level.
- Y = Performance is at grade level.
- Z = Performance is above grade level.

The following scale is used for all other skill areas.

- ✓ = Mastery to date.
- NM = Non-mastery to date.
- Empty box = Not taught to date.

What to look for in your child’s classroom

Comment to principals: This chart could be adapted to reflect the standards in your school and district. By sharing such a chart with parents, parents would have a more clear idea of the standards that guide the school and the district.

	GOOD SIGNS	POSSIBLE REASONS FOR WORRY
Furniture	Chairs around tables to facilitate interaction. Comfortable areas for learning; multiple “activity centers.” Open space for gathering.	Chairs all facing forward or (even worse) desks in rows.
Walls	Covered with students’ projects. Evidence of student collaboration. Signs, exhibits, or lists created by students rather than by the teacher. Information about, and personal mementos of, those who spend time together in this classroom.	Bare. Commercial posters. Students’ assignments displayed but they are suspiciously flawless, only from “the best” students, or virtually all alike. List of rules created by an adult and/or list of punitive consequences for misbehavior. Sticker (or star) chart or other evidence that students are rewarded or ranked.
Faces	Eager, engaged.	Blank, bored.
Sounds	Frequent hum of activity and ideas being exchanged.	Teacher’s voice is the loudest or most often heard. Frequent periods of silence.
Location of teacher	Typically working with students so that it takes a few seconds to find him or her.	Typically front and center.
Teacher’s voice	Respectful, genuine, warm.	Controlling and imperious. Condescending and saccharine-sweet.
Students’ reaction to visitor	Welcoming; eager to explain or demonstrate what they’re doing or use visitor as a resource.	Either unresponsive or hoping to be distracted from what they’re doing.
Class discussion	Students often address one another directly. Emphasis on thoughtful exploration of complicated issues. Students ask questions at least as often as teacher does.	All exchanges involve (or are directed by) the teacher; students wait to be called on. Emphasis on facts and right answers. Students race to be first to answer teacher’s “who can tell me?” queries.
Stuff	Room overflowing with good books, art supplies, animals and plants, science apparatus; sense of “purposeful clutter.”	Textbooks, worksheets, and other packaged instructional materials predominate; sense of enforced orderliness.
Tasks	Different activities take place simultaneously. Activities frequently completed by pairs or groups of students.	All students usually do the same thing. When students aren’t listening to the teacher, they’re working alone.
Around the school	Appealing atmosphere. Students’ projects fill hallway walls. Library well-stocked and comfortable. Bathrooms in good condition. Faculty lounge warm and inviting. Office staff welcoming toward visitors and students. Students helping in lunchroom, library, and with other school functions.	Stark, institutional feel. Awards, trophies, and prizes displayed, suggesting emphasis on triumph rather than community.

Creating a curriculum-focused night

The planning for a curriculum-focused night should begin several months before the event, preferably during the summer when teachers will be less distracted by classroom concerns. Including parent leaders in the planning will ensure that teachers' messages are appropriate for the audience they're trying to reach.

EARLY PLANNING

- **Examine data** you have collected regarding student achievement. Identify one subject in which students need the greatest assistance.
- **After teachers** have identified the subject, all of the teachers in each grade level should work together to identify what they want children to know and be able to do in that subject in their grade level.
- **Working together**, grade-level teachers should reduce their list of objectives to three or four that could be addressed during a single evening with parents.
- **Teachers at** each grade level should identify no more than three hands-on activities per objective that could be demonstrated and taught to parents during an evening gathering. Each activity should last only 7 to 10 minutes. Teachers should design activities in which (a) the teacher can guide a student in an activity while his or her parent observes or (b) the student can guide his or her parent in an activity.
- **Collect the necessary** materials for each activity. Write directions for each activity.
- **Invite several parents** and their children to participate in a mock event. Practice the activities with these parents. Invite their critique of the activities, including the written directions. Modify the activity based on their feedback. (Note: This will help you improve the activities you feature. It also will build interest and enthusiasm for the event you're planning.)
- **Working with** the parent group in your school:
 - Set a date for the curriculum night;
 - Pick a name for the event that will appeal to your community;
 - Determine who will be responsible for publicity and food for the event.
- **Announce the date** of the curriculum night as soon as school opens. Invite parents by announcing the curriculum night in the school newsletter, school district radio station, and/or web site. Send home flyers with students. If possible, develop a phone fan-out, perhaps with the help of the parents group, to telephone all parents about the night. Your goal is to ensure that every parent is aware of the curriculum night.

FOR THE EVENT

- **The total time** for the event should be no more than 90 minutes.
- **Identify one person** who will monitor the time for each activity and keep parents moving from station to station.
- **Identify the teacher** who will be responsible for each activity throughout the night. That teacher should be responsible for assembling the necessary materials for his or her activity and lettering a large sign for the objective for that activity.
- **Create a booklet** with written directions for each activity that will be demonstrated that night. But in the booklet, include additional activities as well. Make extra copies for parents who were unable to attend. Those copies can be sent home with students after the event.
- **Cluster grade-level** stations together in the gymnasium or multi-purpose room.
- **Display the signs** stating the objective prominently at each station. Place the needed materials at each station.
- **As parents** wrap-up the evening, give them an evaluation form to ensure that you receive their feedback.

