

Including Every Parent

**Developed by Parents and Teachers
at the Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School**

Danette Adams, *Parent*

Kathleen Boyd, *Parent*

Dawn Cunningham, *Teacher*

Amy Gailunas-Johnson, *Teacher*

Kim Sprague, *Parent*

Sharon Williams, *Parent*

with

Ali Bledsoe, *Parent*

Pat Dennehy, *Parent*

Wynne Freed, *Specialist*

Maggie Lodge, *Parent*

Cristina Santos, *Parent*

Christine Tabolt, *Parent*

Edited by

Stefan Lanfer and Kelly Kane

Designed by

Lauren Bessen



Project for School Innovation
197A Centre Street
Dorchester, MA 02124
617.825.0703

www.psinnovation.org

The Project for School Innovation is an initiative of the Neighborhood House Charter School, a tuition-free public school serving K-8 students in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

This publication was made possible with support from the US Department of Education and *The Fund for Nonprofit Partnerships in Boston Public Schools*. The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the federal government.

Copyright © 2003 Project for School Innovation & Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 0-9716495-7-X

*I am very proud of the work
O'Hearn teachers and parents have
done to make ours a school where
close to 100% of families are
involved in some way.*

From the Desk of Dr. Bill Henderson

September 8, 2003

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in *Including Every Parent*. We all know how important parent involvement is. I am very proud of the work O'Hearn teachers and parents have done to make ours a school where close to 100% of families are involved in some way. I am even more proud of the great impact this has had on student learning and achievement.

Getting to this point has been a journey for the O'Hearn. When I became principal here fourteen years ago, I asked my teachers what their priorities were for improving the school. They had many suggestions, but nearly everyone agreed we needed to do a much better job involving parents and families. Since then, parent involvement has been a priority for all of us at the O'Hearn—for me, for teachers, for specialists, and for existing parent leaders. Along the way, the O'Hearn has developed a number of specific practices that consistently help us recruit, engage, and empower parents. It is our pleasure to share these with you in this book.

As educators, our bottom line is to help students learn and succeed. Working with the Project for School Innovation (PSI) has given us a rare opportunity to help not only our own students, but students at other schools, too. Showing great leadership and dedication, a wonderful team of O'Hearn parents and teachers spent a year working with PSI's highly skilled writers and facilitators to put together this book—researching and exploring what works at the O'Hearn, so that they could share these practices with other schools. Wherever you are on your journey of welcoming, engaging, and empowering families at your school, I hope *Including Every Parent* helps you on your way.

Best wishes,



Dr. Bill Henderson, Principal
Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School

An Introduction to Parent Involvement at the O'Hearn School

The Patrick O'Hearn is well known in Boston as an exemplary elementary school. On standardized tests, O'Hearn students consistently place among Boston's top public schools and above national averages. O'Hearn students shine outside the classroom too—in an arts program that draws national accolades. Under Boston's Controlled Choice Assignment Plan, so many parents rank the O'Hearn as their first choice that all available seats are filled, and many families end up on a long waiting list.

What makes the O'Hearn School so effective, so popular, and so special? One key factor in the O'Hearn's success is that, regardless of the day of the week or the time of day, parents are everywhere—engaged and involved in a wide variety of ways to support teaching and learning at the school. Parents are volunteering at the front desk. They are socializing and strategizing in the family center. They are running a book swap in the hallway. They are directing rehearsals for a talent show in the gymnasium. They are volunteering or substitute teaching in the classrooms. And the list goes on. Close to 100% of O'Hearn parents are involved in the school in some way.

In the 2002-03 school year, a team of O'Hearn parents and teachers worked with the Project for School Innovation (PSI) to better understand how the school is able to involve so many parents so well. The team used PSI's model of action research to uncover the many systems, strategies, and structures that yield such high levels of

parent involvement. Then the team tested their findings by sharing ideas with parents and teachers from other schools in the PSI network.

This guidebook provides some of the lessons that came out of this process. It is divided into four sections: *Parents are Present* explores key attitudes and strategies to make sure parents feel welcome and comfortable, so that they want to be present at school. *Parents are Participating* explores strategies for both teachers and veteran family leaders to offer new families entry-level volunteer opportunities—specific, tangible, and manageable tasks—that can lead to more significant involvement down the road. *Parents are Partners* explores strategies for involving parents in ways that directly support teaching and learning. Finally, *Parents are Empowered* examines parents and families in leadership and decision-making roles, taking the initiative to dream up, plan, and execute their own projects to address needs at the school.

