

# Parents as Partners in Student Achievement

Parent-teacher conferences have long been the primary tool that schools use to promote school-family engagement, which is one of the keys to boosting students' academic success. But WestEd's Maria Paredes says that for many parents, traditional 15- or 20-minute meetings with teachers twice a year aren't doing the job. "They have little focus, are not strategic, and are a far cry from what is necessary for parents and teachers to collaborate and drive student achievement," Paredes says.

A WestEd senior program associate, Paredes heads up its Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) project, which puts a new twist on parent-teacher interaction. Paredes came up with the approach while working in the Creighton Elementary School District in Phoenix, Arizona, first as coordinator of parent programs and later as the district's director of community education.

Paredes knew that 40 years of research had confirmed that parents' engagement in their children's education was one of the best ways to boost their academic achievement. "We knew family engagement worked, but we had not found concrete, effective ways to put it into action," she says. "Years of sending home hot-pink flyers inviting parents to events with no direct connection to academic learning had diminished parents' sense of having a role to play in their child's school achievement. The bake sales, the musical performances—they're fine for community building and socializing, but you can't stop there. You have to make sure that you are giving parents the information they need to support their children's learning."

A gauge of the APTT model's effectiveness comes from a 2010 study of first-grade students in the Creighton schools whose reading fluency scores in September averaged 16 words-per-minute read correctly. By November, students in classrooms participating in the APTT model had increased their scores to an average of 45 words-per-minute read correctly. That compared with an increase to only 27 words-per-minute read correctly for those in classrooms not using the model.

## Engaging Parents in Daily Learning Tasks

Paredes set out to provide Creighton parents—many of whom had limited education and were learning English as their second language—with concrete information about both their children's academic progress and research-based, outcome-oriented strategies they could use at home to reinforce the instruction their children's teachers were providing in the classroom. Says Paredes, "We were teaching parents how to help build their children's vocabulary, support their math skills, and improve their critical thinking."

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This teaching takes place during three, 75-minute APTT team meetings that include the teacher and the parents of all the students in the class, and one traditional 30-minute individual session between the teacher and each student's parents. It is during the team meetings that parents, working with the teacher and each other, review data on student achievement levels; discover exactly what students will be expected to master during the school year; set specific, short-term academic goals for their own child; and learn how to work with their child at home.

Paredes concedes that traditional parent-teacher conferences often work “just fine” in upper- and middle-class families. “Because of the parents’ own experiences, they know exactly what to ask, and have the context in which to understand the importance of good grades when it comes to transitioning successfully into high school and college,” she says. Beyond that, Paredes also notes that college-educated parents routinely provide their children with “highly structured family lives that include rich language experiences, vacations, enrichment activities, and other resources that add layers and layers of support to what is happening in school.”

Yet in families where, for generations, children had not been expected to excel academically, let alone attend college, “Parents need to be given information about their children’s progress in completely different ways,” Paredes says. “You need a system that prepares teachers to coach parents so they understand there are key concepts each child has to master at each grade level, and that they themselves play a part in making sure that happens.”

### **Bringing Parents Into Data Discussions**

To boost participation, teachers send parents personal invitations, in the parents’ first language, to the APTT meetings, the first of which is a team meeting held within three weeks of the beginning of the school year. “If you make sure parents understand they are coming to meet with the classroom teacher and learn about strategies they can use to help their child, they are very willing to come,” says Paredes. At the team meeting, parents receive information about the teacher’s grade-level expectations in key academic areas. For example, parents of fourth graders in Creighton were told that their children would be expected to know multiplication facts from 0 through 12 by the end of the school year. Parents also review bar graphs with assessment data detailing exactly how close each student in the class is to meeting each expectation. (Teachers protect student privacy by identifying each with a random number known only by his or her parents.)

“When you invite parents to engage with this kind of knowledge and they understand where their child is performing in comparison to grade-level expectations, it creates a sense of urgency, something that has been missing in the past,” says Paredes. “We’re leaving out the feelings and simply saying, ‘Here are the facts.’” And even if the news is bad and a student is performing far below expectations, “We tell parents we have the entire school year to help them reach expectations. ”

Next, teachers work with parents to set 60-day academic goals for their child. One such goal for a child who scored low on a four-minute, 55-question multiplication test might be to increase his score on the same test by 50 percent. The teacher then coaches parents on how to use specific activities—perhaps card or dice games—to help their children practice their multiplication facts. “We give parents all the materials they’ll need and tell them to get involved and practice with their child a minimum 30 minutes four times a week,” says Paredes. “But we find that once the whole family gets engaged, they often spend a lot more time than that.”



Teachers also ask parents to retest their children once a week “so they know whether they are getting closer to their goal,” says Paredes. In October and November, parents meet individually with their child’s teacher to reinforce what happened at the first meeting and create a more detailed student improvement plan. At December and March team meetings, achievement data are shared again, and new goals are set. Paredes says parents also share advice and success stories.

Paredes points out that under the APTT model, “We aren’t asking parents to teach; we’re asking them to provide their children with practice and support they need to achieve skill mastery.” After all, she adds, “Practice is everything. Middle-class families know that, but for us to assume that families that come from chronic poverty and generations of unsuccessful schooling can do this without training, coaching, and support is unrealistic. We have to build in them the capacity to connect what their children are learning in school to what’s happening at home—to create complementary learning environments.”

Paredes is encouraged by the scores of testimonials she receives from teachers and parents. One teacher admitted to being “amazed by how well the program worked,” noting that the model “opens [parents’] eyes to what they need to do to make their child successful and shows them that if we work together we can achieve more.” A young parent stood up at a Creighton Community Council meeting to report that until attending APTT meetings he and his wife, both high school dropouts, had no clear concept of how to work with their oldest child, who was in kindergarten. “He thanked the board, the principal, and their child’s teacher for helping them become supportive parents,” recalls Paredes.

## **Developing Teacher Skills and Spreading the Word**

Critical to the success of the APTT model is professional development and support for teachers focusing on building capacity to deliver the essential elements of the model with fidelity and proficiency. Teachers learn how to introduce grade-level Common Core standards in parent-friendly language, share student performance data on which action can be taken, model field-tested activities for home practice, provide guided practice on activities, and coach families on setting academic goals for their child. Paredes notes that without adequate time and effective training, “something that has the potential to be very effective can be bewildering to teachers.” She says that after the initial team meetings, it’s important for teachers to debrief, noting what went well and what needs to be refined.

The APTT model, still in place in Creighton and other Arizona schools, has been replicated in 14 schools in Washington, D.C., and in a number of schools in California, Nebraska, and Colorado. Paredes says most are Title I schools that have failed to meet federal guidelines for adequate yearly progress (AYP) and have chosen to adopt the APTT model as one of their school improvement initiatives.

However, APTT training, offered by WestEd, is available to any district interested in using family engagement as an instructional strategy. As it should be, Paredes insists. “Teachers want parents engaged in their child’s academic learning, parents want to be involved, and research shows clearly that children’s achievement benefits from the teacher-parent partnership,” she says. “Although it’s a largely untapped resource, effective family engagement is one of the keys to lasting school improvement.”

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