

Join the "Par-aide" in Education

Volunteer parents in the classroom can enrich and extend the curriculum by sharing their career expertise, enthusiasm about avocations, and cultural knowledge.

Parents' aid to education has become a full-blown "Par-aide" as thousands of willing collaborators, without professional training, are recruited into classrooms. These collaborators—both paid aides and volunteers—augment the work of teachers by first receiving training and then assuming responsibilities that range from housekeeping and clerical work to tasks involving direct assistance to students' learning. Even schools with well-developed training programs, though, often overlook vast opportunities for curricular enrichment through the use of skills possessed by volunteer parents that are not in the repertoires of teachers.

At the UCLA laboratory school, when I was principal, we plumbed parents' abilities beyond those possessed by the professional staff for a new kind of parent involvement. We identified three categories of parents' competencies:

1. skills in hobbies and crafts;
2. direct knowledge and experience in occupations;

Suggested Content for Your Presentation

Hobbies

1. Prepare display (picture or real)
2. Tell something about it: time, cost, skills needed, where materials are secured, or where taught
3. Demonstrate "doing it," or your collection
4. Prepare directions for students' participation in class
5. Prepare directions, source of materials for student to pursue activity during leisure time

Occupations

Give information about:

1. What your field encompasses
2. What you actually do—examples, demonstrations, and a typical day
3. Skills needed, how acquired (academic, emotional, social)
4. Assets and liabilities of the field—what you like best and least about your job
5. Content the student is studying now that is used in your occupation
6. Needs of the field, salary, openings

Cultures

Show things, present information, or demonstrate or have students participate in activities that teach a culture's:

1. History
2. Geography
3. Customs
4. Art
5. Music
6. Aspects that are unusual or different as well as similarities
7. Contributions
8. Present-day situation

3. appreciation of, knowledge of, or skills in many aspects of different cultures.

For parents who did not feel they had special interests or talents but who were willing to assist in any way they could, "helping out" became a fourth category.

Invitation and Orientation

To initiate "Par-aide in Education," we sent a letter to all parents of children in the school (see "Sample Letter to Parents," p. 39). We invited those who responded to a two-hour inservice session, where they were given information about and training in how to plan and conduct their presentations.

In each category (occupation, hobby or craft, culture), teachers modeled demonstration lessons with lab school students so "Par-aiders" could see how their instruction might (*not* must) look in practice (see "Sample Format of Presentation," p. 40). The content of these lessons, which lasted from 15 to 40 minutes, ranged from

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Jewish religious holidays, Egyptian art, sailing, baking bread, and origami to "how it feels and what you do" when you're an architect, a pharmacist, a secretary, and a salesperson (see "Suggested Content for Your Presentation," p. 36). We encouraged the "Par-aid-

ers" to modify the basic lesson plan to accommodate their own content and styles.

The parents also watched teachers illustrate techniques for making lessons more successful, such as letting students know at the beginning

Enlisting Parents' Help with Mathematics

Ann P. Kahn

- "Math is not a part of everyday life unless you plan to be a scientist."
- "Boys are naturally better at math than girls."
- "Learning math requires special abilities, which most students don't have."

For years, many parents have believed and repeated such math myths. But mathematics skills are *not* genetic. Like any other subject, mathematics requires hard work and high expectations.

Without math, citizens cannot understand newspaper articles about the impact of political polls, AIDS testing, or acid rain. A consumer can't tell whether the "Jumbo" or the "Giant" size of detergent is the best buy. The loan interest on a charge account or a home mortgage is a mystery. And so on. Starting early in elementary school, our children need to know the full range of mathematics skills, not just arithmetic. If we allow our children to be limited to computation, their job prospects are dim—they can be replaced by a cheap machine.

Enter a new national PTA kit, *Math Matters: Kids Are Counting on You*, based on the premise that all parents, whether they loved math or hated it, can make a difference in their children's education. The kit's developers recognize that mathematics is the subject that most parents feel least comfortable with. To help them, *Math Matters* provides ideas parents can use with their children at their own kitchen tables or on family outings. Periodically during the year, PTAs will send their member parents selections from over 70 "Home Helpers." For example, suggested home activities, which come with instructions, include:

- doubling a recipe for oatmeal cookies and using the fractional measurements in baking;
- taking a family survey on favorite ice cream flavors and showing the results on a bar graph;
- filling in football "stat" charts or figuring the batting averages for favorite baseball players;
- estimating the total bill during trips to the grocery store (learning to "round up" prices to make the task easier).