Together, these four sections highlight the primary ways parents are involved at the O'Hearn. Many parents do follow them in sequence—first present, then participating, then partnering, then empowered. However, parents can and should be able to begin at any point. A helpful way to visualize a school with a healthy, productive level of parent involvement is as a cycle. Parents can begin at any point, and once parents are in the cycle, they continue to play many different roles.

Effectively involving parents is everyone's job—the principal, teachers, school staff, and parents themselves. As a result, different parts of this book are directed to different parts of this audience. In the early chapters, our step-by-step instructions are directed towards principals,

teachers, and veteran parent leaders, whose attitudes and actions can draw new parents into the school as helpers and participants. In later chapters, our instructions are directed more and more to parents themselves, as they are empowered to take on more significant leadership roles.

Including Every Parent is the sixth book in PSI's By Teachers for Teachers series. Through PSI, training and technical assistance are available from the same O'Hearn teachers and parents who developed this book. To learn more about these resources (or about *Including Every Child*), visit PSI's website (www.psinnovation.org) or call 617-825-0703.

• • •

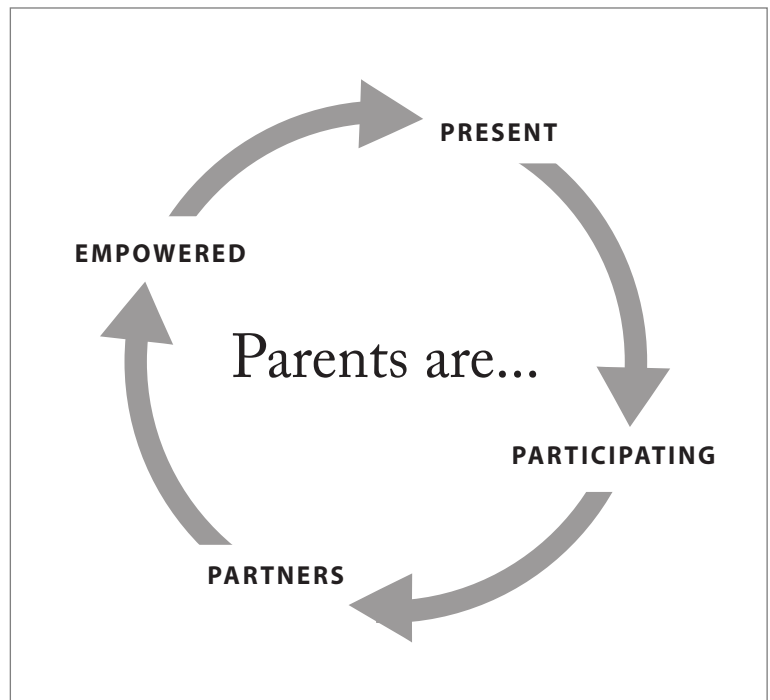
Why Involve Parents?

In most areas of education, there is more contention than consensus—from curricula to instructional strategies to assessment systems. In this book, we explore one education topic about which nearly all researchers actually agree: parent involvement. In recent years, a growing body of research has lined up behind an idea that comes as little surprise to most teachers, principals, and parents—student achievement improves at schools when parents become involved.

Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla summed up much of this research in the opening lines of their 1994 book, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*:

The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life.¹

In 2002, the Southwest Educational



A healthy parent-involvement cycle—many parents engaged in many ways at many times.

Development Laboratory published a review of more recent research on parent and family involvement. According to this report, students whose parents take an active role in their schools are more likely to:

- ◆ Earn higher grades and test scores
- ◆ Enroll in more higher level programs
- ◆ Attend school regularly
- ◆ Be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- ◆ Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- ◆ Graduate and go on to post-secondary education

In fact, many researchers also note that family involvement yields such benefits to students regardless of family background or income.²

Children are not the only ones who benefit from family involvement. Families and teachers benefit as well. The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (www.ncpie.org) asserts that when student performance improves, it has a positive impact on parents' confidence to help them. Furthermore, it raises teacher morale by decreasing a sense of isolation and increasing a sense of connection to a larger community invested in student success.³

At some schools, "parent involvement" is what happens only after students get in trouble. At other schools, "parent involvement" means parents attend a fall open house, they show up for parent-teacher conferences once or twice a year, or they bake cookies or brownies for occasional bake sales.

