

Engage Parents as Partners



As the principal of a large, growing elementary school (plus a parent of six and a grandma of 18), I know how powerful family engagement is in the process of educating students. At my school, Endeavour Elementary School in Kaysville, Utah, we strategically plan activities throughout the year to involve families. For instance, every Friday is Dads Day, where fathers organize students' play at lunch recess, and once a year we invite grandparents to accompany their grandchild to school.

Throughout the year, we host a variety of family events. Some feature food, games, dancing, star gazing, student projects, and a special "Morning of the Arts" with performances and displays especially for parents. The PTA and I also join forces to celebrate each child during their birthday month—no small matter, since we have 1,150 students—where parents are invited to join their children for lunch.

These activities forge powerful relationships. The one that stands out, however, as a key to strengthening students academically is our Parents as Partners project. This initiative is rooted in the idea that teachers, administrators, and parents can work together to answer the question, "How can parents most effectively help their children at home with reading and math?"

Round 1: Reading

To engage parents as our partners in reading, we invited families to a

"Parents as Reading Partners" event during the school day, where our teachers modeled powerful instructional routines in reading fluency and comprehension. Our reading specialist and teachers demonstrated simple activities that could be easily replicated at home. Classroom teachers shared materials and online tools, and demonstrated specific, grade-level strategies.

In the lower grades, parents were shown a sight-word routine and directed to a website where the words and the routine were available. In the upper grades, parents learned strategies for improving students' comprehension. Teachers then invited parents into the classroom to "practice" these activities with their children under the direction of the classroom teacher.

This event taught us that more parents were concerned with the reading skills of their younger children than they were with their upper-grade

children. Although this initiative was a great idea, we had trouble with turnout, since we held it during the day. Plus, unfortunately, some parents found themselves darting between classes to be with all of their children.

Round 2: Math, and a New Model

We knew we could improve the event, so when we held a "Parents as Partners in Math" program, we changed our focus and format. Math is currently a huge concern to almost every parent because our district has adopted more rigorous standards, which are introduced earlier. Many parents feel that they are not always able to help their child, even in elementary school, because math concepts, math processes, and math language seems very different from when they were taught. While many concepts are actually the same, these concepts are introduced earlier, taught deeper, and often use vastly different math vocabulary.

This time, we made a few crucial changes: We held the event at night and invited only parents to attend without children, as you would with any serious training. Teachers planned meticulously beforehand, pinpointing the concepts that were especially concerning to parents and students.

We began the meeting by emphasizing the importance of STEM and why math skills are so crucial in preparing students to become college- and career-ready. I also shared our Math Priority Skills, which build from grade level to grade level, and how these contribute to student success. Teachers from each grade gave an overview of the main concepts they cover during the year, modeled the best ways parents can help support these concepts, and defined specific math vocabulary.

Then, parents chose one breakout presentation to attend. The presentations paired a first- and second-grade teacher, a third- and fourth-grade teacher, and a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, who presented hands-on materials designed specifically for parents. Teachers demonstrated how to use the

activities and materials; parents were able to ask questions and access tools for supporting their children.

Results

Our Parents as Partners initiative, especially the math program, has been invaluable to teachers and empowering to parents. Parents received an overview of the concepts being taught across grade levels (one through six), learned the definition of new terminology, and were trained to access online resources. Throughout the process, our teachers shared how we collectively bring below-proficient students to proficiency. This boosted the confidence of parents and gave them a place in Endeavour Elementary's success. Most importantly, parents were provided with a forum to ask important as well as simple questions.

Parents As Partners in Math has already been planned and timed strategically mid-way through the next school year to truly make a difference in the math achievement of our students. Math seems to be a universal concern for parents and the concrete nature of the subject lends itself to parent involvement. Likewise, we have planned to hold an evening class for all parents in reading with lower grade students at the beginning of the year. As with anything meaningful, parents need training and modeling to provide extra help at home.

Parents ultimately felt included and valued. When the Common Core and SAGE testing became controversial in Utah, our school enjoyed a high level of trust with parents. Because we reached out to parents and trained them as valuable partners, parents felt more confident and empowered, which in turn, built trust and strengthened relationships. Once parents see, value, and understand basic math and reading principles, they can become true partners in education as they provide powerful home support. 

Beth Johnston is principal of Endeavour Elementary School in Kaysville, Utah.

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