Many such activities can be performed with a calculator, and the kit contains one designed for 4th grade fingers. The kit also contains a list of ideas for gifts that develop interest in mathematics and science, summer and vacation tips to help children keep the skills they learned during the school year, and a special sheet to help preschoolers learn concepts like *larger than* or *smaller than*. Additionally, there are posters, a seven-minute videotape, math stickers, and a "Quiz for Parents," which reveals how many myths they believe about mathematics.

Neither schools nor parents alone can turn around the problems caused by math illiteracy. But the PTA believes they have a much better chance, working together. When parents believe that "Math Matters" and that their kids are depending on them, they can become part of the team seeking a solution.

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Parent Surveys Can Give You Useful Information

Thomas R. Hoerr

For the past 11 years—first as a public school principal and now as the head of The New City School, an independent school in St. Louis—I've used parent surveys to help me gauge how parents are viewing our programs. When I began the process, I used a simple format, a one-page sheet that asked parents to respond to three items:

- "I'm happy about _____"
- "I'm unhappy about _____"
- "I'd like to know _____"

The sheets were sent home with the children and could be returned, anonymously, to the school. I was pleasantly surprised when almost one-quarter of our families responded.

Over time, I've added more and more different kinds of surveys to help me determine how parents view various aspects of our school. We typically receive responses from between one-quarter and one-third of our families. All questionnaires contain Likert-scale items ("strongly agree," "strongly disagree," and the like) as well as open-ended questions. If a child's parents are separated or divorced, we send a form to each household. The forms can be returned anonymously, but we ask parents to indicate their child's grade level. By checking a box on the form, parents can indicate that they do not wish for me to share their comments with others. Every questionnaire ends with the invitation, "Other thoughts?"

A Survey for Every Season

I mail these questionnaires to parents at regular times throughout the school year. For example, I poll parents after the first parent-teacher conference of the year to ascertain their level of agreement with the following statements:

- "My parent-teacher conference was a good use of my time."
- "During the conference, information shared gave me a good understanding of my child's current strengths and weaknesses."
- "The progress report was understandable and effective in indicating my child's progress."
- "Joint planning occurred regarding what steps school and home can take to strengthen my child's skills."
- "I feel that the school is providing learning experiences that are geared to my child's capabilities."

In May I also conduct a general spring survey to gather information about the values of our institution. The questionnaire asks parents to rank order the reasons they chose to send their child to The New City School (academics, student diversity, nurturing environment, and so on). I also solicit their perceptions about other matters, including our Extended Day Program and my own helpfulness.

In the fall I poll new parents to learn what their initial reactions are to our school, whether we are meeting their expectations, whether the open house was helpful, and so on. Parents whose children graduate will receive a form the following November, asking how the child has adjusted to the secondary school. I also send a questionnaire to parents who elect not to have their children return next year to find out what caused them to make this decision.

For each survey a summary sheet is prepared to show the frequency of responses and to capture the flavor of the narrative comments. These sheets allow us to track and compare data over time. In preparing for our parent-teacher conferences, we devote part of a faculty meeting to reviewing the survey data from the previous conference. Teachers also meet by grade level to review the questionnaires from their respective students' parents.

Only the First Step

Schools that use surveys on a regular basis can obtain valuable information about what parents perceive as their strengths and weaknesses. They can then use these data to open lines of communication so that school and home understand each other better. In doing so, both can work together toward their common goal: providing the best learning environment for the students.

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whether they will have the opportunity to touch, make, or experiment with the product demonstrated. Other topics covered during the training were ground rules for asking questions, whether raising hands was necessary, how an interested student could find out more, what materials were needed to get started, and so on. At the end of the session, the trainers directed the parents to references¹ to enhance their presentations.

Another critically important aspect of training parents to work in classrooms is the preparation necessary for laypersons to deal with professional and possibly confidential information. Anyone working with students has access to information (test scores, behavioral problems, family situations) that must not become a part of casual conversation. Because parents can be intrigued, amused, or outraged by students' comments or behaviors, they must develop sensitivity to issues of invasion of privacy and to the legal regulations regarding confidentiality so that they adopt professional precautions to protect students.

