The Parent Trap

Now, more than ever, schools and families must work together to ensure student success

Naomi Dillon

Everyone cautioned Karen Bostian against expecting too much, too soon. It seemed like sound advice.

After all, Cedar Grove Elementary in suburban Nashville, Tenn., had just been through a major shake-up. Rampant growth had forced district officials to rezone the area in 2006. The shift helped alleviate the school's crowded conditions, but it also scattered an army of parent volunteers.

More than 80 percent of the regulars—mostly stay-at-home moms—were reassigned to other sites. And Cedar Grove, once an enclave of white, middle-class families, suddenly became a designated Title I school with more than 1,000 students. About the only thing constant was Bostian, the lone returning PTO officer and a mother of three.

"I just knew when we lost all those people, we really had to get out and do something different," she says.

Despite a lingering national perception that schools are rigid, they have become pretty adept at adapting to change. As a whole, though, schools are struggling to connect with the one group that has the biggest impact on a student's academic career: parents.

"We have to do a better job of educating our kids, and we have to start doing it now and doing it fast, but we won't make a difference unless we enlist parents in the process," says Anne Henderson, an education consultant and coauthor of *Beyond the Bake Sale*, a frequently updated compendium of innovative family engagement programs.

Since the early 1980s, when Henderson published the first review of parent involvement and student achievement, she has critiqued and contributed to mounting evidence that a powerful relationship exists between the two.

"The key to student outcomes over the long haul is the support they get from their families," Henderson says. "There's no question about it."

Equality of wishes

Researched, corroborated, and somewhat legislated through NCLB and state accountability measures, the value of parental involvement is firmly established—it's just not always present in schools. But that's not necessarily for lack of trying or caring on either side.

"Just about all parents want their kids to succeed, regardless of race or class," says Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. "There is equality in wishes."

Unfortunately, little else is equal. That naturally translates into the amount and type of effort exerted in forming bonds between home and school. Sometimes the attempt is misguided, like Chicago's parent report cards that turned off scores of families. At other times efforts are misunderstood.

"It was just so easy before because you had all those parents that you knew were always going to be there. It was hard to tell them, 'No, you can't help,'" says Bostian, who acknowledges the insular image she and other parents unwittingly created. "But when we were rezoned, we were forced not to be a clique, forced to ask everyone for help."

That meant approaching new people and trying new tactics, not heaping a laundry list of duties on someone at the last moment. Requests are specific, require minimal time, and are well planned. Appreciation is effusive and personalization is critical.

Cedar Grove's family events now reflect the school's new demographics. With the aid of a bilingual mother, the PTO translates all literature into Spanish. The organization and the school also hosted the first-ever orientation for Latino families this year. Prices were dropped on fall festival tickets and an inaugural family game night—featuring fun activities and free food—was held.

Bostian, now the PTO president, says 140 people attended the events, "which may not sound like a lot to some people, but it was to us."

"One teacher told us a parent came to game night that had never come to school before, not for a single thing," she says.

Increasingly, schools are discovering that's what it takes: an arsenal of strategies to attract a varied and diverse group of families. In the following pages, we profile three parents who represent the kaleidoscope of families in America's schools today.

One has overcome tremendous obstacles to avoid becoming a statistic. Another challenges her son to distinguish himself from the crowd. And the third was determined to make a home for herself and her family, even though she didn't always feel welcome. ■

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Nicole Lewis, Columbia, Md.

A teen mother defies the odds for her child

It was Nicole Lewis's senior year. She was leaving for college soon, following in the footsteps of parents who expected nothing less. They prepared her well. School had prepared her well.

Then, a few months shy of graduating, Lewis got pregnant. About the only person thrilled by the surprise was the baby's father.

"He didn't have a lot going for him—it was a tie and a bond," Lewis says. "For me, I was devastated. I'd turned in my applications for college. This wasn't supposed to happen."

It certainly wasn't supposed to happen twice. Lewis suffered a miscarriage but, still estranged from her parents, got pregnant again. Unplanned as well, this pregnancy seemed to her an affirmation of the turmoil she had endured.

