

Parent-friendly schools boost learning



At Spencer Technology Academy in Austin, there was a time when not many parents attended meetings like this one, which was held in February for parents with preschool children. That is not the case now. Find out why inside. [Photo by Cristina Rutter.]

Some public schools are more effective than others and for years, researchers at the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research have been studying data to find out why. Consistently, they have found that to be successful, schools need five ingredients: effective leadership, good teachers, a stimulating curriculum, a welcoming, safe, learning environment and parent involvement.

Often, schools overlook the parent piece. In doing so, they hold themselves back, the Consortium data show. Schools that measure strongly in all five areas are 10 times more likely to improve student learning and 30 times less likely to stagnate, the Consortium reports.

"When parents and school staff come together, children do better," says Elaine Allensworth, senior director and chief research officer at the Consortium. "It keeps coming up over and over in our work."

For example, when the Consortium looked into why teachers leave or stay in Chicago's public schools, it found that elementary teachers are more likely to stay in schools where parents are involved. By involved, the Consortium means that par-

ents pick up their children's report cards, attend parent-teacher conferences and school events, and volunteer in the school.

In an upcoming study on school safety, researchers found that when parents are involved in a school, the school climate is better—and that makes them safer.

To reap these benefits, schools need to reach out to parents and make schools welcoming and accessible. Allensworth acknowledges that sometimes it is hard for teachers and parents to recognize that they want the same thing: "How do we make sure the child is doing his or her best?"

However, it is essential that schools create an environment that is inviting to parents—beginning with a simple smile and a respectful attitude.

Soon, parents will have the opportunity to learn how their schools are doing on this and the four other essential ingredients of success.

For the last 15 years, the Consortium has surveyed principals, teachers and students biennially about their school improvement efforts, like parent involvement. Surveys have asked teachers, for instance, how well they work with parents, whether parents come to report card pick-up days and whether they support their teaching.

If half the teachers or students at a school participate in the survey, the Consortium gives the school a report on the findings and how they compare to other schools in the district. This information can help schools understand why test scores and other key measures of student learning are improving or declining at a school. It also can help schools decide which school improvement efforts are most important and target certain areas for professional development, the Consortium notes.

Currently, 60 to 80 percent of CPS schools participate at the 50 percent level.

So far, the reports have gone directly to principals. Beginning this fall, they will be made available to parents at the school and to the general public, as well.

Allensworth said the Consortium has not made the reports public because it feared participants might be less truthful.

For more information about the Consortium, go to www.ccsr.uchicago.edu.

—Debra Williams

In the Know Sponsors

Catalyst Chicago would like to thank The Boeing Company for supporting the development and free distribution of *Catalyst In the Know*. Anyone interested in helping to bring this newsletter to particular communities or groups of schools should contact Community Editor Debra Williams at williams@catalyst-chicago.org.

Austin school rolls out the welcome mat

Cynthia Peterson, a parent long involved at Spencer Technology Academy in Austin, had grown weary of the speeches: “Parents are important. We want parents involved in this school.”

One school leader after another professed a commitment to parent involvement, she said, but never followed through with action.

When the local school council hired a new principal four years ago, Peterson threw in the towel. “When I came in as principal, she left,” Principal Shawn Jackson recalls. “I explained how important parents were to me, and she didn’t believe me,” he adds with a chuckle.

But Jackson, who had been the assistant principal, proved he was more than talk.

First, he set aside funds to create a classy parents room. It is carpeted and filled with café-style tables and leather chairs. It boasts five desktop computer stations, 10 laptops, a fax machine and a water cooler. The walls are filled with colorful art work, and one wall sports a deep blue banner announcing “Spencer Parent University.”

The school also began offering classes for parents, ranging from effective parenting to photography to computers.

Skeptic won over

Jackson reached out to Peterson again. “I came back and observed and I saw his commitment to parents,” she says. “The parents’ room looks like you are at a Borders or a Starbucks. You feel smarter just being in the room. That’s when I knew he was serious.”

Jackson hired Peterson to be the school’s community/parent coordinator and enlisted librarian and literacy coach Jerry Larkin to help her. The principal told Peterson to open the room to the community, not just parents.

He asked Larkin to focus on getting more men involved in the school.

“I hired them to get parents to buy into what we are doing here educationally and to show them that education will work for them,” says Jackson. “When parents and the community see the good things happening here, especially if they’ve had bad experiences with school, they want to be a part of it.”



Parents Darryl Bright, Lillie Montgomery and Diane Aldridge take advantage of the laptops that are available for parents to use in Spencer’s parent room. [Photo by Debra Williams.]

For a school with 760 students, the parent turn-out for programs and meetings is not high—typically 30 to 60 parents—but it is far better than in the past. And recently, about 110 parents showed up for a learning fair for parents with children in the primary grades.

Heading off probation?

Spencer has been on probation for the last nine years but this year looks to meet its mark and get off the list. Last year, Spencer was named a school in good standing.

