

Piloting a Parent Involvement Program for a Middle School

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[Editor's Note: This article is the outgrowth of the work of a middle school team composed of teachers and school counselors that attended the one-week Constructivist Design Conference held at St. Lawrence University in the summer of 2003. Based on an evaluation of the school's needs, the team's self-initiated task was to develop plans for a parent involvement program for the parents of at-risk 5th and 6th grade students in the middle school. The article reports only on the initial pilot program implemented in the Fall 2003 semester as a result of the conference. Since Fall 2003, the program has continued to evolve.]

Abstract

A program to create greater parent involvement in a middle school was designed during the week-long 2003 Constructivist Design Conference in the summer, and then piloted during the subsequent fall semester. This article reports on the design of the program, its rationale, and the results of the pilot.

Introduction

The American Family is the rock on which a solid education can be built. I have seen examples all over this nation where two-parent families, stepparents, single parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents are providing strong family support for their children to learn. If families teach the love of learning, it can make all the difference in the world to their children.

U .S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley (1998)

When parents and families get personally involved in education, their children do better in school and grow up to be more successful in life. (Borba, 1999) Yet parental involvement is one of the most overlooked aspects of American education today. Schools aren't always welcoming. Employers often don't recognize the importance of being "family friendly." The fact is, many parents

don't realize how important it is to get involved in their children's learning. Thirty years of research show that when children can count on their family and community, in addition to their teachers, for involvement in education, it makes a significant difference in learning. Of all youth, at-risk children, whose numbers are increasing, have the most to gain from parent involvement. The main reason parental involvement with the schools is so important for at-risk children is that their home and school worlds are so different. At-risk parents may have feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, as well as negative experience with schools. There are also problems with scheduling, transportation, lack of childcare, etc. that prevent families from being more involved in school. Consequently, schools need to find ways to reach at-risk families.

A New Parent Involvement Project at our Middle School

An effort to do just that was implemented at the A.A. Kingston Middle School in Potsdam, New York in the Fall 2003 semester. As the Home-to-School Counselor at the middle and high schools, I was a member of our Middle School Team at the 2003 Constructivist Design Conference at St. Lawrence University where we worked to develop a parent involvement program to be piloted for the fall semester of the upcoming school year. The program, entitled T.R.E.E.S. (Together Responsible for Every Educational Success), ran for a six-week period from October 7 through November 18. The program was directed at parents of fifth and sixth grade students, with parents of seventh and eighth grade students to be targeted at a later time. Parents were initially chosen from the list of

students receiving Title Math or Reading services. The reason for this is that funding for my position is derived from Title monies and those families needed to be targeted first. Once a response was received from those parents, the rest of the school families were canvassed, based on teacher recommendations and discussions with the guidance counselor.

After an involved process of recruitment, which included mailing letters, calling parents as follow up, and making home visits, there were six parents who attended all six weekly sessions. They were all mothers. While this number was at first disappointing to me and to the two fifth grade teachers who helped facilitate the program, we came to realize that ANY parent who feels that their participation would benefit their family is important. And while there were only two families that could really be considered "at-risk", the other four felt they could benefit from the program as well.

Pre- and Post-Program Surveys

A pre-program survey was given to the parents that asked them to rate how often they did the following:

- I read with my child.
- I help my child with schoolwork.
- I check my child's backpack and/or agenda for homework and information.
- My child and I spend time discussing his/her school day.
- I feel comfortable when I visit my child's school.
- I feel comfortable when I talk to my child' s teacher/teachers.
- I feel comfortable helping my child with homework.
- My child follows a daily routine for doing schoolwork.
- I use the Internet.

- I talk to my child about personal concerns.

Upon completion of the program, parents were asked to rate the same questions to see if there had been a change after attending the six sessions. The results of this are discussed below.

Program Components

As facilitators, we held a great deal of discussion regarding the topics for each weekly session. There are many issues that present themselves in the middle school, and they are often, but not always, exclusive to that age. We chose to work with parents on:

- Getting to Know You (the initial "get-to-know-you" meeting)
- Discipline and Responsibility
- Building Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence
(which included self-esteem in relation to bullying)
- Home Remedies for Reading, Looking for Answers (Homework Help)
- The Whole Middle-School Child
(including puberty, hygiene, issues and emotional changes).

Sessions were held each week in the evenings throughout October and November during the fall semester.

We found the parents enjoyed the topics; and all mothers had input, questions, answers for others, and concerns about their children in relation to each subject.

The fact that the sessions were very informal, and included round-table discussions made it very conducive to participants feeling comfortable and free to talk in front of everyone present. The activities we chose (making journals, using

the Internet, taking family photos) were chosen to help the parents learn more about their own children and encouraged them to spend quality time with them.

Post-Program Evaluation Results

In addition to responding to the post-program survey of parent/child activities, parents were asked to respond voluntarily (and anonymously, if desired) to a post-program evaluation form. Overall, they indicated an overall satisfaction with the program. All parents reported higher frequencies for most items on the pre-post survey, such as encouraging reading at home, spending one-on-one time with their child, involving the child in rules and responsibilities (and consequences) at home, and finding resources for helping with homework when a parent does not understand the assignment. In addition, every parent stated verbally at the last meeting that while they had initially dreaded coming to the program ("just one more thing I have to plan"), they looked forward each week once the program began. Many stated how much they were going to miss getting together.

While the facilitators and participants would certainly classify this first six-week program a "success", it is still a work in progress. There is always a need for more parents to participate in the program, based on how their children are behaving and performing in school. For many, school provides the structure children need, and when they are at home the structure is absent. It is obvious to many that children's behaviors today are radically different than they were

twenty years ago. While there have always been families who struggle at parenting, the rapid changes in family composition, availability of a parent at home for supervision and guidance, and cultural exposure to issues like alcohol and drugs, sex, and criminality all seem to contribute to a society that is less in control of their children. And we as educators are not here to point the finger and blame parents; we are here to offer support and assistance in a genuine way.

Since the notion of "school" is often intimidating for parents, we are now looking at holding the sessions outside of the school. The program may run at a housing complex in Potsdam where many of the lower income, struggling parents reside. This eliminates the need for transportation and allows the families a sense of familiarity with environment, which would hopefully encourage more parents to attend.

Conclusion

Our initial pilot at a new parent involvement program at AA Kingston Middle School in Potsdam can be seen as a success. It has potential for growth, and we intend to continue work on it.

All too often, when children enter middle school and begin adolescence, parents believe that they do not need to be as involved in their children's lives. While it is indeed important for children to exercise some freedom and "spread their wings," this is also an age where parents need to be very aware of what their

children are doing. And while children may greatly resent their parent's involvement and questioning, there is still a need to provide guidance and support by establishing rules and appropriate consequences. This school year alone I have had many eighth grade students report regular marijuana and alcohol use. While I recognize that children typically "experiment" during the teenage years, I believe that parents who make themselves aware of their children's activities and whereabouts as often as possible limit the possibility for them to engage in what can be very dangerous behaviors. I encourage parents to recognize that it is more than likely that teenagers will go through a stage where they "hate" their parents, especially when the parent wants to know where they are and with whom they are socializing. I would discourage trying to be a child's friend or accept that in a few years "this too will pass." The child will grow to appreciate the limits that were set for his or her own safety and well-being. After all, that is what being a parent is all about.

References

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