



Harnessing the Power of Parents

First appeared in the IEW Schools Magalog—2014

by Janet Spitler

The Institute for Excellence in Writing encourages parents to participate in their students' education. Because recent studies prove parent participation is a key factor in students' success, schools are shedding the lingering attitude of hands-off and looking for ways to empower their parents. Therefore, we are continuously creating and sharing helps for teachers to give their parents so that they can feel more involved.

Realistically, to accomplish this grand, important task is messy. Teachers will have parents who genuinely want to support the classroom activities as well as parents who try to help by telling the teacher how to do her job—believing they are helping. The third group, which is larger than you might suspect, shies away from helping their children. According to a recent survey by the National Center of Family Literacy, five out of ten parents say they have trouble helping their children with their homework. The reasons range from parents being too busy to feeling ill-equipped due to an inadequate education. Parents who speak English as their second language can especially feel this way.



With this variety of attitudes and aptitudes, creating a school culture of parent participation is daunting. One solution is to focus on one activity that all parents can do. We believe that one activity is reading aloud. Reading aloud to children when they cannot read themselves needs no persuasive argument. We want teachers and parents to understand the transforming power of continuing to read aloud when the students can read for themselves. Reading books out loud that are above the students' reading level gives the parent the ability to model "reliably accurate and sophisticated language patterns" just beyond what their children can currently process or create for themselves. For parents who feel inadequate at the thought of reading aloud, we encourage listening to audiobooks. Even parents who have no time will be able to play an audiobook in the car as they drive from one activity to another, and the shared listening activity adds the opportunity for a lively discussion at the dinner table. The public library has a large selection of audiobooks, and you can build a listening library in your classroom.

“ With this one activity encouraged at home, all your parents will know that they are doing a most important task in ensuring their children’s success and will actively participate in the school’s culture. ”

With this one activity encouraged at home, all your parents will know that they are doing a most important task in ensuring their children’s success and will actively participate in the school’s culture. All your students will stretch their listening skills beyond their current level, which smooths the path to more complex speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills.