

Parent Workshop Evaluation

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The goal of including parents in the educational process is not a new one. In reviewing the literature, it was found that not much research is dedicated to introducing parents to a school but mostly on parenting classes and the education of parents. For this reason, the review of the literature is fairly broad and covers parenting classes, attendance at those classes, and parental involvement in schools.

A common theme within much of the literature is a lack of parental involvement or interest in their children's schooling. Carol Calfee (1996) describes five of the difficulties involved in trying to increase parent involvement in schools. First, she found that parents were more concerned about meeting their child's basic needs than being involved in their education. Survival needs must come before a child's education, but it's once these needs are met that a change needs to occur. Secondly, Calfee found that many parents who were not involved in their child's education did not have a positive experience in school when they were younger. As a result, children of these parents struggle as well. Another problem that Calfee found was that most schools don't accommodate to family and work schedules making it nearly impossible for parents and families to be involved during the school day. Another barrier that Calfee found was a lack of transportation or a need for daycare that kept parents from participating more in their child's school. The final problem that Calfee encountered in increasing parent involvement was a feeling from the families that they were not welcome at the school. This is a tragedy in schools today when parents can be a huge asset to strengthening the educational environment. According to Bresnick (1997), many parents just do not care enough about their child's education to make the effort.

Concern about the level of parental involvement is important and founded when we realize that student success is often dependent on how involved the parents are (Glenn, 1995). Dr. Stephen Glenn (1995) found that "...parents who ask at least one question about school on a daily basis see marked improvement in their child's school performance." The National PTA has also conducted research on parent involvement and has found a "...strong positive correlation between parent involvement and student achievement" (Bresnick, 1997).

Research shows over and over that parental involvement is critical to the success of children in school. How then can we as schools encourage and create a greater degree of parent involvement? In her research, Kathleen Feeney Jonson (1999) found that "more than one-third of parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences, and almost two-thirds never even talk to teachers by telephone." It is obvious that something has to be done about this lack of participation by the parents. Jonson believes that schools must be the ones to take the initiative and be effective communicators with the parents as well as welcoming them and encouraging them to be part of their child's education. Communication is one of the key factors in implementing parental involvement. According to Bresnick (1997), two-way communication is very important. This can include letters requesting a response, surveys, meetings, and classes. Bresnick also recommends starting this kind of communication from the beginning of the year to set a precedent. In his article on listening to parents, Thomas Hoerr (1997), states that listening to parents is not all that is important. He believes that schools must create opportunities and forums for parents to be able to express themselves.

Linda Hinman and Patricia Reynolds (1992) give some valuable tips on increasing parent involvement while building a partnership between parents and school staff. This partnership is a key factor in improving schools but is also one that most schools struggle with. Part of the reason

this partnership is hard to cultivate is because school staff and parents many times have very different views on school issues. Hinman and Reynolds offer some ideas as to why parents deal with schools the way they do. They found that many parents were not as likely to be involved if their own parents had not been involved in their education. They felt that often parents relate better to other parents rather than staff. Staff members do not realize how much of an influence they have on parental involvement. Hinman and Reynolds also explain that parent workshops work well when there are instant results, when parents are able to immediately apply what they have learned in the workshop.

Method

Parent workshops have been held for several years at the Academy for Academic Excellence (AAE). This school year it was presented by the School Psychologist and the head Researcher. The 2002 Parent workshop was an opportunity to introduce parents to the Parent Support Center at the Academy for Academic Excellence. It was also an opportunity to set a precedent for the upcoming year and discover the expectations of both the parents and staff at the AAE. The Workshop was a mandatory event that parents were required to attend. With all the changes that took place at the AAE in the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year, the staff and administration felt that it was important to introduce parents to the changes at the school and inform them about the creation of a Parent Support Center where their needs could be met.

Parents from the Academy for Academic Excellence who participated in the classes also filled out a survey called the Workshop Evaluation. All attendees were parents or guardians. They ranged in race, ethnicity, and age. All parents were invited to the class and were told that the class was mandatory, however only 287 surveys were filled out and less than half of the families at the AAE were represented in the classes.

The Workshop Evaluation survey was designed specifically for the workshop (Deutscher, 2003). To accommodate as many families and work schedules as possible, the Lewis Center offered the workshop at all different times, day and night and weekends. Parents were given the option of coming to a class on eighteen different dates at different times. This was done to ensure that different schedules could be accommodated. Participants were asked to write the name and date of the workshop they were attending, the presenter's name, the length of the workshop, and finally their name and phone number if they so desired. The survey contained eleven questions about the quality of and feelings toward the workshop using the Likert Scale. At the end of the survey, there were three free-response questions: "I would come to more workshops if..." "What are some topics that you would be interested in learning more about that we could offer as future workshops?" and "Additional Comments."

Results

Much of the analysis done on the classes was based on parent attendance. Less than half of the families at the AAE were represented at the class, but of those who came, the majority felt that it was helpful.

