

Tennessee Parents Were Invited to Participate— and They Did

A statewide effort to strengthen parent-school partnerships has generated an enthusiastic response.

Recognizing the need for stronger parent-school partnerships, especially in the state's poverty-stricken communities, the 1986 Tennessee General Assembly appropriated \$1,000,000 to design and implement a statewide parent involvement initiative. The purpose of this endeavor was to enhance or develop various parent involvement models in local school systems in order to demonstrate the benefits of a strong partnership between parents, students, and the school. The state funded 11 models at 17 sites throughout Tennessee. Even though the models differ both in emphasis and in magnitude, the basic assumption underlying all of them is that student performance, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced positively by parental involvement.

Tennessee funded the programs in two phases. In the first, school systems with existing parent involvement activities seen as having great potential received funds to expand and enhance their programs. In the second phase, several nationally validated programs were replicated in different school systems to determine if they would work effectively in Tennessee. The state also independently initiated one additional model and piloted it at six teacher center sites around the state.¹

Phase I Models

The seven models in the first phase emphasized varied combinations of early intervention, public awareness, preschool readiness and enrichment, parent education, and volunteer programs. One model is a comprehensive systemwide volunteer and public awareness program that recruits interested persons (mostly parents) to

work in the schools to strengthen the curriculum and enrich each student's educational experience. As a result of this program, the district has almost doubled the number of volunteers in tutorial, reading readiness, and home learning activities.

A second model is an early intervention program to screen prekindergarten students for physical and mental

Photograph by Lessa Ellis, Scott County Schools



During an Operation Fail-Safe conference at Burchfield Elementary School in Scott County, Tennessee, a kindergarten teacher (left), the mother of a kindergarten, and the student share a happy moment. Below, during a Family Math session at Airways Junior High School, Memphis, Tennessee, mothers and sons use calculators and newspaper advertisements to go on a "Christmas Shopping Spree."



problems and to train parents to remediate the identified areas. The county health department conducts the physical screenings, and the school system is responsible for the educational screenings. The screenings occur in the summer before the children begin kindergarten. Parent training and post-evaluation feedback are conducted during "Parent Day" in September.

The concepts of Purkey's Invitational Education² are the basis for a third Phase I program whose purposes are (1) to create a school environment conducive to teaching and learning, and (2) to involve parents and community in the educational process. The infusion of state money allowed the school system to expand the existing program by involving parents and community members in the public awareness and support effort. Under the direction of a full-time home/school coordinator, this systemwide program attempts to build positive self-concepts and attitudes in all school community members, to enhance parenting skills, and to improve students' achievement in basic skills.

An outgrowth of the Invitational Education program has been the creation of a comprehensive volunteer program. In addition to helping in the classroom, volunteers plan and conduct Invitational Education workshops, open houses, and classes in basic and parent education.

Three of the additional models in Phase I are primarily parent education programs. Two serve individual elementary school communities, and one is a systemwide model. These program activities are intended to help parents become effective partners with the schools and to create community awareness of the importance of parental support and understanding of the educational process. Specifically, the aim of the projects is to introduce parents, through home visits, weekly parent club sessions, and the like, to ways they can help their children in basic skills and social development.

In these three programs, the major strategy used to reach the parents was to provide a full-time home/school coordinator to act as a liaison between the families and the school. The coor-

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inator routinely makes home visits to give parents materials for helping their children and gradually to build trust between the families and the school. Building trust is a crucial and difficult step, since most parents of at-risk students did not themselves have positive educational experiences and, as a result, may view the schools with fear and distrust. The coordinator functions as the key to changing these negative attitudes, opening the door to more constructive partnerships between families and the school.

At the weekly parent club sessions, the parents receive training and materials to assist them in helping their children develop the skills and attitudes necessary for success in school. In addition to learning a new game or skill to use at home with their children, they are taught parenting and social skills at each meeting.

The seventh model is a preschool readiness and enrichment program for 3- and 4-year-olds. These classes, designed to increase language and concept development, are held in specially adapted school buses that travel to different distressed urban communities. The preschoolers participate in group and individual learning activities and also have free time to play with educational toys. The employment of a full-time home/school coordinator enabled the school system to add home

visits and monthly parent education classes to the program. Since the parent classes are held at the central office, the school system can provide free transportation and baby-sitting services; and these have proved to be important supports for the program.

Phase II Models

To begin Phase II, after an extensive search, state officials chose three validated models—Active Parenting³, New Parents as Teachers⁴, and Operation Fail-Safe⁵—to implement in Tennessee.

Active Parenting is intended to help participants learn to rear cooperative, responsible, and courageous children. The program, built around a videotape series, offers six two-hour training sessions to teach parents about goal setting, planning, decision making, and the like; problems young people encounter; ways they can work with their children in problem solving; and approaches to creating a better home-school environment. Using the taped program as a foundation, the coordinator then assists parents with their specific problems and issues.

