

# Education Begins at Home

Each year, thousands of children file through school doors for the first time and into classrooms where teachers expect them to be ready to learn. However, we all know that in too many cases children begin school with few of the early developmental skills they need to be successful.

It's easy for educators to forget that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. They model behavior, for good or bad, and set an early tone for expectations about learning. Parents want the best for their children, but often they need help in creating the enriching home environment young children need to excel in school.

As school and community leaders, principals are uniquely positioned to help parents understand their critical role in laying the foundations for a child's academic and social success. "Principals have the voice that can convince people how important this is," says Sarah Walzer, executive director of the Parent-Child Home Program, a national early childhood literacy and school-readiness initiative that sends trained staff into the homes of economically disadvantaged 2- and 3-year-olds to help parents model reading, play, and conversational activities. "In many cases, we have been brought in by a principal who realizes we need to make sure our children are coming into elementary schools prepared."

## Parents as Partners

Initiatives like the Parent-Child Home Program, which operates in more than 150 sites around the country, have demonstrated tangible results. A 2003 New York University study that looked at 135 children taking part in the program in five school districts found that, despite challenges of limited English proficiency, poverty, and low levels of parental education, students in the program performed as well as their more advantaged classmates on early literacy and other measures.

School readiness is also attracting national attention from lawmakers. Last year, Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri introduced the Education Begins at Home Act, which would provide \$400 million over three years for states to greatly expand the Parents As Teachers program, an effort that Bond estab-



lished while governor of Missouri to help parents from birth until their children reach age 3.

Principals, especially those in urban settings, may wonder where to find the time and funding to take a leadership role in engaging parents *before* their children actually enter school. But here are some practical steps they can take:

- Partner with community-based organizations that serve young children;
- Seek out initiatives like the Parent-Child Home Program that make home visits to families; and
- Attend community events and speak out about the importance of school readiness.

## "We Don't Do Naps Anymore"

Denise Lynch, principal of Bradbury Heights Elementary School in Capitol Heights, Maryland, believes that school

leaders must pay attention to school-readiness issues now more than ever.

"The curriculum at the kindergarten level is no longer just focused on social skills," she says. "It's a rigorous challenge and it requires children to demonstrate readiness for reading and writing. We don't do naps anymore."

An important challenge that principals need to address, says Lynch, is making parents feel more confident when dealing with school leaders and

teachers. This is particularly true for schools like Bradbury Heights, where a high percentage of students are poor and parents often have little education.

"We try and share information and provide an atmosphere that is inviting for the parents," she says. "Getting them in is the biggest challenge. We have parents who may feel uncomfortable with educators because their own experience with the education system may have been negative."

Inviting parents to visit the school before their children are old enough for kindergarten is one way of reaching out that Lynch has used. Her school also makes connections with local businesses. For example, Bradbury Heights has a partnership with the local mall, where students' work is displayed and the school's music group performs. This gives parents a chance to relate to the school in a more comfortable environment.

"Parents need to know we are here for their children," says Lynch, "but we can't do it by ourselves. We have to learn from each other and we have to share." ■

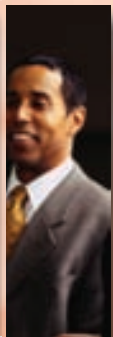
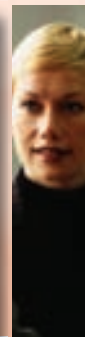
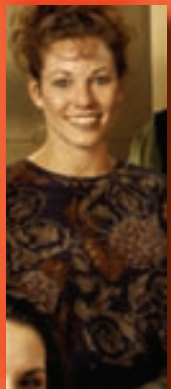
**Cheryl G. Riggins** is NAESP's Associate Executive Director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances. Her e-mail address is [criggins@naesp.org](mailto:criggins@naesp.org).

**"Parents want the best for their children, but often they need help in creating the enriching home environment young children need..."**

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