

# New Era of Family Engagement

Art-integrated strategies get  
parents involved in schools.

By Cheri Sterman

**P**rin cipals are increasingly aware of the need to partner with parents to make the long-term significant impact they both want for children, and that art is a great way to draw families and schools together. The principals of Pleasant Hill Elementary School in Missouri and Richard Edwards Elementary School in Chicago have used the arts to attract parents to their schools and strengthen the partnerships between parents and faculty.

“Art draws parents into our school, not only for the evening special events, but on a daily basis,” says Sue Herrera, principal of Pleasant Hill Elementary. “Art levels the playing field and makes school less intimidating.”

At Richard Edwards Elementary, parents are invited to help frame and

hang children’s artwork and to help the dance and thespian clubs. “We’re an art-integrated school, so the arts are a magnet to anyone who walks in our door,” says principal Judith Sauri.

At both schools, faculty open the doors for parents to create art alongside their children. “This welcoming access to our art studio strengthens our partnership with parents,” says Herrera. Adds Sauri: “Involving parents in art-making has reduced the tension this community has historically felt.”

#### Parents as Arts Advocates

Sauri radiates with pride when she talks about how her school’s parents are incredibly articulate arts advocates. She credits their advocacy for getting a new \$30 million commitment to renovate and expand the

school, which includes a new music room and art studio. “It was parents’ passion for the arts that built the support for this investment,” Sauri says.

A sketch of a boat and a team of individuals rowing in unison illustrates Pleasant Hill Elementary’s vision statement, which explicitly states that the school partners with families to meet students’ needs. “We can’t achieve our objectives without them,” Herrera says.

Parents are key partners in the entire educational process, from shaping the school’s vision and contributing ideas, to making decisions and engaging in art-infused learning. Herrera explains that parents participate in project-based learning experiences to see firsthand the rigor art integration brings to other subjects. As a result, “parents embrace art



Parents create their own art alongside their children.

ABOVE and LEFT: Pleasant Hill Elementary, Pleasant Hill, Missouri



integration. ... They get as excited as the kids do during our in-depth cross-curricular explorations.”

### Parents as Partners

What could be more welcoming than an invitation to share fruit pie and conversation with the principal? During PIE (partners in education) nights at Pleasant Hill Elementary, parents are given the opportunity to be heard during informal conversations with the principal.

These conversations often get colorful, as temperatures rise from warm to heated topics such as Common Core and recalibrated grading. But Herrera says that the relationships with families are enriched by sharing honest feedback. “Various points of view inform each other and solidify our partnership.”

### Parents as Leaders

The special relationship Sauri has with the parents in her school is because they are officially her boss. They conduct her evaluation annually and, every two years, vote to decide whether or not she remains as their principal. Because parents also evaluate the school’s educational programs and make key educational decisions, Sauri decided to provide leadership effectiveness training. The key

competencies the training focuses on include:

- Understanding needs (with the big picture in mind);
- Identifying who makes what decisions and controls what funds;
- Prioritizing what to ask for and who to ask; and
- Organizing others so they speak with aligned voices.

“It’s exciting to see how our parents have built their leadership capacity,” Sauri says. The training challenges parents to consider the one thing they’d ask if the mayor walked into the school and how might that be a “different ask” if they were talking to the school board, an alderman, or a senator. “Knowing who controls what aspect of the educational system helps parents customize their ‘ask.’”

### Parents as Learners

Leadership training is not the only subject taught to parents. Richard Edwards Elementary has a strong commitment to parents as learners. Eighty-five parents currently come to the school to take GED classes. Every day there are several parent workshops that range from parenting topics to deportation issues—and many of the workshops include art integration.

Parents and educators truly are partners in the educational process. When parents develop their leadership capacities and their appreciation of the power of art to transform learning, they help guide the vision and performance of the school that reverberates throughout the community. **■**

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