

Programs to Engage Parents and Other Family Members

SNAPSHOT

Program:

Parent and Community Outreach Initiative

District:

Reading School District

Location:

Reading, Pa.

Grades: PreK-12

Enrollment: 17,860

Free/reduced-price lunch:

82%

ELL: 19%

Establishing strong parent organizations in every school

Parent and Community Outreach Initiative

Reading School District

Reading, Pennsylvania

To help engage parents in their children's education and give families a voice in the school community, a coalition of groups in Reading, Pa., is working together to establish a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in every school in the district. Parent organizations were once prevalent in Reading, but when many affluent families moved to the suburbs, the district's tax base shrank and parent involvement declined. Many parents in Reading felt uninvolved and uninvited, cut off from their students' schools and educators by cultural or language barriers. Establishing a PTA in every school in Reading could help break down these barriers by promoting communication and collaboration between parents and educators.

"It had been hard for parents to get engaged in the school community because they didn't know how to begin," says Ginny Wade, the Pennsylvania PTA regional vice president. "Sometimes the empowered parent wasn't real welcome." Now, the Reading Education Association (REA) and partner organizations are recruiting concerned parents to help establish a PTA in each of the district's 24 schools as part of the district's Parent and Community Outreach Initiative. Over the past two years, the REA, the Reading School District, and the Pennsylvania PTA have worked together to develop new PTAs in two elementary schools. Also active in the Parent and Community Outreach Initiative is Miriam Feliciano, who founded a Parent Teacher Organization at Thomas H. Ford Elementary School and serves as its president. PTAs will be established in additional schools this fall.

Parent engagement is particularly important in the Reading public schools, where the district has been facing severe budget challenges and changing demographics. The district is the poorest in Pennsylvania, and Reading's growing Hispanic population includes many students who move from school to school and from district to district as families relocate to find work or affordable housing. Parent involvement in PTAs can help to boost student achievement by encouraging parent engagement, helping to break down language barriers, and fostering a sense of community among parents and educators.

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How the initiative works

This year, the Reading Education Association Community Committee (REACC) formed a parent engagement subcommittee to lead the effort to engage and organize parents. REACC was joined by the state and regional PTA, the Pennsylvania Parent Information and Resource Center, and other community stakeholders. Major operational support has been provided by Lorenzo Canizares, a local organizer for the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). Parents and community volunteers have produced a newsletter and provided additional support.

The coalition has been meeting with principals and interested parents throughout the district to discuss what PTAs can do. Although teachers were immediately receptive, Wade says it took longer to get the superintendent on board. Now, under acting Superintendent J. Drue Miles, the district not only supports the Parent and Community Outreach Initiative but has even added to the effort with a district outreach program.

The coalition works to identify active, engaged parents and provide the training and support they need to establish a PTA in their school. To start a PTA, it takes at least two parents—to serve as president and treasurer. Members must pay nominal national and state dues, which Wade says helps to instill a sense of ownership among parents.

At Amanda Stout Elementary School, 30 parents joined the new PTA at the outset. To bring together families at the school, the group held an ice cream social and a game night, to which families brought board games to play with one another.

Starting a PTA was more of a challenge at Sixteenth & Haak Elementary School, where family income is lower

and many parents speak only Spanish. Still, the PTA attracted 14 initial members and hosted a book fair for the school community.

Evidence of effectiveness

Having a PTA at their child's school gives parents a sense of empowerment and belonging. "If we have an established parent organization at a school, that opens a door for further parent involvement," says REA President Bryan Sanguinito.

Forming parent organizations has also proven to be effective in increasing schools' responsiveness to families. Feliciano first became involved in organizing parents at Thomas H. Ford Elementary School after her son was rushed to the emergency room and found to be dehydrated because school classrooms were severely overheated. She collected evidence about conditions in the school building, obtained 200 signatures from parents and school staff, and presented her case at a school board meeting. The next day, contractors arrived at the school to install air conditioning.

The Parent and Community Outreach Initiative has also opened doors between the union and the school district. When the program began two years ago, there was a high degree of tension between the two sides, according to Canizares. Now their relationship is very healthy, he says.

Exemplary practices

Engaging parents and families in learning: One of the best ways to improve the quality of education throughout the district is to engage more parents and family members. Yet many parents in Reading felt uninvolved and uninvited, cut off from their students' schools and educators by cultural or language barriers. An established PTA in every school in Reading can help break down these barriers,

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promoting greater communication and collaboration between parents and educators.

Forming a coalition: Initial discussions leading to the Parent and Community Outreach Initiative took place at joint meetings of the REA Parent Engagement Committee, the Reading School District, state and regional PTA leaders, the director of the Pennsylvania Parent Information and Resource Center, and other education stakeholders. By coming together to tackle parent engagement, the groups have motivated one another to work together and expand the initiative.

Outlook

The coalition aims to have PTAs established in every school in the district by 2013. Acting Superintendent Miles is directing every principal in the district to begin pursuing that effort by November 2011.

Association perspective

REA and PSEA leaders have been actively involved in the program. They are an integral part of the Rebuilding Reading Commission, which came up with the idea for the Education Summit that was held in March 2011. The meeting brought together 70 education stakeholders to brainstorm ideas on engaging parents and other community members.

Bryan Sanguinito, REA president since June 2011, is an enthusiastic supporter of the Parent and Community Outreach Initiative. "Only with buy-in from teachers, parents, and administrators will we truly be able to achieve our noble and lofty goals," he says. "We will then be able to do what is right for our students by doing what is right for our community: promoting total involvement in the educational success of our city's future leaders."

READING, PENNSYLVANIA

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Related information

Report card: <http://bit.ly/qhggSp>

REA website: www.WeAreREA.com (includes link to BCTV.org, which features a video report on the district's community outreach efforts)

"Union and parents join forces to improve school conditions," NEA Priority Schools Campaign, May 20, 2011,
<http://neapriorityschools.org/2011/05/20/union-and-parents-join-forces-to-improve-school-conditions/>



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