Jackson says he learned to be in tune to parents from his classes at Loyola University, where he received his doctorate, and visits to districts outside Chicago.

“Affluent districts had parent involvement. It was in place,” says Jackson.

In his community, he says, he had to create that culture.

Some of the staff at Spencer share Jackson’s passion. Last year, kindergarten teacher Tanya Foster-DeMers developed a home instruction plan that shows how parents at various academic levels can work with their youngsters in reading and math.

Foster notes that parents are always told “Help your child,” but they don’t always know what to do.

“I give parents a menu of what they can

do with their child,” explains Foster.

Last year, over 80 percent of three kindergarten classes went to 1st grade at or above grade level, says Foster. “Parents made the difference. The ones who were not involved, you could see the difference,” she says.

This year, Jackson asked her to create home instruction plans for teachers in the 1st and 2nd grades.

Parent volunteer Shiquita McNeal says the program that Foster created and Spencer’s other parent initiatives have made her feel right at home at the school, and she is spreading the word.

She says that if more parents knew what the school had to offer, they would be just as involved as she is.

“I’ve had parents ask me, ‘I see you up at the school all the time. What do you do?’ and they’ve started getting involved because they saw me do it. At first they thought they couldn’t contribute anything, but they see that they can.”

That is music to Jackson’s ears. “I am not just trying to change a school. I am trying to create a better community, and when the community sees good things happening in the building, they want to be part of that.”

—Debra Williams

‘So much more than just a clerk’

School clerks can play a big role in how a school functions and how it is viewed. Typically, the clerk is the first person visitors see. They are gatekeepers. Need an audience with a principal or a teacher? Go see the clerk. Some clerks make you smile; others make you grit your teeth. Recently, Catalyst asked its readers: “What clerk makes you smile? What clerk is parent-friendly?” The winner, with several nominations, was Renee Wicker, a clerk of seven years at the Murray Language Academy in Hyde Park.



Murray clerk Renee Wicker

As the clock approaches 9 a.m., school clerk Renee Wicker leaves her desk in the main office of Murray Language Academy and heads to the security desk near the front door. Merle Armstrong, the school’s security aide, greets Wicker with a hug and gives up her seat.

It is time to “do tardies,” a routine that Wicker devised to make the school run more smoothly.

Teachers have a lot to juggle at the beginning of the school day and sometimes children who did not show up on time were marked as absent, instead of tardy.

By sitting at the door until 9:30 a.m., Wicker catches stragglers and their parents, records who is late—she knows every child by name—and sends them to their classrooms. In the process, she gets a chance to chat with parents.

On this morning, one parent arrives with two digital devices that are labeled with his children’s names. “Good morning Ms Wicker, can you hold on to these until school is over?” the dad asks.

“Sure,” she agrees.

A mother arrives with a lunch bag for

her child’s field trip. “Ms. Wicker, can I stick this in his locker?”

When another parent arrives with a lunch, Wicker jokes, “What, no Subway bag? Then you know that your child does not want to see you.”

One mother shares with Wicker that she doesn’t carry a purse so she is always putting things down and losing them. Wicker suggests a small bag. “If I see an all-black, small bag at the outlet, I will let you know,” says Wicker. “I’m going this weekend.”

Even though many parents are rushing to get to work, Wicker greets each one.

“Are you off today?”

“How are you doing?”

Things are going smoothly this morning, but at one point, a clearly unhappy mom approaches Wicker. The woman has talked with her child’s teacher and reports that her daughter may not be able to go on a choir field trip because she did not fully comply with the choir uniform policy—she wore the wrong color pants. The woman is not sure what to do. After a brief conversation, Wicker leaves her post to run interference. She calls up to the teacher’s classroom and, in a soothing voice, asks if the child will be able to attend. The teacher says, yes. Wicker breathes a sigh of relief. “A disaster avoided,” she says with a smile.

All day long, Wicker is the go-to person at Murray. A parent arrives with a music CD that his daughter needs to perform at the school’s African-American celebration the next day. It needs to get to her teacher. “What is she going to perform,” Wicker asks. “Funky Town,” the dad replies.

A preschooler scurries to Wicker’s desk and silently reaches up to get a hug.

When parents run late at the end of the school day, they call Wicker to explain why and to ask if their child can stay with her until they arrive.

And no matter what, parents say, Wicker

More star clerks

Catalyst received nominations for more parent-friendly school clerks than we had space to print. But here are a few more, with comments from their admirers:

Millie Freit, McAuliffe Elementary

“Millie Freit never says what is not in her job description. She does things she doesn’t have to do. Because she is bilingual, she really reaches out to Spanish-speaking parents. I have heard from a lot of parents, and they love her.”

—Silvia Gonzalez, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Community center and parent coordinator at McAuliffe

Kelly Tyson, McDade Academy

“Kelly Tyson seems to be the backbone of McDade. She is a conduit between the parent and the classroom and works feverishly to accommodate parents. McDade parents are tough cookies, and I have seen her work in a calm and professional manner when I know I would have become upset.”

