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ABSTRACT

Presented in this paper are some suggestions for cooperation between the schools and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) for the improvement of children's reading ability. Suggestions for how the school can inform the parents about the school's reading program include: undertaking a long range study of the reading program in the school; explaining sequential skills programs and what a child experiences as he progresses from level to level; explaining the recordkeeping and evaluation system; providing training sessions for volunteer help and teacher aides; planning workshops for preschool parents; promoting story hours and book review sessions; and planning means where parents can receive help, ask questions, and receive answers. Suggestions for what the school can do to involve the parents and to enlist their services include: maintaining an open door policy; planning home visits, telephone calls to report on a child's progress, and social events; training parents to help out in the library; and providing activities parents can use at home with their preschool child. Suggestions for what parents can do to help the teachers and the school include volunteering to assist with extra-curricular activities, assisting with preschool roundups and vision and hearing tests, and serving as a resource person. (WR)

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"Mutual Concerns of the IRA/PTA"

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GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER THROUGH THE PTA

Is it possible that two organizations, one mainly for parents and one mainly for teachers, can have mutual concerns? Why not? Are we not both concerned about children? Are we not both concerned about reading? After all, reading teachers at all levels are working to develop good readers: readers who can read and read well; readers who do read and readers who love to read. What parent does not also want this for his child?

Why then the concern? One PTA group in our school system surveyed its membership and identified some items the parents wanted to know more about. What do you think they were? The three top ranking concerns were:

What is expected of the average child's reading development?

How can parents supplement the teacher's efforts?

What factors prevent a child from learning to read at the peak of his ability?

Parents want to know what we're doing in school and what they can do to help. Let us cement the relationship between PTA and IRA through some mutual planning. Better yet, let us interweave this relationship between home and school so they work as one.

How can the school inform the parents about the school's reading program?

Perhaps the first step should be for the PTA to undertake a long range study of the reading program in the school. It can devote several meetings to, or even issue an outright attack on the study of reading for the entire school year. At these meetings,

the reading personnel (teachers, consultant, etc.) can be called upon to explain the sequential skills program and what a child experiences as he progresses from level to level. The various stages of reading growth can be explained, examples of materials used can be displayed and discussed and mini-lessons illustrating key reading areas can be presented. One school PTA group did this very effectively by developing sample lessons in which the parents participated as students. It helps to illustrate the child's problem in learning to read if a brief paragraph can be rewritten phonetically and used as the content of the lesson. It was an enjoyable experience, yet several as they left the room said, "You made your point."

Explanations of the recordkeeping and the evaluation system and how they work are other areas of mutual interest and concern.

What else can the PTA do to help the parents learn more about the school's reading program? A number of ideas follow:

1. Arrange study groups around special topics such as the preschooler and his needs; the gifted reader; children with learning disabilities; the non-motivated reader; children with physical handicaps; the early reader, etc. A number of these study groups can be functioning at any one time. Alternatives for the parents to select from are encouraged.

2. Provide training sessions for volunteer help and teacher aides. Give them instructions in what is to be done and how they should go about it. It is important that an aide have his own special niche and that the teacher knows what he will do, how he will do it and how well the task was accomplished. To make these services valuable, long-range planning is necessary so the aide can go ahead without day-by-day instructions from the teacher. Most teachers are beside themselves getting their own planning done and to have an additional set of plans to work through can be the "straw that broke the camel's back." Some PTA groups have a coordinator of volunteer personnel, as a steady stream of volunteers wanting something to do, if not well organized, can be more trouble than it's worth.

3. Plan workshops for preschool parents. Help them get the most out of their child's "magic years" -- those years from two to five when he is learning language and developing physically, mentally and emotionally at a rate faster than at any later point in his life. These workshops can help parents with such items as how to read a book to a preschooler, how to talk with a child to help him develop more effective oral language, how to develop small muscle skills, how to become more adept at visual and auditory discrimination tasks and how to accomplish these objectives in a gamelike atmosphere.

4. Promote story hours and book review sessions at the public library, or at the local TV or radio station. Help bring the public library to the people in the form of a bookmobile, a branch library or a "Read and Swap Club" whose purpose is to exchange paperback books among the children in the neighborhood.

5. Plan periodic "rap sessions", interviews, or newsletters where parents can receive help, ask questions and receive answers. Professional people in the community such as the social worker, psychologist, pediatrician, optometrist, school nurse, etc., can be made available to the PTA groups according to some prearranged schedule.

What can the school do to involve the parents and to enlist their services in this joint effort?

1. The school can establish an "open door" policy so that the parents feel welcome in the school at any time. An informal, glad-to-see-you atmosphere is especially important to weld together the home and school partnership.

2. Plan home visits, periodic telephone calls especially to report good news of a child's progress, and social events which involve both the parents and the school staff in a mutual effort.

3. Keep a list of jobs that parents can do on file in the Principal's Office; run a Help Wanted column in the monthly newsletter or have room mothers, acting as talent scouts, seek out parents in the community and match talents with jobs to be done.

