

No Excuses

Successful principals don't wait for parents to get involved in their children's education.

By Samuel Casey Carter

Today, a lack of parental involvement is often the first excuse for a school's poor performance. But high-performing principals have found that where academic achievement is the norm, parental support is not far behind.

This article gives examples of ways that enterprising principals are managing to engage low-income parents in their children's education.

No-excuses principals want parents who value education and will instill in their children the values that make for success in the classroom. Realizing that in many cases these values are not firmly in place at home, they use a written contract signed by parents, teachers, and students alike.

"We state our expectations and let the parents know that if these things are not met, their child will lose privileges," says David Levin of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Academy in the Bronx. "If these things continue not to be met, the child will be asked to leave."

KIPP in the Bronx is a neighbourhood school that cannot legally expel a student, but no one has yet called Levin's bluff. Every parent knows there are five children on the KIPP waiting list for every child in the school.

At KIPP, both in Houston and in the Bronx, the school keeps parents informed through its system of student "paycheques," which also acts as a powerful motivator of enhanced student performance.

Each week, teachers evaluate their students in ten specific areas of performance ranging from personal neatness to the quality of their prepared assignments, awarding up to \$2 in each area. Teachers send the children home with a weekly paycheque worth \$0 to \$20, which acts as a quick report on that week's activities.

Once the cheque is endorsed with a parent's signature, it is redeemable at

the school store for books, supplies, CDs and other goods, appropriately sold at hyper-inflated prices.

At George Washington Elementary in Chicago, parents can turn to a daily planner that shows — subject by subject — how their child is moving through the curriculum. Assignments are recorded in the planner every day. The principal also mandates teacher contact with the parents every week, and there is a homework hotline for every grade level, every day.

Some high-performing principals teach parents to read to their children, check their homework, and ask after their assignments. Again, the focus is on academic achievement.

A number of these principals interview parents before the start of the school year. Others administer final exams to them at the year's end.

Gregory Hodge of the Frederick Douglass Academy in New York says a parent has to take only one exam to learn the importance of checking homework regularly. At Cornerstone in Detroit, every parent knows that homework is assigned four days a week and must come back every day signed by a parent.

Strict parental accountability in the early years is one of the most effective tools at a principal's disposal. High-performing principals tell parents of kindergartners months in advance what their child needs to know before school starts.

In June, for example, Irwin Kurz used to give the parents of kindergartners at P.S. 161 in New York a copy of the test their children would take the following September. He would then go over the test and tell the parents how they could work with their children to prepare for school over the summer.

This one practice allowed Kurz to identify with some accuracy the level of learning that had taken place in the home. For those who struggled, Kurz

had one of his early childhood teachers teach the parents what to do to assist their child's efforts in school.

At George Washington Elementary, the principal provides a training session for the parents of preschoolers designed to encourage more effective learning in the home. Where necessary, high-performing schools often provide or recommend a literacy program for parents.

For Vivian Dillihunt, the principal of Rozelle Elementary in Memphis, parental accountability is about two things: assisting students with their schoolwork and reinforcing the value of the child's formal education.

Her school holds parenting workshops to increase parental literacy and to improve parents' ability to instruct their children at home. She (and every other high-performing principal) says that parents of elementary school students should explicitly teach phonics in the home.

A lack of parental involvement, however, is no excuse for a school's poor performance. In the end, *each student*, not the child's parents, must be held accountable for his own individual success.

"We let our children understand that so many opportunities are available even if their parents can't or won't help," says Hellen DeBerry, the former principal of Earhart Elementary in Chicago.

If a school fosters a clear culture of achievement, a parent need only reinforce the clear mission of the school. Effective parental participation, therefore, begins and ends with strong leadership in the school.

"Schools that are not performing well will never achieve parental support and do not deserve it either," Levin concludes. "The only thing you can do to earn parents' support is to educate their children."

(Adapted with permission from No Excuses — see our review on page 3)