



## The Parent Mentor Equation: (Parents+Educators) x (Involve+Communicate)= Success 4 Children

Building collaboration and communication between parents and educators ultimately leads to greater success for all children.

According to the National PTA, more than 30 years of research shows that effective involvement of parents and families in their children's education has the potential to be far more effective than any other type of education reform.

Research repeatedly shows that as families, schools and communities work together, there is a stronger influence on student learning and improved student outcomes.

A recent study in Chicago found "a significant, even dramatic, positive relationship between parent participation and social and academic outcomes for children. The more parents were involved at school, the more likely their children were to complete high school, and the less likely they were to repeat a grade, be abused, be arrested, or require special education."

Researchers Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements concluded that intensive resources for parent involvement yield greater and longer-lasting benefits than many efforts that consume a larger share of public spending.

The PTA's national standards for parent/family involvement, based on the work of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins

University, state that the knowledge base is broad and clear on the powerful influence of parent involvement: "The challenge comes in transforming knowledge into practice and practice into results."

Essential elements of effective school, family and community partnerships are: Leadership, Teamwork, Action Plans, Implementation of Plans, Funding, Collegial Support, Evaluation and Networking. Districts and schools that organized programs with these components had higher quality programs, greater outreach to parents and more parents involved from one year to the next. (Joyce Epstein, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.)

The purpose of a Parent Mentor Project is to nurture communication among parents and educators, ultimately leading to greater success and better outcomes for students with disabilities. A sense of broad communication and collaboration must infuse the process from the moment someone decides a Parent Mentor Project is worth considering. The most important aspect of the Parent Mentor work is to build community teams and involve as many people as possible. "The earlier schools turn outsiders into insiders, the better," wrote Kathleen Cushman in *Essential Collaborators: Parents, School, and Community*.

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Ohio has discovered that Parent Mentors who advocated for their children in the past in a professional manner make great Mentors; parents who always said “yes” and did not participate as full members of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team often struggle as Mentors.

Major functions for Parents Mentors are:

- \*\* Informing families about the special education process—demystifying the process and making sure families understand their rights and responsibilities;
- \*\* Listening and supporting families or educators going through that process;
- \*\* Attending IEP meetings at the request of staff or parents (note: it is critical that the role of a parent mentor at an IEP meeting be one of explaining and clarifying, *not* advocating);
- \*\* Conducting workshops or outreach sessions on particular needs, issues or available resources;
- \*\* Building bridges between home and school;
- \*\* Building partnerships among families, schools and community organizations to generate multiple pathways for student success. Parent Mentors are continually involved in professional learning. Professional learning and development can be both formal and informal. The “professional learning community” is one powerful staff development approach to effect school change and improve outcomes for students. Who are the members of these professional learning communities? The learning community for Parent Mentors includes individuals with whom they share and pursue knowledge, information and new

skills at the local, regional and state levels. Traditionally, professional learning communities were groups of educators, usually from the same school or region, who worked together to improve their teaching skills. Essentially, everyone learned from each other to accomplish desired student outcomes and create solutions.

Parent Mentors bring a different skill set and unique perspective to already existing professional learning communities. While they learn from educators, specialists and administrators, they find themselves in a teaching role as well. Parents have much to offer educators and professionals serving students in the school setting. This approach to staff development acknowledges the dual role of the Parent Mentor as both “teacher” and “learner”.

What Peter Senge described so vividly as a new vision of corporate learning organizations in *The Fifth Discipline* applies equally well to education. Learning communities allow people to “expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together”. Within the professional learning community, mutual trust and respect are the expected norms of behavior as the members seek solutions, and engage in collaborative investigation and learning activities.

Currently, in Ohio, all Parent Mentors are required to use an approved Professional Development Plan with topics and hours approved by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). Retreats, conferences and workshops give Parent Mentors an

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**Parent Mentor Projects contribute to district performance goals for students with disabilities.**

**PERFORMANCE GOAL**

**ASSOCIATED PARENT MENTOR ACTIVITIES**

Decrease percentage of students with disabilities who drop out

Develop parent resource guide  
Advise middle school parents about high school options

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Increase percentage of students with disabilities who earn regular diplomas

Begin parent support group for parents of teens with disabilities

Encourage regular attendance by working with schools, parents, social worker, community

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Increase percentage of time students with disabilities receive instruction in general educational setting

Offer parent workshops to address the continuum of services

Coordinate training for parents on least restrictive environment and benefits of inclusion

Distribute information to parents about home activities that will enrich child's involvement in general education setting

Help parents navigate IEP, IDEA

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Increase percentage of students with disabilities who transition to their desired post-school outcome

Monitor students after graduation

Organize information fair to inform parents about resources

Compile resource list for parents (employment, post-secondary education, social services)

Assist with development of Student Transition Handbook

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Decrease the disproportionate representation of students with disabilities to reflect the demographics of the general population

Distribute information to local hospitals and doctors' offices about developmental delays and early intervention services that are available



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opportunity to compare notes, gain insight from the experiences of their colleagues, learn about other agencies providing services in their area, role play and practice skills such as problem solving, learn how to address specific challenges by meeting with resource agency experts, and just defuse and recharge.

At one training session in Ohio, Parent Mentors were asked to measure their own knowledge about all of the above topics as limited, adequate, proficient or advanced. This readily established priority issues to be addressed at future training sessions. These topics were then provided by experts in their fields at future trainings provided by ODE in collaboration with their technical assistance contractor, the OCECD.

Parent Mentoring is all about team building. The program is a partnership because the effective Parent Mentor is constantly identifying and nurturing partnerships and building teams. As Joyce Epstein, from the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, writes, "There are many reasons for developing school, family and community partnerships. The main reason is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life."

Every team the Parent Mentor builds serves as an example for other parent-educator teams throughout the school system, from the Mentor's own relationship with a supervisor to the special education team in each school to the IEP team for each student. The Parent Mentor's supervisor/special education director initiates the first critical team building effort by including the Mentor in staff meetings, listening to the Mentor's successes and concerns, setting reasonable goals and finding a balance between autonomy and

micro-management of the Mentor's daily schedule.

In special education, parents and administrators/educators are too often perceived as adversaries, forgetting that they are both committed to the best outcomes for students. Sometimes, while administrators are looking at the larger picture of needing to serve hundreds of students, and parents are seeking to get the best services for their one child, the two sides lose sight of their common goal: positive outcomes for all children. Parent Mentors can be a bridge, listening to each side, explaining the emotions and the substance on each side, using empowering words (*disenchanted* instead of *angry*, *searching* instead of *lost*, *different* instead of *terrible*) to bring the sides closer to each other and ultimately building a team that can truly serve each child.

Important questions the Parent Mentor asks when starting a project:

**\*\* *Is there an active group of special education parents already? If so, is this group working with the administration or are there issues?***

**\*\* *If there is not an active group of special education parents, is there a PTA or PTO that could be an umbrella for a special education committee?***

**\*\* *Is the school administration open to working with a parent stakeholder group?***

Research indicates that schools that work well with families have improved teacher/staff morale and higher rates of parental support for teachers. Effective parent and family involvement provides educators with

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a much-needed support system. Mentors can help schools overcome barriers to parent involvement. Parent Mentors provide information and support to families about special education issues as well as a mechanism to convey the family perspective back to the school system.

The National PTA offers six watch points to gauge the involvement of parents in a particular school:

1. Is there open, regular, two-way meaningful communication between home and school?
2. Is the school a resource for parenting support either by offering classes on positive parenting or connecting parents to community resources?
3. Do parents play an active role in student learning by helping with homework or interacting with teachers to set student goals?
4. Are volunteers welcome in the school?
5. Are parents considered partners in any school decisions about policies, goals, daily procedures?
6. Does the school partner with any local businesses, service groups or community organization to strengthen student learning?

Businesses now talk about employee engagement as a key to retaining the best workers. Parent engagement can also drive school and student success. Engaged parents believe in and support the overall goals of the school, are more willing to give extra effort when it's needed, and contribute the most to school and student success.

## Delisle Appointed State Superintendent

The Ohio State Board of Education unanimously voted to appoint Deborah Delisle as the next state superintendent of public instruction. Delisle replaces Susan Tave Zelman, who has served as state superintendent since 1999. Zelman announced her resignation earlier this year.

As state superintendent, Delisle will lead and supervise the state's elementary and secondary education system; oversee the Ohio Department of Education (ODE); administer licensing of Ohio's early childhood through high school educators; serve as the State Board's secretary; and manage relationships with key stakeholders, such as the governor, state legislature, chancellor of Ohio's university system and local school districts. Delisle will start no later than December 1. Since 2003, Delisle has been the superintendent of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District. She previously held the position of associate superintendent for educational services at the Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District.

## Bequeathed Gifts Will Help Children

If you would like to remember the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD) in your will, you can do so by employing the following language:

*"I give, devise, and bequeath unto the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD), 165 W. Center Street, Suite 302, Marion, Ohio 43302, an Ohio nonprofit corporation, the sum of \$\_\_\_\_\_ (or "\_\_\_ percent of my net estate" or "The following stocks or bonds: \_\_\_\_\_) to be used for its worthy purposes on behalf of children with disabilities."*

# Priming Prepares Pupils Prior to Participating

*By Brenda Myles*

Priming, an intervention that introduces students to information or activities prior to their use, is a low-cost, time-efficient strategy that helps students who need structure and predictability. Priming familiarizes a child with material before its use; introduces predictability into the information or activity, thereby, reducing stress and anxiety; and increases the child's success. Priming typically involves showing students the materials that will be used in a lesson the day or the morning before the activity.