4. Maintain a list of resource people who can come to school and speak to a group of children about a hobby, their job, a country they lived in or traveled in, a special skill they have, etc. Special interest days can be arranged periodically in which the parents demonstrate lapidary work, taxidermy, photography, jewelry-making and a host of other special interest areas. One school arranged several mini-workshops about Christmastime and the children selected an area they wanted and were helped there to make a Christmas gift of their choice for their parents. Parents helped staff these workshops. The projects ranged from woodworking projects such as bookends and candlestick holders to art and craft projects such as wire sculpture, paperfolded fish mobiles, macrame belts, burlap wall hangings, and figurine painting.

5. Poll your neighborhood for authors and have a Special Author's Day. That has proven to be the highlight of the year for one school. It has adopted one author and this year staged a "This is Your Life" program with a toy wagon parade of floats around the gymnasium; banners across the school entrance; welcoming speeches and all. Create "book talks" by the authors themselves or invite the parents to become experts on a particular author and to share their

experiences and feelings about the author, the major purpose being to entice more children to read and appreciate good books.

6. Train some parents to help out in the library. Set up "buddy systems" whereby a child can be guided by a knowledgeable adult through the step-by-step process of preparing a written report on a chosen topic. Parent "buddies" can interact with the child helping him narrow his topic, locate suitable material, read it, take notes and finally organize his ideas into a finished product of which he can be quite proud. "Walking a student through these steps" can go a long way toward developing independent learners. It is difficult for a classroom teacher of thirty students to give the individual help and permit the maximum degree of free choice needed to make the project a stimulating, rewarding experience.
7. Create a "book corner" where parents can sign up to read a particular book aloud or where a child can sign up to have a particular adult listen to him read.
8. Provide booklets of games and activities parents can use with their preschool child. Games such as "I see something in the room which begins like (boy, book, band)" or "I went to the fair and I took some apples, a boat, a cow, etc." are excellent mind strengtheners.

What can the parents do to help the teachers and the school?

1. Parents can volunteer their services by making puppets, helping with classroom and school plays, hockey games and other extra-curricular activities. They can become Great Book discussion leaders and sponsor and lead groups at their school.
2. Book fairs can be organized with the proceeds going for more books for the library, books for disadvantaged children in the school or for some other reading project such as Reading is FUNDamental, a national organization aimed at getting books into the hands of children who want them. One classroom in our district made homemade ice cream and sold it at the noon hour at the school. The proceeds went to purchase paperbacks for their room library.
3. Parents can help organize an interest day at school, canvas the neighborhood for participants, handle the publicity for the event and help the neighborhood get the feeling that the school is a social hub for the community where neighbors can gather and communicate about mutual concerns. One interest day might lead to a special project such as bringing more cultural activities (music, art, drama, etc.) to the community.
4. Lists of recommended books, good children's records and educational games can be prepared and distributed for Christmas and birthday buying. Parents can read and review the books offering "book talks" periodically for the different age groups and through parent study groups.

5. Parents can also be trained to hold book conferences with the students. Care must be taken that the conferencing does not turn out to be a quiz or an extensive book report turning more children away from reading than toward it. Conferences should contain a few literal level questions to get the facts straight; a few "what did the author mean when. . ." kinds of questions to enrich understanding and some "how did you feel about. . ." kinds of questions to get the reader involved with the characters and the author's purpose for the book. The idea is to get books to children, children to books, and books into children.

6. Parents can help with preschool roundups and vision and hearing checks in the school. They can make tapes for "read along" activities in the school media center. They can serve in a teacher aide capacity making educational games and devices, flash cards and monitoring the checking out and use of tape recorders, filmstrip projectors, reading or media kits, etc.

7. Perhaps the most effective and most gratifying type of work might be that done in a service or resource capacity. Parents can, with some training, serve as resource people to help young parents, or parents new to the district, learn to interact with their own child to establish a desirable self-concept, healthy learning environment at home and a desirable attitude toward school.

Parents have expressed sincere thanks and appreciation for ideas in the following vein:

- a. Help the child feel that he is important, that he can succeed when he tries something new or hard and that even if he tries and fails he will still be loved and accepted as a worthwhile person. A child's self-concept and the expectations his parents have for him are intricately related. He rarely questions the parental expectations. Rather, he tends to question his own personal adequacy if he does not measure up.

- b. Reward the effort not the product when the child is attempting a difficult task. Be ready to help him over the rough spots. Some feel the rewards of success are not worth the price he must pay if he fails. Redesign the task in line with what he can do successfully.

- c. Encourage him to become independent, to assume responsibility for suitable tasks and to complete these tasks without direction or nagging.

- d. Listen to your child even though he may not possess the vocabulary to communicate his ideas well. Respond to his frustrations and fears on a "feeling" level. He needs to be loved for who he is, not for what he can do.

- e. Reading is a relaxed activity. Go to great lengths to establish a suitable reading environment free from anxiety and pressure. Provide a time and a place to read and set a good example by being a reading family. Research has shown that good readers come from homes where reading is important and where parents and children discuss school activities frequently.

Yes, the PTA and the IRA do have mutual concerns. If we don't work together, then we'll, no doubt, work separately. What is your choice?