Scheduling and Observation

At the training session, the Par-aiders had indicated the ages of students with whom they wished to work and the times and days of the week when they could be available. The Par-aide Coordinator (a classroom teacher with some released time) then developed a schoolwide schedule.

After their training, Par-aiders had an opportunity to go over their "lesson plans" with the Par-aide Coordinator. This step in the process helped to eliminate the booby traps that unwary enthusiasts often design into lessons and to ensure the educational match between the Par-aider's presentation and the students.

The final component of our successful Par-aide program was the observation of each Par-aider's presentation by the teacher who had prepared students for the "lesson" followed by feedback on how they had done. The teachers discussed the successful aspects of their presentations with the

Sample Letter to Parents

Dear Parents,

We are anxious to take advantage of your very considerable talents, abilities, and interests in order to increase the richness of your child's program. As a result, we are initiating "Par-aide (Parent Aide) in Education" and, with parents joining us to augment the power of our instructional resources, are creating another "first" for education. You are busy people, but many of you already have indicated your eagerness to contribute your time and talents to the success of your child's education. We would like to poll your interest and availability for participation in one of three areas. In no way is this an obligation of a parent, just an opportunity.

I. Knowing and valuing cultural differences

Students need to know and respect the cultures of all peoples of the world. Consequently, we would like to develop cadres of parents, not necessarily of that nationality or ethnic derivation, who will present some aspect of the culture of a country, region, or people through their customs, folklore, art, cooking, history, music, geography, special events, festivals, beliefs, and religions—anything that would give our students a taste of knowing and valuing those people.

II. Arts, crafts, and hobbies

Increased leisure time is a "for sure" of the future. Students should have the advantage of learning from those of you who are already engaged in arts, crafts, and hobbies, so each student can develop a variety of truly "re-creative" recreational activities.

III. The world of work

The complexity of adult occupations is difficult for other adults, let alone students, to understand. Hearing about "what I do" from a real participant in that field develops knowledge that contributes to the eventual selection of a field of interest and occupation. Students should have the advantage of knowing the full range of possibilities, opportunities, and responsibilities in the world of work, not just what is presented by television stereotypes.

Your participation in any one of these activities will take an occasional half-hour to an hour with students at school plus the time needed for preparation. We will assist you in planning your presentation and provide materials if needed.

IV. The "short-handed" school

While we try to anticipate our needs and budget our work time, there are occasional chores (that's the only word for it) where we need an extra head with a willing pair of hands. This might involve clerical work (typing, filing, listing), preparation of educational materials (games, puzzles, charts), helping with students ("convoying," field trips), or what-have-you.

Your contribution would be to list your name as a possible source of assistance at the time of need. If you wish to increase your involvement and make your child's school richer through your participation, please return the tear-off below. After we receive your reply, we will schedule a meeting to give you additional information. Indication of interest in no way commits you to the program.

Sincerely yours,

Principal

"Par-aide in Education"

I am interested in learning more about the areas checked. I understand that this response does not commit me to participation in the program.

___ I. Knowing and valuing cultural differences

My special cultural interest is _____. I could contribute to: ___ customs, ___ folklore and literature, ___ art, ___ cooking, ___ history, ___ geography, ___ special events and festivals, ___ beliefs and religions, ___ music, ___ other.

