

Helping Parents Help Students

* Jim Short (jshort@OUHSD.K12.CA.US) on November 20, 1998:

Parents quickly notice that there are no longer examples in the book for them to use to help their children learn the mathematical rules. Therefore, they frequently ask IMP teachers how they can help their students be successful in math class. At the California Math Council - Southern Section annual conference in Palm Springs, a number of IMP teachers got together and came up with some ideas.

Teachers can...

- 1) ask parents to determine if the student really wants or needs help.
- 2) teach parents how to ask clarifying questions.
- 3) provide parents with a list of generic questions to use.
- 4) role play parent/child interactions at a parent meeting to model the use of the generic questions.
- 5) alert parents that a lot of the problems can not be solved in 5 minutes. Discuss the issues of frustration, struggle and perseverance.
- 6) set up tutorial hours and let counselors know when they are so parents can be informed.
- 7) use IMP 4 students as tutors (possibly as a fund raiser for CSF or Honors Club).
- 8) let parents know that it is okay to be wrong; that, too, is a learning experience. (Use caution here. We do not want to leave the impression that we do not care about students' getting the right answer!)
- 9) introduce parents to the idea of study buddies.
- 10) advise parents that homework is assigned everyday, so they can always ask to see it.
- 11) recommend that parents ask students how they are doing on their POW.
- 12) update parents about what is happening in the class.
- 13) start a website for parents.
- 14) send out a list of teachers' e-mail addresses. (This suggestion received a mixed reaction from the whole group!)
- 15) expose parents to IMP problems and activities at family math nights.
- 16) prepare an IMP parent packet for each unit that outlines the unit and provides some guidance on some of the major ideas.
- 17) encourage parents to tie math into everyday family activities.
- 18) offer Adult Education IMP classes in the evening for the benefit of parents.
- 19) encourage parents to work on the POWs with their students.
- 20) schedule parent awareness evenings. Give them food, information, a positive video, and child-care. Include some specific strategies they can use to help their students.
- 21) give the parents a copy of the Teacher Guides (available from Key Curriculum Press), when appropriate.
- 22) demonstrate with parents how to brainstorm with their students about what their needs are and then about how to find a solution.
- 23) attach a parent response form to student portfolios. When students take their portfolios home, the parents may comment and sign that response form.

* Jerry P. Becker (jbecker@siu.edu) on March 27, 1999:

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A Tactic for Educating Parents
by, Diane Briars

Parents clearly play an important, influential role in mathematics reform. Our experiences in Pittsburgh (and those of other districts) dramatically illustrate the need to provide substantial information to parents as well as the consequences when they are not kept informed.

How can we enlist parents as allies rather than opponents to reform? Here are four suggestions.

1. Make basic skills visible.

Research by the Public Agenda Foundation shows that parents do want their students to reason mathematically and develop problem-solving skills. But, first they want to be assured that their children will learn the basics - the number facts and fundamental computation skills. Ironically, math reform programs also expect students to learn the basics. In fact, most programs expect more mental math capabilities than traditional programs.

The problem is one of public relations. In their zeal to extol the virtues and importance of problem solving, reformers stopped mentioning the basics. We assumed that parents knew they would still be there. This is a costly mistake! The basics must be clearly visible to parents and the public.

2. Provide specific information about how parents can help their children.

Most parents, especially parents of elementary students, want to help their children learn math. Unfortunately, traditional ways of helping (e.g., showing them how to do specific procedures) are not applicable to standards-based programs.

Many reform programs are activity-based. Students keep journals instead of using traditional textbooks. Thus, parents do not have access to the regular, specific information about what is going on in class that they got from textbooks. Even if books do come home, their content often is so different from parents' experiences that most are at a loss about how to help their children.

Parents need specific direction about things they can do and ideas on how to do it. Basic facts practice can certainly be a parental responsibility. Even better, schools can offer a packet of games to reinforce basic facts (and other concepts) in fun ways. Schools can provide glossaries of mathematics terms, send notes to explain homework activities that might be unfamiliar, and conduct frequent parent meetings to facilitate two-way communication.

3. Provide information on assessment as well as curriculum and instruction.

If we want parents and the public to accept and value standards-based assessments, we must inform them about the topic. Pittsburgh's director of public relations, Pat Crawford, created a successful way to provide such information.

During "Take the Test Night," parents answered sample questions from our state and district

tests, including the New Standards Reference Exam, had dinner, then scored their own tests, and discussed the results. Parents were surprised at the level of questions on the NSRE and clearly recognized it as a good test of their children's knowledge. The news media gave good coverage to this event, so the public was also informed.

4. Listen to parents.

Parental concerns and complaints are often well grounded. With appropriate follow-up, they can provide valuable information about faulty implementation of programs. The most common complaint I hear about our elementary program is that students are not learning their basic facts.

When I ask parents if they have seen games coming home or if their children mention playing games in school, and they say "no," the problem is clear. Games are the primary vehicle for basic fact practice in that program. By eliminating games, the teacher has eliminated the basic fact practice from the program!

The problem is implementation, not the program and not the parents. Many parents had terrible mathematics experiences when they were in school, so they want a better experience for their children. Most parents are positive about standards-based reform once they understand it, see how it works, and recognize they have a productive role to play.