

## *Strategy 6: Supporting educational opportunities for families*

### **Action Steps:**

- Conduct assessments of families' educational needs to determine the content and form of delivery
- Involve a diverse group of parents and community members when planning parent education programs
- Provide opportunities for parents and children to learn together
- Provide opportunities for parents to share challenges and offer emotional support to one another
- Reach out with educational opportunities to families who rarely attend school activities



### ***Fifth Grade Transition***

For the past several years the Fifth Grade Transition Program at **Monica Leary Elementary School** in Rush, NY, has provided information and eased the anxiety of both parents and students who are facing the significant transition from elementary to middle school (Salinas, Jansom, & Nolan, 2000). During the spring of each year, sixth grade students who have graduated from Monica Leary return to the elementary school to discuss the culture of middle school (backpacks, lockers, lunch choices, homework assignments, etc.) and share their experiences with fifth graders and their parents.

Following the student-parent activity, graduating fifth grade students meet with the middle school students in a “*kid-to-kid*” session while parents of the fifth and sixth grade students meet separately to discuss mutual topics of interest such a schedules and supplies. “*Talking to other parents and students who have just been through the anxious transition you are facing can be reassuring,*” said parent Patricia St. Clair (personal communication, January 28, 2003). “*Parents and students alike realize the value of sbaring the practical, day-to-day experiences of someone who’s ‘been there.’*”

“*Parents are reassuring to one another,*” says Sue Mills, elementary school principal (personal communication, August 21, 2002). Each year attendance increases, attracting 20-30 parents and their fifth grade students.

The **Monica Leary Elementary School** transition to middle school program exemplifies a practice that includes both parents and children in teaching and learning roles while giving and receiving support as they face an important milestone in their school careers.

Parent education is considered an “essential component” of parent involvement programs (Freedman & Montgomery, 1994; DiCamillo, 2001). However, “Parent education is not a single concept that comes in one easy-to-identify package. Rather, it is a group of strategies that can assume a number of directions and formats” (Rockwell, Andrew, & Hawley, 1996, p. 151).

High quality parent education programs lead to increased parent volunteerism, better teacher-parent communication, and improved child behavior and attendance (Covarrubia, 2000). The benefits of parent education programs “can increase many-fold when different organizations work together and provide their expertise in putting together quality parent education programs” (DiCamillo, 2001, p. 177). Meeting the complex needs of families for social, emotional, and educational support requires a community effort.

Characteristics of effective parent education programs include:

1. Assessments to determine parent and student needs (Conner, 2000; Freedman & Montgomery, 1994)
2. Involvement of parents, teachers, and community members in planning the programs (Conner, 2000)
3. Consistent outreach that attracts and retains parents and involves fathers in an active role (Beale, 1999; France & Hager, 1993; Freedman & Montgomery, 1994)
4. Demonstration of “sensitivity, respect, and affirmation of diversity” (Hurd, Lerner, & Barton, 1999; National PTA, *Building successful partnerships*, 2000; Freedman & Montgomery, 1994)
5. Development of “ongoing training programs in which parents, administrators, and staff participate as teachers and learners” (Freedman & Montgomery, 1994)

Schools can select from an array of strategies for delivering parent education so that programs meet the needs of their families. These include home visits by parent educators, parent workshops, programs that support parents’ own educational needs, programs that develop parent leadership, parent/child education opportunities, support groups, and teen parenting programs.

### ***Home visits by parent educators***

Home visits are an effective strategy to reach parents who may not feel comfortable coming to school. They allow educators to individualize teaching and modeling according to each family’s needs. Additionally, home visits allow children to observe teachers and parents sharing the educational role. (See ***Strategy 4: Developing family-friendly communication***).

### ***Parent workshops***

Workshops can help family members develop skills to help them with parenting. Care must be taken, however, to build on parents’ strengths and to respect cultural differences in parenting approaches, such as individualistic versus collectivistic orientations (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). Schools that attempt to educate parents by “telling them what they must do” may cause resentment toward the school and the negative perception that the school is “demanding” and not “family-friendly” (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998, p. 12).