___ II. Arts, crafts, and hobbies

I could share my interests in _____

___ III. The world of work

I could tell about _____

___ IV. An extra hand at school

I would be willing to _____

Child's name _____

Parent's name _____

Sample Format of Presentation

Your plan:	You might do or say:
<p>I. <u>Developing anticipatory set</u> The teacher will get students ready and introduce you. Watch to see how the teacher: gains attention of the group, prepares students for your presentation, sets behavioral and content expectations.</p>	<p>Use some of those same signals and techniques when you work with the group.</p>
<p>II. <u>Stating objective</u> The students will know what they are going to do. After your presentation, students will: answer questions, ask questions, prepare/make/taste product demonstrated.</p>	<p>"Listen (watch) carefully, I'm going to tell you about _____. When I finish, I will ask questions so you will know how much you have learned." "You will be able to prepare some _____." "You will have a chance to make _____." "You will all play the game of _____." "I will answer your questions about what I have told you/ demonstrated."</p>
<p>III. <u>Purpose/meaning</u> Why is your presentation important? Information and/or demonstration: Will help students value cultural differences and similarities Enable students to create/make a product, play a game, sing a song Encourage students to increase their knowledge of occupation presented.</p>	<p>"The information I give you (the things I tell you about) will help you to see how we have benefited from this culture and the ways it's different from/similar to our own culture." "After we do this together, you will be able to do it at home for your family." "When I finish, you may want to read further about _____. I can give you some references."</p>
<p>IV. <u>Input</u> Give information through: lecture, pictures, film, demonstration, display, charts, diagrams, response to questions.</p>	<p>Explain, describe, show. Include references, such as books, museums, trips, programs that students can use for added information. Provide or have students write down a list of supplies or ingredients for product demonstrated.</p>
<p>V. <u>Modeling</u> You show by doing or by showing examples of: craft, music, costumes, games, art, dance, things used in occupation.</p>	<p>"These are the special tools/ingredients/costumes used by the people of _____ when they _____." "Watch carefully while I show you how to _____."</p>
<p>VI. <u>Checking for understanding</u> Ask questions to check for understanding. Help students identify similarities/differences between another culture and ours. Determine if students can tell steps in procedure demonstrated. Respond to students' questions.</p>	<p>"You have listened well. Now raise your hand if you know the answer to this question." Give the students knowledge of how well they did: "You really remembered. That's just right." If the answer is incorrect, maintain the student's dignity: "I can see how that may have been confusing. Let me make it more clear." "Let's list some ways we're the same/different." "Let's review now. What will you do first?" "That's a good question. I didn't cover it" or "You're really thinking about it. As I said, _____."</p>
<p>VII. <u>Ending the lesson</u> Finish with good feeling tone and help students move to next assignment by: Acknowledging good attending Reinforcing good questions asked Expressing your pleasure in talking to/with them Turning class back to teacher.</p>	<p>"I've enjoyed talking with you and answering your questions." "You learned that very quickly." "You've listened well and asked many good questions. It has been a pleasure to be with you." "Now it's time for your teacher to give you directions for your next activity."</p>

Par-aiders and, most important, told them the reasons why those behaviors and activities had been effective. If appropriate, the teachers also gave suggestions for enhancing subsequent presentations or for remediating anything that did not go well. The basis for this feedback was the prior training in coaching that the teachers had undertaken to develop sensitivity and proficiency in professionally assisting another.

Only when it was requested and appropriate did the teachers identify for the Par-aiders those activities that consumed precious time and energy but contributed nothing—or that actually interfered, albeit unintentionally, with learning. If nothing else was accomplished, Par-aide generated in parents a deep and profound respect for the professional competence required to teach in a way to accelerate learning.

Enriching the Curriculum

The response of teachers, parents, and students to Par-aide was enthusiastic. Parents kept "polishing their act," asking for additional opportunities to teach and receive feedback. Several eventually enrolled in university classes so they might become certified teachers. Students developed knowledge and interests that exceeded those made possible by the resources and experience of any one teacher. And teachers saw parents as valued partners in extending and enriching an educational program that brought the resources of the community into the classroom without the cost and the logistics of moving students.

Par-aide, of course, does not replace trained helping hands. But to overlook the knowledge and skills that parents alone possess is shortsighted and shortchanges students. Only people who have done it can present an occupation with the integrity of direct experience in

the assets and liabilities of that lifework, can present a hobby or craft with the enthusiasm of a devotee, and can introduce children to the multitude of pleasant experiences involved in appreciation of the history, geography, art, customs, and life experiences of a diversity of cultures; in short, can enrich a curriculum beyond the possibilities presented by the most competent and dedicated professional staff.

These "riches" can be made available to students in any school regardless of budget, school organization, methods, material or pupil-teacher ratio. Great dividends, indeed, from a "Par-aide in Education"! □

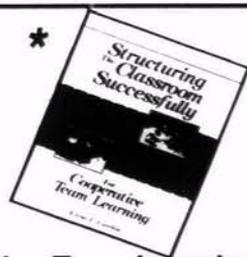
¹M. Hunter and S. Brett, "Aide-ing in Education," TTP Publications, P.O. Box 514, El Segundo, CA 90245.

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