NWP Sites Reach Out to Parents

A sampling of successful parent programs in the NWP network

by Art Peterson

The magic words are “parent involvement,” a phrase to remember if you are a reform-minded educator. Indeed, the term “parent involvement” has its uses when one is looking for hot-button expressions to plug into a grant proposal, but what exactly do these words mean?

Jim Vopat, director of the Milwaukee Writing Project and author of the book The Parent Project, A Workshop Approach to Parent Involvement (Stenhouse, 1994), knows what parent involvement has too often meant in his own community: “Busloads of parents are brought into large auditoriums for info-motivational seminars, where they are blamed, tantalized, and talked at. At the end of the day, these parents are bussed home where they have to deal with the everyday problems that have accumulated. And that’s it. There is no follow-up support, only a slightly bitter tomorrow.”

Parents are rounded up, yes, but there is nothing involving about the encounter. Vopat knew there must be a better way, and he found it. Thus, the Parent Project was born. Funded originally by The Joyce Foundation, The Parent Project is now established in Cleveland and Chicago as well as Milwaukee.

Vopat writes that “school has changed dramatically since many parents were there.” Cooperative leaning, response groups, book-sharing and much more may be unfamiliar to parents of kids now in school. Vopat believes that if parents are to support such strategies, they need to understand what these strategies are.

The Parent Project, however, does not talk at parents. Vopat believes the Project’s workshops are successful because “we do things instead of talking about them.” So, for instance, if parents are learning about “prediction” as a strategy for teaching reading, they may find themselves making their own predictions about just what the surprise could be in

See Parent Programs, page 12

(l-r) The late Susan Wren, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, with Kim Stafford, Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College, and Richard Louth, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, at the first summer institute of Rural Voices, Country Schools at Walker Creek Ranch in Sonoma County, California, July 1997. Look inside for more about Rural Voices, Country Schools, including Kim’s memorial poem to Susan. Story on pages 6-7.
Parent Programs

Continued from page 1

Donald Carrick’s *Wednesday Surprise.*

Typically, a Parent Project workshop has the following ingredients: Fifteen to twenty-five parents join with at least two teachers and, if possible, the school social worker for six weekly two-hour sessions. Childcare and transportation are arranged. Parents receive a small stipend, not as payment to participate, but rather as a means to make participation possible.

While journal writing, shared reading of children’s literature, a guest presentation on a topic of group interest and an activity usually based on this presentation are all part of the Parent Project model, the workshops also assume that parents bring much knowledge to these sessions. “Just as the writing project is about teachers teaching teachers,” Vopat says, “the Parent Project is about parents teaching parents.” The workshops play havoc with the territoriality of school culture. “I’m always pleased,” says Vopat “when someone visits one of our workshops and says, ‘We couldn’t tell who the teachers were and who the parents were.’”

One other key ingredient of the Parent Project is follow-up. By the end of the six-week workshop, participants have founded a community. It’s important, Vopat believes, that the parents and teachers continue to meet at monthly meetings to build on relationships they’ve established.

Despite the success of the Parent Project, Vopat has seen ways it may be necessary to alter the model. “One of the consequences of welfare reform,” he says, “is that many parents are not as able to get to school as they once were.” So the Parent Project is experimenting with new directions. “If a parent is reading to her child in an effective way and she wants to share that, we’ll help her video tape her
Toby Curry, a 6th grade teacher at the Dewey Center in Detroit, Michigan, a TC with the Red Cedar Writing Project, and a member of the Project Outreach team, understands well enough that many parents are not able to get to school. She even wonders if, for middle school students, frequent parental visits to school are a good idea. “Most middle school kids don’t want their parents hanging around school often,” she says. But Curry does recognize the importance of helping parents understand what is going on in the classroom. And this recognition has led her to create the Roving Parent Journal, which Curry describes as “a doorway into the classroom.” The Roving Parent Journal, Curry says, “is about as low tech as you can get.” It is a sturdy spiral notebook that passes among the parents who respond to Curry and to each other. The first entry is Curry’s:

“...this year I’m going to circulate this journal among all my parents. A parent teacher dialogue journal is a great place for us to talk about schooling, parenting and kids. I'm a parent too. My children are 14, 16, and 18.

This journal will be a place for us to discuss any questions or concerns you have about school... To get our conversation going why not tell us how you like the idea of a roving parent journal.

“Whose mom or dad really likes to write?” Curry asks her students, and the Roving Parent Journal has begun its journey. When a parent responds, Curry answers in the journal but also sends home a copy of what she has written.

Although not the primary purpose of the journal, Curry has found the journal to be a “great self-esteem builder” for her, as many parents have complimentary things to say about Curry’s teaching. But parents go in many other directions when they respond. One writes about girls in sports, another stresses the importance of multicultural education, another draws an analogy between “preaching and teaching.”

“I try to nudge the conversation,” Curry says. “When a parent makes a long entry, I synthesize and look for points of general interest. A parent asks ‘what about spelling?’ This gives me a chance to discuss how to do a spell check with kids.”
With aary a computer in sight, the Roving Parent Journal creates a virtual classroom community where parents have a chance to connect with one another, modeling literacy for their children and a variety of approaches to writing for each other.

Rebecca Borjas, a 1st grade bilingual teacher at Arellanes School in Santa Maria, California, a TC with the South Coast Writing Project, and like Curry a Project Outreach teacher, also helps the parents of her students connect. But the literacy concerns of her parents are quite different from Curry’s students’ parents. None of these parents speaks English as a first language. Borjas describes a revelation during her first year of teaching: “Parents would come to a conference and I would want to discuss what they could do to raise their child’s skill level. Then I realized that many of the parents themselves had low literacy, not only in English, but in Spanish as well.”

Borjas began to organize workshops to help parents help their kids, workshops which helped parents as well. “I keep the focus on what we are doing in the classroom,” Borjas says. “Parents do what we do in class, and we do what I want them to do at home with their children.

“So, for instance, when we begin phonics awareness, I ask parents to cut and paste words that have the letter ‘o’ What sounds can ‘o’ make? Parents help one another. They’ll put together a page for each ‘o’ sound. Then they’ll go home and do it. I’ve given each of them a notebook At the next session they’ll bring in the notebooks to share. But I also always ask, ‘What else have you been doing?’”

Indeed, much of what Borjas does takes the spotlight off the teacher and puts it on the parents and the kids. Borjas accepts the idea that the parents provide a fund of knowledge. “Farm workers are experts in agriculture, and these parents have brought to class displays complete with pictures illustrating strawberry farming.” When Borjas’ class was studying sound, one parent played the guitar, grounding this little physics lesson with concrete examples.

Borjas goes a step further in spotlighting parents. She has her students collect stories from their parents’ past. The non-literate parents get a tape recorder. The parents’ stories are published as “Stories from The Heart,” an appropriate title for a book that connects parents, kids, teachers and schools. When parents’ knowledge of their children is added to the educational mix, they are contributing not only information, but also heart.