The biggest attendance day for the workshop was Thursday, September 5, 2002 from 9:00 to 11:00 in the morning. Approximately 4.8% of the total that attended a workshop were represented on this day. Only 49.2% of AAE families came to a parent class, leaving 50.7% of AAE families who did not come. Of the 49.2% who attended the class, 45.1% were new families and 54.9% were returning families. Of the 50.7% that did not attend a class, 34.7% were new families and 65.3% were returning families. The analysis showed that new families were significantly more likely to attend a workshop than returning families, $t(560) = 2.525, p = .012$.

Of the 11 Likert Scale questions on the Workshop Evaluation, 5 were chosen by the researchers to be analyzed. The researchers felt that these questions would be helpful in determining whether or not the classes were a valuable resource. Of the parents who attended a parent class, 55.4% agreed and 19.9% strongly agreed to the statement, “I received enough information about the topic(s).” In response to whether or not the information received at the Workshop was helpful/applicable, 46% agreed that it was and 36.2% strongly agreed that it was. When asked if the presenter gave them new ideas, 40.4% of parents who attended agreed that he or she did and 34.5% strongly agreed to this statement. Approximately 42.9% of parents attending agreed that they enjoyed the shared support and sense of mission with other parents and 34.1% strongly agreed to this statement. When asked if the meeting time was convenient, 48.4% of the attendees agreed that it was and 39.7% strongly agreed that it was.

In the free-response portion of the Workshop Evaluation, answers were coded. In response to “I would come to more workshops if...” approximately twenty people said they would come more if they were aware of when the meetings were going to be held and approximately twelve people said they would come more if topics were clearly defined. In response to “What are some topics that you would be interested in learning more about that we could offer as future workshops,” approximately twenty-three people said Teaching Strategies and approximately nineteen said Learning Strategies. In the “Additional Comments” section, six people asked that the school provide a list of support services and contact people for the AAE, six people felt the workshop was too short, and five people felt that there was too much complaining and that the workshop was not positive enough.

Discussion

The workshop was taught for a variety of reasons. Its main focus was to give new and returning parents a sense of support and guidance in the year ahead of them. Along with that support, the class was an attempt to implement change, open new avenues of communication, introduce the Parent Support Center, and gain a better understanding of what the parents needed help with or information about.

Accomplished in this study was a better understanding of parental involvement at the Academy for Academic Excellence. This research also provided the researchers with information on how parents who are involved feel about the classes and the AAE, and what their interests are. The results of this research are limited to parents whose children attend the AAE and the reader cannot assume the same for other populations. Besides being limited by population, this study became limited simply by relying on self-report for information. Many parents who came to the parent class chose not to fill out portions of the survey and, as the results show, many parents chose not to even come.

The most telling of the results was that less than half of AAE parents came and of those who did, significantly more new families rather than returning families attended. A large percentage of AAE families are made up of parents who either used to home-school their children or still do. It has become evident through this project and others that home-school families are much different from families who have never home-schooled before. Parents who home-school their children often have a hard time giving up control of their children's education to other people. It has been sensed that these parents are often very reluctant to attend school meetings and workshops for fear that the school will try to tell them how to raise their children. It makes sense to the writer that new families to the school would be more likely to come to

classes and workshops based on two observations. The first is that they are just getting used to the school and wish to do their part and make a good impression. Secondly, many of them have come from other schools and may not feel the same way as some home-schooling families do about the educational system.

Along with the home-schooling factor, it has become evident that parents often do not take their responsibilities to the school seriously. The classes were advertised as mandatory and still over 50% of AAE families did not attend. Somewhere along the way, a large majority of parents at the AAE have abdicated their responsibilities to the school. This is a difficult hurdle to jump while still trying to maintain a sense of democracy within the school and compassion for the busy lives of the AAE families.

The largest percentages of responses to the 5 Likert Scale questions were “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” Approximately 25% of responses to “I received enough information about the topic(s),” “The workshop presenter gave me new ideas,” and “I enjoyed the shared support and sense of mission with other parents” were answered with either a “Neutral,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree” response. The researchers felt that this percentage of parents responded negatively or neutrally to “I received enough information about the topic(s)” because the topic of the Workshop was not clearly defined before or during the class and so participants were unsure as to what kind of information they were supposed to be receiving. This may be the case as well with the minority of responses to “The workshop presenter gave me new ideas”. If parents were unsure as to the topic of the Workshop, they may have felt as if they learned nothing new. It is the researcher’s opinion that those who responded negatively to “I enjoyed the shared support and sense of mission with other parents” were either feeling negatively about having to come to the Workshop or were frustrated with the lack of optimism in the group as a whole.

The majority of those who did attend the workshop found it helpful which tells us that the class has its benefits. Whether or not it achieved its objectives listed in the beginning of this paper is not clear. The class was successful in introducing the Parent Support Center to the parents and in giving AAE families an outlet to ask questions or express concerns. Many parents felt relief at simply being able to get frustrations out and know that problems would be addressed. The goal of opening new lines of communication was reached and some changes were implemented as a result of the workshop. If parent classes are going to continue in the future, more precautions need to be taken to ensure that the majority of parents attend. Topics of future classes need to be more clearly defined in the hopes of eliminating some frustration on the part of parents and creating a more positive setting where all attendees know what will be discussed before they come.

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