New Parents as Teachers is a program for teenage parents with children up to 3 years of age. Most of the young parents involved are still enrolled in school. The program focuses on developing parenting skills, reducing child abuse and/or neglect, increasing parental self-esteem, developing active and positive relationships with the school system, and teaching parents how to help their children learn how to learn. Program activities and resources include parent education classes; home visits by a parent educator; group meetings with other parents; a toy lending library; a resource center; screening for vision, hearing, and physical development; and home learning activities.

Operation Fail-Safe is a systemwide intervention program designed to raise student achievement levels. Parents learn to assess their children's aptitudes, achievement levels, interests, and abilities. A major activity of the model is a series of parent-student-teacher conferences that endeavor to develop shared accountability for the

child's education. The program also attempts to create a comprehensive community and parent support program through building committees composed of parents, teachers, and administrators; PTO/PTA groups; and business, civic, and other community groups.

Family Math

In addition to the Phase I and Phase II programs, the State Department of Education initiated Family Math⁶ at six Tennessee Teacher Center Network locations. The catalyst for this model was parents' frustrations in not understanding the mathematics their children were studying. Family Math is not remedial. Rather, its objective is to create a positive learning environment where parents and children can work together as a team, using a "hands-on" approach to learning mathematical concepts and logical thinking.

A typical course includes six one- to two-hour evening sessions led by a teacher trained in the Family Math program. The sessions provide parents and children opportunities to develop problem-solving skills and to better understand the applicability of mathematics to daily life. Classes at each of the six teacher center sites are targeted for the following grade levels: K-4, 2-4, 3-4, 6-8, and 7-8.

Invitation Accepted

All of the models increased the amount of time parents were involved with the schools and with their children's education.⁷ During 1986-87, the first year it was in operation, Tennessee's Parent Involvement Program generated over 43,000 hours of parent participation. It is hard to determine the increase in parent involvement hours since most of the Phase I programs were very small before the state funded them. The Phase II programs and Family Math were new programs. With the addition of a full-time coordinator, the involvement increased dramatically in the Phase I programs.

The records show the approximate total number of different parents involved in the various programs was 2,400. There was a wide variance in the number of parents involved in

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each model and also a broad range of parent activities. For example, at one Family Math site, only 10 parents enrolled in two classes; at another site 78 parents enrolled in three classes. One model that focused on school volunteers had over 200 parents participating, while 100 parents were involved in a model that concentrated on parent-teacher conferences.

The parent survey I conducted also suggests that parents are supportive of and enthusiastic about all of the models. Over 95 percent of the 1,100 parents who completed the survey instruments, which were available at each of the model sites, either "strongly agree" or "agree" they are more involved with their children's education, feel better about the school, are better able to help their children, and would recommend their particular program to other parents. Over 90 percent reported that their children's skills and overall attitudes have improved, and 81 percent perceive an improvement in their children's behavior.

No matter which model was offered in a school system, the parents responded favorably. However, while they are eager to be involved if invited, we found that more than a simple request is needed. The invitation must stimulate high expectations in the par-

ents by letting them know what the benefits are for them. The schools must send out an appropriate "message" to attract them; they must say, "We respect and care for you and your children, and we all need to work together." The interest of parents of at-risk children in their youngsters' education represents a major asset waiting to be tapped—a fact that Tennessee has recognized and is employing to everyone's advantage. □

¹ The Phase I sites were Athens City Schools (Strengthening Kindergarten via Intervention Procedures), Dyer County Schools (The Bowdoin Method), Kingsport City Schools (Parent Enhancement Program), Lewis County Schools (Invitational Education Program), Metro-Nashville Public Schools (Caldwell Early Childhood Education Center), Murfreesboro City Schools (Classroom on Wheels), and Washington County Schools (Parents Assisting Students' Success). The Phase II sites were Hancock County Schools (Active Parenting), Memphis City Schools (New Parents as Teachers), and Scott County Schools (Operation Fail-Safe). Family Math was piloted at Knox County Teacher Center, Oak Ridge Teacher Center, Robertson County Teacher Center, Warren County Teacher Center, Weakley County Teacher Center, and West Tennessee Teacher Center.

² W.W. Purkey and J. Novak, (1984), *Inviting School Success* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth).

³ "Active Parenting" was developed by Michael H. Popkin and is distributed by Active Parenting Inc., 4669 Roswell Rd., NE, Atlanta, GA 30342.

⁴ "New Parents as Teachers" was started in 1981 by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 205 Jefferson St., Jefferson City, MO 65101.

⁵ "Operation Fail-Safe" originated in 1978 in the Houston (Texas) Independent School District, Houston, TX 77002.

⁶ "Family Math" was developed in 1979 by the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California-Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720.

⁷ D.C. Lueder, (1987), *An Evaluation of the Tennessee Parent Involvement Program* (Nashville: Tennessee State Department of Education).

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