—Dagene Brown, McDade parent

Deborah Jackson, Pershing East

“Deborah Jackson is a breath of fresh air. She makes you feel like you are the reason she is there. It doesn’t matter what [income] bracket you are in, she is polite and treats each parent with kindness.”

—Josephine Norwood, Pershing East parent

is always pleasant and respectful.

“I have seen parents being ridiculous, and she is still pleasant and helps them resolve their issue, and I know they are working her nerves,” says parent Kim Williams. “Renee is the head mother of this village.”

Parent Curtrice Scott says that Wicker is amazing. “It is truly the everyday, mundane things she does that make her so special.”

From a child’s perspective, Wicker’s help can be far from mundane. For example, she once dropped everything at dismissal time to help a distraught child find her

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Letter from the editor

As a reporter for *Catalyst Chicago* for almost 20 years, I have been in hundreds of Chicago public schools. In some, I saw school staff talk down to parents—like one parent who was chewed out because she wanted to transfer her son into a school, but didn't have the necessary documents—treat them disrespectfully and even ignore them. I have walked into some main offices, and no one acknowledged me until I asked for help. But I have also been in schools like Spencer and Murray, where parents are greeted with a smile. They feel so comfortable that they are in no hurry to go. Parents at these schools are treated like family, and the school is their second home.



for the last five years. They work on school projects, help students with their homework and lend a hand to teachers when asked. The school encourages all of this.

Teachers appreciate having another set of hands and eyes in the classroom. Parents know there are other parents watching out for their children. Students love the attention and extra support. All this makes for a good learning climate, one of the five essential ingredients that the Consortium has found makes for a good school.

Finally, we still have copies of past issues of *Catalyst in the Know* dealing with finding special education services for your child and improving parent-teacher relationships. If you'd like information on these topics or want to read about my personal experiences, give me a call or send me an e-mail. You can reach me at (312) 673-3873 or williams@catalyst-chicago.org.

Best Regards,

Debra Williams
Catalyst Community Editor

As Elaine Allensworth from the Consortium on Chicago School Research told me in our discussion about school relationships, parents can be a school's secret weapon for success. Schools that don't get that yet, are missing out and in a big way.

Valeria Hinton and Gail Jordan, both parents of children at Goodlow Magnet School in the West Englewood neighborhood, have volunteered at the school daily

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eyeglasses. She walked the halls with the child, checked trash cans and, at the suggestion of someone, even looked into the toilets. She eventually found the glasses in a side pocket of the child's book bag.

Another child saved \$60 of her own money and asked Wicker to help her buy flowers for her mother, a teacher assistant at the school. Wicker diplomatically arranged to have the child's aunt help her and steered her to an edible fruit arrangement to save money.

It is this kind of attention and care for students and parents that make parents feel that the school is safe and nurturing.

"She loves the students unconditionally and is always lending a helping hand," says Scott. "Her spirit exudes kindness, fairness and concern for our children. I adore her and so do my boys."

Principal Gregory Mason sees ripple effects for the school as a whole. "She knows the parents. She has developed these personal relationships. So when things happen, she decides if it is a problem she can resolve or if a decision needs to be made by the principal. This takes a lot of the burden off me and the assistant principal and frees us up to focus on instructional issues."

"[Wicker] is professional and smart and so much more than just a clerk," says Mason. "Sometimes she sees me fumbling with a child's issues and she steps in and says, 'I got this. This is what this child needs.' I don't know what we'd do without her."

Wicker, who is 34 and hopes to be a mom some day, says that she simply does what comes naturally. "I've always been told that I'm very maternal. But I also believe that you treat people the way you want to be treated."

—Debra Williams

Parent rights

The best scenario is when schools are welcoming and build relationships with parents. However, when that is not the case, parents should know their rights. Here is a sample of parent rights from Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual.

- Receive an explanation of the basis for any mark given by a teacher.
- Request and be granted a conference with a teacher and/or principal.
- Visit a school.
- Be provided an opportunity to observe in their child's classroom at times mutually agreeable to the parent, teacher and principal.
- Be given information about the school's homework policy and individual classroom homework expectations.

For a full list of parent rights as well as responsibilities, and the rights of students, go to <http://policy.cps.k12.il.us/documents/102.4.pdf>

What parent-friendly schools looks like

A parent leadership group in Bronzeville called the Peer Parent Education Network has developed "The Welcoming School," a list of activities that make a school parent friendly. The network is affiliated with the Grand Boulevard Federation. Here are just a few of the activities:

- Treat parents with respect and dignity.
- Create a parent resource room that is open throughout the day, and equip it with books, computers, etc.
- Let parents know they can volunteer as classroom assistants, greeters and hall, bathroom and lunchroom monitors.
- Publicize school events so parents know about them.
- Encourage teachers to schedule meetings with parents regularly and to accommodate parents' work schedules.

For information, call the Grand Boulevard Federation at 773-548-8140 or go to www.grandboulevardfederation.org.