She reconciled with her parents after her daughter's birth, but they still weren't on the same page.

"I was still going to college and my mom was like, 'You don't get it. Your life is over,'" Lewis recalls. "But I felt this real conviction that I wanted to go to school. I didn't think that having a baby was a death sentence."

If only more pregnant teens thought that way, says Wanda Spann Roddy, who founded and directs Future Promises, a school-based program for pregnant and parenting teens in Indianapolis.

"If everyone says it's not my job, than nobody does it," Roddy says. "And the people who are going to do the educating are the drug dealers and the pimps. 'You need love? I can give it to you.'"

Instead, Roddy partners with select city high schools to help students who are at risk.

"If we start to see grades slip, if they start missing days at school, we call them on it and create an intervention because our main goal is to keep them in school," says Roddy, who places program coordinators in the schools four days a week.

Cade Martin

It's not an easy task. Anyone can be hit with an unplanned pregnancy, but the vast number of teens Roddy serves do not come from middle class backgrounds or earn honor roll grades like Lewis. Most struggled well before pregnancy struck.

Children born to teen mothers are more likely to live in poverty, experience homelessness, repeat a grade level, go to jail, or become young parents themselves. Stopping the cycle of poverty and generational teen pregnancy, Roddy says, begins with building knowledge, relationships, and goals.

"It's all about the relationship: 'Somebody cares about me,'" Roddy says. "That's the hallmark of my staff. They love 'em, even the ones they don't like."

That affection and attention resulted in a first this year for Future Promises: 10 graduates are now enrolled in college.

As for Lewis, she enrolled full time in a private university with her daughter, Nerissa, in tow. Her relationship with Nerissa's father deteriorated quickly, so she alone shuttled the child—now 8—to daycare and preschool so that she could write term papers and take finals.

Despite the hardships, Lewis was as determined to continue her education as she was to begin her daughter's school career. "I was always committed to putting her in the best situations academically, and I know that has a lot to do with my upbringing," she says.

Her presence at her daughter's schools has not always been easily accepted. Sometimes she's been ignored.

"There are always cliques, and I do think younger and single parents are left out," says Lewis, who recently married her college sweetheart and settled in Columbia, Md. "And I think, sometimes, people don't want to see teen parents do well because they are trying to prove a point."

Lewis hasn't let real or perceived barriers stop her from making education a priority, but others aren't so daring. She suggests her story might inspire teen parents to rewrite their own ending, too.

Cade Martin

Sharon Macauley, Washington, D.C.

The 'walking billboard' of an active parent

Sharon Macauley is a mom who doesn't play around. When her son Ryan's elementary school teacher called to say Ryan hadn't turned in his English project, Macauley got in the car and drove to the school that day.

She found her son in a safety patrol meeting with other kids who volunteered as crossing guards. "I said, 'Today is your last day as safety patrol, and if you don't know why, I'll tell you,'" Macauley recounts. "Your grades aren't correct."

In a tough world, Macauley is doing everything she can to be sure her now-17-year-old son is prepared. High expectations? Yeah, she has them.

Macauley moved to Washington, D.C., from South Carolina years ago. She isn't the parent who needs to be convinced about the importance of being involved in her child's education. She is the walking billboard of an active parent for the 21st century.

At the end of each day's classes, Macauley touches base with her son via e-mail. Sometimes they text each other during lunch. Evening TV usually includes international news programs, enabling Ryan to maintain his fluency in French.

Ryan has aspirations—not far-fetched—of being U.S. ambassador to an African country. "Everybody says, 'How do you keep him focused?' But it's not me," Macauley insists. "He has an interest and I nurture it."

Like everything else, nurturing ain't what it used to be. Bringing cupcakes to class and chaperoning middle school dances is tame compared to what parents do these days. And school officials, particularly in affluent areas, experience both the positive and the negative aspects of the increasingly expansive and sometimes expensive role parents take in their child's education.