Successful workshops require careful planning and implementation, including the following steps:

- Assess family needs through surveys, home visits, or other informal methods
- Identify resources needed to conduct workshops, including specialists, skilled parents, practitioners, and educators
- Recruit participants through a variety of means — written materials, home visits, telephone networking, and meeting announcements
- Provide support services to make it easier for parents to attend, such as child care and transportation
- Evaluate the success of the program through surveys and/or group discussions to determine how the program might be improved and what activities need to be added (Moles, 1996)

A sampling of possible workshop topics includes:

- Anger management
- Transitions between schools and from school to the community
- Advocating for your child with disabilities
- Monitoring television watching
- Helping children develop positive self-esteem
- Creating summer learning opportunities
- Prevention of child abuse
- Positive parenting strategies
- Single parenting
- Father involvement
- Step parenting
- Managing multiple family responsibilities
- Accessing community resources
- Parenting grandchildren

### ***Programs that support parents' own educational needs***

Schools can encourage greater family involvement by offering family members opportunities for their own education and enrichment. Many family centers offer a variety of educational opportunities, ranging from aerobics to advanced computer classes for college credit.

**Parent University.** The ***Rochester City School District*** in Rochester, NY, provides education and training for parents through its Parent University. Parent involvement/empowerment classes are offered at three different levels — beginning to advanced — according to parent liaison Cynthia Minz (personal communication, August 26, 2002).

**Collaborative Parent Training Classes.** ***Stillwater Area Schools*** provides parent training classes for Stillwater, MN, area parents of students who have or are at risk for behavior disorders. The content of the weekly, two-hour classes was developed by a school psychologist who co-facilitated the six sessions with community mental health professionals. Participants were offered dinner and reimbursement for transportation and child care costs. Program content included: teaching social and problem-solving skills, preventing placement in more restrictive settings, reducing specific behavioral problems, teaching conflict resolution skills, preventing increase of mild problems, crisis intervention, violence prevention, parent involvement, generalization of program effects, and individualized goals (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002).

### ***Programs that develop parent leadership***

Many schools now offer opportunities for parents to learn effective leadership skills. As an outgrowth of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) passed in 1990, the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership was launched in 1997 by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence to build leadership capacity in parents (Henderson & Raimondo, 2001). Many schools in the state realize they cannot institute major reforms without the assistance of parents, so they now have a “powerful incentive to engage families in improving student achievement” (Henderson & Raimondo, 2001, p. 28).

Two hundred participants each year attend three, intensive two-day sessions that are held around the state. Each parent graduate agrees to design and complete a project aimed at improving student achievement, increasing parent involvement, and having a lasting impact. Many graduates of the Institute have become officers in parent-teacher organizations and run for school board positions. Steve St. Clair, Principal of Conway Middle Schools, says the Institute “unlocks the potential in a parent leader.” For principals, he says, “it is much easier to communicate the school’s needs and goals with parents who have had this kind of training. Parent leaders can communicate a vision with other parents, often in a way that staff members cannot” (Henderson & Raimondo, 2001, p. 32). Many Parent Training and Information Centers and Developmental Disabilities Planning Councils also offer parent and consumer leadership development opportunities.

### ***Parent/child education opportunities***

Many schools offer opportunities for children and parents to learn together. Intergenerational literacy programs have grown nationwide during recent years in order to promote parent and child literacy development and to break the cycle of poverty in urban areas (DiCamillo, 2001).

**Parent-child computer education:** The Howard Lewis Parent Center in Buffalo, NY, offers parent-child computer classes for students in grades 6 through 12. Parents and children learn skills in desktop publishing and computer programming together. The center also allows parents to take home computers to learn with their children (U.S. Department of Education, *Family Involvement*, 1997).

Community School District 10, the largest urban school district in New York City, is working to bridge the digital divide with a cost-sharing wireless laptop leasing program for middle school students and parents (Zardoya, 2001).

The program will be in its third year with the 2002-2003 school year. Under the lease contract agreement, 36 monthly payments are shared by the school district and families, and parents are given the option to purchase the computers at the end of the lease period for \$1. A supporting professional development program includes a “three-pronged process for teachers, parents and students.” Parents must participate in a 12-hour training program, conducted in English and Spanish, before the laptops are taken home by students (Director of Information Technology Mario Fico, personal communication, September 6, 2002). Among the positive impacts of the program, which will grow to more than 300 computers being leased in the district during the 2002-2003 school year, is an increase in student attendance and parent involvement.

