

Partners in Education

It Takes the Whole Community to Educate These Children

Judith Anne McBride teaches in Ashland, Oregon in one of several multi-graded classes with a successful history of mandatory parent participation. Her class is very popular, with long waiting lists. A few years ago, the district administration ruled that it was unfair, and perhaps illegal, to make parent participation a requirement of enrolment. The class continues — and thrives — but the parents who have chosen it feel strongly that participation should be mandatory. The district so far does not agree.

A Teacher's Perspective by Judith Anne McBride

Living for 12 years in a rural community and teaching full-time in the local parent-run school instilled in me the desire and taught me the skills to run a truly parent-involved classroom in a public school setting. I have a first-, second-, and third-grade primary class, which means that children are in my class for three years. In mid-August, I set a date for our first parent organizational meeting which takes place before school is in session.

The first meeting is an opportunity for the new families to meet the returning veterans. This is the only meeting I facilitate. From then on, parents rotate that responsibility at our monthly evening meetings as one way to assume leadership. Each family is asked to give three hours per week to the classroom or at home (publishing the weekly newsletter, coordinating parent scheduling, etc.)

For the most part, parents arrive at school and “teach” a lesson that I have prepared to a small group of children. There are usually about five or six children in each group. Of course, reducing the student/adult ratio to 5:1 gives an incredible boost to learning. When they are not directly working with kids, parents check the “help” list that is made up of chores that keep the classroom running. While doing these chores is important and makes my life a lot easier, I feel it is more important to have parents working directly with the children if they so desire.

Communication is an essential element to creating community. We publish a weekly newsletter. I write the opening column, highlighting the week's events. Minutes of the parent meetings are published. Kids write a little too. We include a calendar of school events and usually a math or brain-teaser problem of the week.

Another link in our communication network is the curriculum committee. I meet before each new thematic unit with everyone interested in planning curriculum. This is one of my favourite ways of tapping the interests of parents. Most people who participate on the curriculum committee come prepared with wonderful ideas for activities, trips, resources, and literature. I could never create and execute the program that I do without the input of these parents.

My weekly routine reflects parental availability. I consider when parents can be in the class and what they would like to teach. I then take the kids' schedule for other activities, such as recess, physical education, music and library and set up instructional time slots matching when parents can be present with the class curriculum. Parents are pivotal to my program.

A Parent's Perspective by Donald Abel

My eight-year-old daughter Marley is in her third year in Judith's class. Every Thursday morning we go to school together. We rush to get there a few minutes early so I can prepare for what we will be doing that morning. Sometimes it's math or spelling with small groups; sometimes it involves leading a discussion or helping with an art project.

As Judith gathers the kids around her in one corner for morning circle, I have time to go over the lesson plan Judith has made, making sure I have enough markers and paper and visiting quietly with other parents. Jennifer will be reading the next chapter of *Charlotte's Web* to the class as she does every morning before going to work. Paul, Lea and Syl will also be working with small groups. Later that morning, Dana will be in for the weekly yoga lesson, and in the afternoon Lisa will come in to sing songs she and the class have written together.

Today is math day. I move around the table where the half dozen kids in my group are bent over their workbooks. My responsibilities include helping those who get stuck and encouraging those talking about Power Rangers to focus on the problems. When that's done, we play some math games for the rest of the time.

By mid-morning, the small-group work is done. With the kids at recess, I help clean up and chat with the other parents about the day, confirm whose kids are going to whose house after school or discuss ideas for the next unit. I make sure Judith has the kids' math papers and mention who is having a hard time with borrowing and who is ready to move on. Then I get ready to leave.

My participation, however, does not end with leaving the class. At monthly parent meetings we discuss issues that affect the entire group — classroom schedules, plans for a weekend field trip, or deciding on the next unit of study. Attending Curriculum Committee meetings, escorting field trips, or weeding the class garden are other ways in which I take part in the community.

School is an extension of family relationships and connects us with a larger community of families engaged in a common undertaking of importance to all. This program creates an unbroken continuum between home and school, allowing each to enrich the other.

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