Rosalind Wiseman has witnessed those aspects, too. Her bestselling book, *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads*, is based on real-life encounters with high-powered adults who employed those same traits in their parenting style.

"It's very much a class issue. It's the privilege of being a middle-class person and being in a position of authority," Wiseman says. "[Schools] are there to help them, which is a different experience for working class and poor people where the authority is not there to help them."

From boardroom brawls to gauntlets thrown down in the classroom, Wiseman has seen parents acting out of turn in the name of protecting their children. Intervening on their child's behalf at every instance is a disservice, she says, leaving kids unequipped to deal with life's struggles.

"Having a bad teacher is not the worst thing in the world. Everybody had a bad teacher, and what you learn is how to deal with difficult people," Wiseman says. "I hated Mrs. Clark in the fifth grade, hated her. But I got through it."

Wiseman is one of a flurry of writers who have spotlighted the rise of the helicopter parent, so-called because of their tendency to hover. For her part, Macauley had never heard the term. "No, I'm not a helicopter parent," she says. "What good would [Ryan] be if he was always leaning on his parents?"

Trips abroad and attending high profile embassy events broaden Ryan's horizons and enrich his life, she says. As do Ryan's teachers.

"Anytime someone can make my son see something that he wouldn't have thought of, that's a good teacher," Macauley says. "That's someone who can inspire him."

In the end, she says, that's all she's trying to do, too.

Ann Oxrieder

Claudia Nunez, Bellevue, Wash.

An immigrant mother struggles to fit in

The first time her son received an invitation to a birthday party, Claudia Nunez was excited. Her grade-schooler was quickly making friends in the new neighborhood, and she would have an opportunity to see new faces and socialize, too.

But when she arrived at the host's home, Nunez was told to return in a few hours to collect her son.

"I just stood there. I didn't know what to do," Nunez says. "In Mexico, when you have a party, the whole family is invited. But here, it's more like from 4 to 6 [p.m.] and at 6 sharp, everybody goes home."

Not long after Nunez and her husband moved to the wealthy suburb of Bellevue, Wash., she began to feel like an outsider. Her shy offers to help her son's teachers were rebuffed, and she was completely lost on the Parent Teacher Student Association concept. She grew depressed, but tried to ignore it in the interest of her son.

"I said my kid is happy. He's in the best school. I don't care for me," says Nunez, whose attempts to fit in and help out mirror experiences by immigrant parents who feel shut out of schools because of cultural and language differences.

Then one day her son came home, exuberant about his part in a new school play. He had been cast as a cockroach, and he needed a sombrero. Confused and insulted, Nunez had enough.

She moved her son to another Bellevue elementary school, one with a much larger Latino population. The principal smiled, welcomed Nunez personally, and asked if she would join the PTSA. Before long, Nunez became the point-person for many Hispanic families in her school and district. She was asked to become part of a Latino parent advisory group that formed in 2004.

"Among the kids most at risk academically are Latino kids, and we wanted to know what we could do to stop that," says Ann Oxrieder, assistant superintendent at Bellevue School District 405.

The district held *cafecitos,* or informal coffee chats, with Latino parents and discovered the biggest hurdle to participation was communication. Parents wanted to help but had no idea what was occurring in the classroom, school, or board-room.

"The biggest misconception [about immigrant parents] is that they don't care because you don't see them, but it's just the system, the hidden rules of school that we all take for granted," Oxrieder says.

Good communication, particularly with newcomers to the country, requires officials to be explicit about the district's organization, expectations, programs, and need for parental support and engagement. Warmth and an interest in the family's background also are essential.

"If you don't know who your families are, whether they speak English, or work during the day, for example, if you don't take those things into consideration, your message is going to be lost," says Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.

Nunez urges school staff to remember that first impressions are everything for many Latino families. "You don't know how hard it is for a parent to just show up at the school and then nobody is there and smiling. Everybody is busy," Nunez says. "I say, 'You are the hostess of your house; it is your obligation to welcome everyone.' You never know. You could change someone's life just by smiling."