The primer shows the student what will occur during the lesson by introducing the materials and class expectations. The primer may condense the activities onto an index card that the child can carry to class and refer to as needed.

Priming can occur in the classroom or at home. It is most effective when it is built in as a part of the student's routine. Priming should occur in an environment that is relaxing. The mood of the primer should be patient and encouraging. The priming sessions should be short. Material should be introduced; priming is not teaching, correcting, or testing.

Priming typically consists of four steps:

**1. Collaboration** – It is important to determine up front who is going to prime and what activities/lessons will be involved in priming. A resource room teacher may prime content for a general education classroom, a parent may prime, a paraprofessional may prime, or an older student may prime the child with disabilities. Priming may be needed for some activities but not others. It is imperative that collaboration occur between the teacher and the primer to

address these issues.

- 2. Communication** – An open line of communication must exist between the teacher and the primer. Some of the questions that must be addressed are:
- Who will prepare the priming materials?
  - Where and when can the primer access the priming materials?
  - How will the primer notify the teacher that the priming has occurred?
  - How will the primer and teacher handle last minute changes in the activities/lessons that may not have a priming opportunity?
  - How will it be determined that priming is an effective strategy?
  - How will problems be addressed?

**3. Is a scheduled meeting** needed to overview how priming is proceeding?

**4. Feedback** – The teacher and primer should determine how feedback should occur.

Some may choose to use a form that reports how priming went during the session and its results during the lesson/activity. This type of communication is efficient without being time consuming. If problems occur during priming, brainstorming sessions may be needed to alter the sessions.

Priming is a relatively easy and time-efficient strategy to help children and youth improve their academic and behavioral skills. An investment in priming can increase students' confidence and reduce stress and anxiety.

(Author Brenda Myles is a leading expert in autism spectrum disorders and a professor at the University of Kansas. She is a member of the Kansas CEC.)



# *YLF Promotes Leadership, Self-Advocacy*

"Nothing about me, without me" is a self-determination rallying cry of individuals with disabilities and a common theme among advocacy groups. Many youth with disabilities share this ideal and want to have a voice in the decision-making that affects them. Organizations and programs are available to build their leadership skills to become strong advocates for their own self-determination, and take positions as advocacy leaders within the larger disability community.

## **Ohio's Youth Leadership Forum**

Ohio's Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), a program of the Ohio Governor's Council on People with Disabilities, is designed to cultivate emerging young leaders with disabilities. The program receives support from ODDC and is sponsored by DD protection and advocacy partner; the Ohio Legal Rights Service. The YLF holds an annual leadership-training program for junior and senior high school students with disabilities. The program teaches community leadership and advocacy skills to youth by giving them opportunities to learn from and interact with legislators, experienced advocates, professionals with disabilities, and peers. Over 30 high school students from throughout the state participated in this year's forum.

Laura Hoffman was a delegate to the first Ohio YLF in 1999. Hoffman says her experience with YLF "guided my path in life, and solidified my interest in a legal career in disability law." Hoffman is a lawyer and also works as a development specialist for the

National Youth Leadership Network where she advocates at the national level to empower young people with disabilities to become leaders.

Reflecting on her personal experiences as a person with a disability and an advocate, Hoffman has an astute understanding of what type of advocacy the disability community needs. "It is not enough to hope that society will do what is right to protect people with disabilities ... greater steps must be taken to ensure that such protection is not merely temporary which can be remedied through legal safeguards." In the fall, Hoffman will begin her graduate studies in disability law.

## **The Next Generation of Advocates**

Young people with disabilities are the next generation of advocates and as young leaders, they bring a fresh and important advocacy perspective to the disability community. Youth with disabilities are encouraged to participate in programs such as Ohio's YLF to receive the training they need to build their leadership skills and make them key players in addressing the issues of today, and those that may still exist in their world tomorrow.

To learn more about Ohio's Youth Leadership Forum, go to [www.gcpd.ohio.gov/YLF](http://www.gcpd.ohio.gov/YLF), or email James Clinkscale at [james.clinkscale@rsc.state.oh.us](mailto:james.clinkscale@rsc.state.oh.us).

(Editor's Note: Taken from *DD Quarterly*, Summer 2008 issue, produced by the Ohio Legal Rights Service.)

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OCECD strives to make **FORUM** a timely, useful information source on issues pertaining to people with disabilities. OCECD is a nonprofit organization (501-c-3 tax exempt) made up of parents of children with disabilities, consumers, professional organizations, and advocates. The **FORUM's** mailing list is also used to inform subscribers of other

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Date \_\_\_\_\_ Phone (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Fax (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

\*Child's age \_\_\_\_\_ Child's Disability \_\_\_\_\_ May we give your name as a contact to other parents of a child with the same disability? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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165 West Center Street, Suite 302  
Marion, Ohio 43302