Preparing for a parent-teacher conference

To better prepare parents for parent-teacher conferences, consider sending home a list of questions they might ask during the conference.

QUESTIONS PARENTS MIGHT ASK TEACHERS

What is my child's class schedule?

What do you expect my child to learn this year in reading? Math? Science? Social studies?

Are children grouped in reading, math, or other subjects? What group is my child in and how are children selected for that group?

Is my child working up to his or her ability?

In what areas is he or she doing well?

In what subjects does he or she need to improve?

What are the most important things for the children in your classroom to learn this year? What can I do at home to encourage that?

How is my child's work evaluated?

Can you show me examples of my child's work — classroom projects, tests, special assignments?

How much time should my child spend on homework each night? How can I help with homework?

What can you tell me about how my child seems to learn best? Is he a hands-on learner? Does she need to move around? Does he enjoy learning in a cooperative group or prefer working along in a quiet place?

How do your classroom strategies complement my child's preferred learning style?

Does the school have a code of conduct? How do you discipline students in your classroom?

Does my child get along with other children? With you?

What other ways can I reinforce classroom learning at home or learn more about my child's progress in school? Are there opportunities for parents to be involved in classroom activities?

Learning about involving parents

■ *Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents* by Anne Henderson, Carl Marburger, and Theodora Ooms. Columbia, Md.: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1986. Considers the barriers that prevent parents from becoming more involved in their children's education. Price: \$14.95. Available through www.amazon.com.

■ *Building Parent Partnerships*, part of the NEA Teacher-to-Teacher series. Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1996. Stock #2911-9-00-3T. Price: \$9.95. To order, write NEA Professional Library, P.O. Box 509, West Haven, CT 06516-9904, (800) 229-4200.

■ *Changing the View: Student-led Parent Conferences* by Terri Austin. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994. Shares the author's story of how she combined teacher research, assessment, parent involvement, and student-centered responsibility in developing student-led conferences with middle school students. Price: \$17.50. To order, visit www.heinemann.com, call (800) 541-2086 or fax (800) 793-2154.

■ Family Math and Family Science Programs. Aims to bring more math and science to more people. For more information, call Grace Coates at (510) 643-6525 or visit www.lhs.berkeley.edu/equals.

■ National Staff Development Council. A portion of the NSDC web site—www.nsd.org/parentindex.htm—is designed to help parents better understand staff development and its important role in improving and maintaining teaching quality.

■ "Parent involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference," by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler, *Teachers College*

Record 97 (2), Winter 1995. Primary article exploring the connection between student learning and parent support.

■ Parents for Public Schools, Jackson, Miss. Encourages parent involvement that goes beyond helping with homework and volunteering and extends into parent involvement in policymaking and governance. For more information, visit www.parents4publicschools.com, call (800) 880-1222, or write PPS national office, 1520 N. State St., Jackson, MS 39202.

■ Right Question Project, Cambridge, Mass. Assists citizens to become advocates for themselves on a variety of important public issues, including education. To learn more about the tools they offer, contact them at (617) 492-1900 or fax (617) 492-1950.

■ *Teachers Manual for Parent and Community Involvement* by Larry Decker, Gloria Gregg, and Virginia Decker. Fairfax, Va.: National Community Education Assn., 1995. Focuses on the important role played by teachers in parent and community involvement. Price: \$17.95. To order, call (703) 359-8973 or fax (703) 359-0972.

■ TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) are homework assignments that require students to talk to someone at home. Prototypes of the assignments are available. For more information, contact the publications office at the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218, (410) 516-8808.

■ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction publishes a variety of materials to assist teachers and parents in developing better relationships. For more information, call (800) 441-4563.

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Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Looking for some r-e-s-p-e-c-t

Q *The parents of our students are enthusiastic volunteers but they don't seem to respect our teachers as professionals. What could we do to change that?*

A Many parents feel unsure of themselves in their encounters with schools. Often, they overcompensate by becoming sort of heavy-handed in their dealings with schools. Or they become so disenchanted that they get cynical about schools and teachers.

Listen respectfully to what parents say — and what they are not saying out loud. Parents may be concerned that the curriculum is not rigorous enough for their children. They may be concerned about their child's safety. They may simply love their children a great deal and want to ensure that they are receiving the best possible care and teaching while they are at your school.

Here are a variety of strategies you might use to improve the working relationship with the parents of your students. You could:

- Identify one day each month when parents would be welcome to observe classrooms. Tell parents about this frequently. Of-

ten, parents find it difficult to understand exactly what teachers do all day. Simply extending the invitation says a great deal to parents. By opening your doors and encouraging them to visit, you are telling them that teachers are proud of what they do and confident about having parents watch them work.

- Invite parents to write teachers a letter or respond to a brief questionnaire about their child. Respond to those letters. That will let parents know that you value their insights about their children.

- Spell out the objectives your school is striving to reach in each subject in each grade. Distribute a list with these objectives to every parent. Include them in every report card.

- Use school or classroom newsletters to talk about curriculum. Encourage each grade level or team to write a regular, brief report on what students are doing this month and will be doing during the next month. Post this on your school's web site.

- Use school or classroom newsletters to inform parents about each formal staff development activity and explain what changes parents should expect to see as a result of what you and other teachers have learned.

- Establish regular office hours for teachers and principals so parents know when they can drop in and talk.

Tools may be copied and used in workshops.

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