Family involvement yields such benefits to students regardless of family background or income.

In fact, such activities are only the tip of the parent-involvement iceberg. There are far more, and far more effective, ways for parents to be involved as partners in their children's education. In this guidebook, we explore some of the specific strategies that have worked for us at the O'Hearn.

• • •

Some Guiding Principles for Involving Parents

Running through this guidebook are seven key ideas, attitudes, and priorities that manifest themselves in all of the O'Hearn's efforts to involve parents. Before exploring specific practices in greater detail, we want to draw special attention to these:

- 1 Prioritize parents
- 2 Acknowledge parents as the first teachers
- 3 Bring people together
- 4 Recognize all contributions
- 5 Harness multiple abilities and availabilities
- 6 Use time well
- 7 Reach all families

1 Prioritize parents

Parent involvement can be successful only if everyone involved remains open-minded, flexible, and truly prioritizes parents. It is one thing for a principal or teachers to say involving parents is a priority. It is another thing entirely to *show* this through actions. If parents can't make a meeting, don't hold it anyway. Reschedule it. Recognize too that, while the principal does play a critical role in welcoming parents and setting the right tone, teachers, secretaries, nurses, janitors, and parents, all share the responsibility for making parents a priority.

2 Acknowledge parents as the first teachers

A successful parent involvement program is built on a foundation of trust. Building that trust begins with teachers. By starting from a place of empathy—by openly acknowledging that parents are the first teachers, and that parenting is possibly the most challenging job there is—teachers can earn that trust, clearly establishing that they are on the same team as parents.

3 Bring people together

Parent involvement begins wherever and whenever parents and school staff come together and start talking. Offering child care, being flexible about when meetings are held, and having a variety of ways for parents to be involved (not just meetings and

committees) can all make parents feel welcomed, respected, and valued.

4 Recognize all contributions

At some schools, it seems the only parents seen in a positive light are those consistently present, visible, and vocal at meetings. Yet not all parents are comfortable or capable of playing that kind of role. To engage parents who don't fit this mold, work to create and sustain a positive tone. Don't let parents feel looked down upon, or judged, if they don't come to certain events or aren't involved in certain ways. Instead, ask, "What can we change to make this work for them?" "How can we bring them in?" "How can we welcome them and honor them for whatever contribution they are able to make to the school?"

5 Harness multiple abilities and availabilities

The O'Hearn enjoys a high level of parent involvement because it focuses on utilizing different abilities and talents of different parents. Parents are offered a wide range of events, projects, and meetings to take part in, so everyone can find some place to fit. The school also works hard to vary the times that events take place. Some parents can make a breakfast meeting before work. For others, a lunch, afternoon, evening, or even Saturday meeting may be the only time they have to give to the school.

6 Use time well

Recognize that parents' time is valuable, and be conscious not to waste it. At plays and performances, spend extra time rehearsing the transitions between acts. If you're going to bring everyone together for a show, make sure you pack in the biggest possible punch to the time that they give you. Likewise, at



Sharing samples of a student's work in an after-school parent-teacher conference.

meetings, have agendas, and a facilitator that will help you use time well.

7 Reach all families

As a full inclusion school, the O'Hearn is committed to reaching all children. This commitment extends to families. For family involvement to be truly successful, no family will be left behind.

Seven Goals

What happens when parent involvement is effective? The action research team at the O'Hearn identified a total of seven goals for how they expect to affect parent attitudes, parent actions, parent skills, and school culture. You will notice these goals as a thread strung through all of the practices in this guidebook.

Parent Attitudes

- 1 Parents feel welcome.
- 2 Parents feel that their contributions are valued.

Parent Actions

- 3 Close to 100% of parents are involved in some way.
- 4 Parents are taking leadership, and decision-making roles.

Parent Skills

- 5 Parents are educated about curriculum and equipped to help with their child's schoolwork.

School Culture

- 6 Principals, teachers, and staff feel that parents are their partners in educating children.
- 7 There is a strong sense of community, a feeling of "family" among parents, teachers, and administrators

Notes

1. Henderson, Anne and Berla, Nancy. *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Washington, DC, National Committee for Citizens in Education: 1994.
2. Henderson, Anne and Mapp, Karen, *A new wave of evidence: the impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: 2002, p. 7.
3. National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, www.ncpie.org/AboutNCPIE/AboutPartnerships.html.