

A POWERFUL APPROACH TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Elementary schools nationwide are seeking ways to position parents as solid partners in the education of their children. To meet this need, elementary school family literacy programs are providing a powerful approach to involving parents in their children's education. Mom and Dad are going to school with their children. Inside the elementary school, parents are in classrooms working side by side with their children, getting a firsthand look at curriculum needs, observing teacher-student interaction and gaining knowledge of how to work with their own children to support their educational achievement. Parents transfer the knowledge they gain in family literacy programs into practical application as they interact with their children and become a positive force in their child's learning.

One size doesn't fit all—flexibility is key. During the last several years, the National Center for Family Literacy helped to develop and implement family literacy services in the elementary school setting through work with the Toyota Families in Schools project. The program model, implemented in 45 Title I elementary schools nationwide, produced valuable information about how an elementary school family literacy program looks and works best. One important finding was that the elementary school family literacy program model is not a “cookie cutter” model. It may and should look quite different from school to school, based on the needs of the families involved. For example:

At Haywood Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee, parents attend afternoon and evening adult education classes while their children are also involved in an educational activity. Parents and children come together to take part in Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time in a multi-age classroom setting, such as the computer room or media center, and parents participate in regularly scheduled Parent Time sessions.

In Aurora, Colorado, parents attend ESL/GED classes at their children's elementary school during the regular school day. Parents at this school attend PACT Time in their children's classroom and make wonderful positive connections to their children's teachers. The adult education/ESL teacher provides support for the parents' educational needs during Parent Time.

In Fremont, California, family literacy services are offered both morning and afternoon to accommodate the large numbers of parents wanting to enroll. PACT Time and Parent Time take place during the regular school day, with collaboration between the child's classroom and the adult classroom. Schools provide both ESL and/or GED classrooms to meet the growing needs of parents, while also offering childcare services for younger children.

MAKING IT WORK—KEY STAFF

Family literacy programs in elementary schools should closely match the federal definition of family literacy and provide integrated, comprehensive services to become effective programs. Within this ideal model, there are several important staff roles that have been identified as critical for successful implementation.

School Principal. Local champion for the program, this person provides visible support and overall leadership for the initiative, and manages the logistics of program operation. The principal establishes a positive school climate conducive to parent involvement and recruitment. In other words, the principal leads the vision at the school level.

Adult Educator. While primarily providing educational instruction for parents, the adult educator has an expanded role in family literacy. The adult educator coordinates PACT Time with the classroom teachers, supports the parent's role in PACT Time and serves as the liaison between the adult education classroom

and the child's classroom. PACT Time has a much greater chance of being successful when there is a direct connection between the child's classroom and the adult's classroom. The adult educator uses Parent Time as a natural venue for additional discussions about the ways in which parents can support their children's learning.

Teacher Leader. This elementary classroom teacher serves as the communication link to other certified staff involved in PACT Time. This teacher leader understands PACT Time, keeps other teachers informed about PACT Time, assists the adult education teacher in setting up PACT Time and is knowledgeable and committed to family literacy. This teacher should be able to demonstrate for staff how PACT Time can be a successful strategy that will make their classrooms more successful.

Parent Liaison. Another important role within the school that is critical for the success of family literacy services is a parent liaison. This role can be filled by a Title I parent educator, a school counselor, a family resource center coordinator or any similar staff member who works directly with parents. This person recruits parents, supports parents' needs and assists the adult educator in the coordination of activities between the child's classroom and the adult classroom

District Coordinator. Those who work in family literacy programs understand the importance of working collaboratively with school district staff and other partners. In school districts where multiple programs are being implemented, a district coordinator has been very instrumental in assisting with program needs. The coordinator gives direct assistance to schools, holds regular meetings with all family literacy school-based staff, and facilitates district-wide meetings so that individual programs can network, share lessons learned and support mutual needs.

FAMILY LITERACY IMPACT

The impact of family literacy on individual schools and school districts involved in the Families in Schools program model is seen in many different areas.

Parent involvement. PTO and PTA attendance rose dramatically after family literacy was instituted in the school. More parents attend conferences, literacy nights and other events. Parents are encouraging other parents to participate in school activities. The family literacy school team works to ensure that parents feel welcomed and a part of the school community. Parents' educational goals, because they impact the entire family's educational well-being, are respected and addressed by school staff.

Greater community connections. Because of the collaboration aspect inherent in family literacy, many schools are citing newfound abilities to connect with other funded programming and additional community agencies and partners.

Educational outcomes for children. The educational partnership between the parent and the child is enhanced in family literacy programs and leads to improved student behavior and decreased absenteeism, creating a foundation for intergenerational lifelong learning. Parents in family literacy programs are better equipped to support their children's learning in the home.

Stronger school partnerships. Teachers report that family literacy promotes enhanced communication with parents when parents become familiar with the school community in their newfound role as adult learners.

FAMILY LITERACY—PROVIDING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Parents must play a key role in the education of their children. The benefits are clear. When Mom and Dad come to school and become integrally involved in their child's education, it becomes a win-win situation for school and home. Family literacy offered in the elementary school provides the perfect setting for parents to increase their own learning, while gaining knowledge about how to best help their children become academically successful. Parents in family literacy programs learn quickly how to navigate complicated school systems and become true advocates for their children. Schools are seeking ways to bring all families into an educational partnership. Family literacy ensures that all families, regardless of their economic or educational background, are given the opportunity to participate in this partnership and influence their own lives and their children's lives in positive ways.