## ***The Hungerford Mosaic Project***

At the **PS 721 Richard H. Hungerford School** in Staten Island, NY, parents became “*arts partners*” with their children to create the Hungerford Mosaic. The one-year Parents as Arts Partners program was funded by the New York City-based Center for Arts Education ([www.cae.nyc.org](http://www.cae.nyc.org)).

Teaching artist Kristi Pfister hosted a tour of the Staten Island Zoo for 47 family members and students who participated in the project. Ms. Pfister showed how zoo animals are translated into ceramic mosaic imagery. She then hosted a series of four, two-hour family workshops at the school for families and children to learn how to create a ceramic mosaic. A total of 70 family members and their children attended these Friday-night workshops, according to arts coordinator and teacher Linsey Miller. The result was the creation of a 2x4-foot ceramic mosaic that is now displayed in the school’s lobby. Hungerford School is a District 75 school serving 235 K-12 students with disabilities.

*“This collaboration has enabled our students, siblings, parents and teachers to experience the deep satisfaction of creating artwork and giving to the community,”* says Principal Dr. Mary McInerney. *“Families have learned new ways to use the arts to help improve their child’s perceptual, motor and problem-solving skills”* (personal communication, September 30, 2002). Parent Liz Devoti said the project *“bonded family members as a unique community.”* It also *“inspired us to see our abilities and strengths, and to recognize that the disabled member of our family has many hidden talents”* (personal communication, January 20, 2003).

## ***Support groups***

When families meet in support groups they discover they are dealing with common issues and life circumstances and are not alone. During group sessions, a facilitator can help parents “to support each other while they work to help themselves” (Lueder, 1998, p. 176). Support groups can be organized around a single issue or be open-ended, depending upon the concerns of the participating parents. Groups may also be formed to appeal to family members with similar concerns (grandparents raising grandchildren, single parents, families with children with disabilities, etc.). Guidance counselors and school psychologists can take an active part in support group sessions.

## ***Kinship Care Support Group***

Many children are now being raised by adults other than their natural parents. In order to meet the needs of these caregivers, the Grove Park Elementary School #224 in the **Baltimore, MD, School District** began a Kinship Care Support Group (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2002). With a grant from the local Department of Social Services, the school’s Action Team began one-hour, biweekly support group sessions, available during both mornings and afternoons, to provide outreach and support to caregivers. Community members provided referrals to resources, counseling, and agencies to participants. Caregivers who attended sessions became more involved in school-related activities and benefited from their interactions with other care providers.

### ***Teen parenting programs***

“Schools are the social institution with the greatest opportunity and capacity to educate and intervene in the lives of school-age parents” (Lindsay & Enright, 1997, p. 22). These young parents need “special attention, skillful direction, and sensitive support” (Berger, 1995, p. 286). The Rochester City School District in Rochester, NY, has operated a Young Mothers Program since 1969. The program, housed at the Family Learning Center, offers education and comprehensive support services for teen mothers. Prenatal and postnatal care courses, career development classes, job training, and independent living skills classes are offered to up to 200 teen mothers a year. The services of a public health nurse, guidance counselor, and social worker are also provided as a part of the program. Additionally, the program houses an infant day care center and a baby boutique where students may purchase clothes, toys, and furniture with credits earned in the program, according to Program Administrator Audrey Cummings (personal communication, September 4, 2002).

In New York City, the Living for the Young Family through Education (LYFE) program operates in 41 centers, some self-contained and some operating inside traditional schools (Lee, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, *Compendium*, 1999). These combination schools/day care centers serve 600 infants and young children, ranging in age from two months to 33 months, and 700-1,000 young mothers and 50 young fathers annually. The LYFE program provides comprehensive education and social services to meet the needs of adolescent parents and help them transition with the support of community services. The program is primarily funded by the New York City Board of Education and Administration for Children’s Services-Child Care.

### ***Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Project***

**Ensley Elementary School** in Pensacola, FL, winner of the 2003 National PTA Phoebe Apperson Hearst Excellence in Education Partnership Award, collaborated with a local child advocacy group to meet the needs of more than 75 grandparents raising grandchildren in its school community (National PTA, *Phoebe*, 2003). The *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Project* seeks to strengthen the child-caregiver bond in order to empower these families and reduce risk of school failure. The program provides a weekly support group for families, including a dinner, tutoring and other activities for children, and information for grandparents on services to help them raise their grandchildren. Monthly family outings, quarterly respite care for grandparents, and weekly case management are also provided.