

Program Profile: Reading Baskets Promote Parent Involvement

What would happen if a school made a top-to-bottom commitment to parent and family involvement? What would teachers and staff need to do? And would their efforts produce any significant change in student achievement?



Tower Street School in Westerly, Rhode Island, might serve as a living laboratory for research on all those questions. Principal Audrey Faubert and a dedicated group of teachers have made family involvement a top priority.

In a sense, Faubert grew up in the school. She attended kindergarten through second grade at Tower Street, so, “It was really exciting to come back as the principal.” From the minute she arrived, staff members told her that parent involvement was their biggest challenge. “At open house, we’d have perhaps two parents (in a class of 26) in attendance.”

Faubert decided that if parents wouldn’t come to the school, she’d go to them. Working with staff members, she developed literacy baskets tailored to a student’s grade level. Faubert and a parent volunteer delivered all 160 baskets to families. “Parents were just thrilled to see us,” she says. “They invited us in. They gave us coffee.”

Student achievement has risen steadily since the family involvement program was launched. Tower Street was named a Rhode Island Regents’ Commended School for significant improvement in literacy.

Here’s how to make it work for you:

1. **Make time to visit parents.** Faubert found that once she had visited with parents around their kitchen table, even those who had never set foot in the school were more willing to come.
2. **Bring something with you to leave behind.** Faubert prepared a basket that included information for parents and fun activities for students. Elementary literacy baskets included crayons and pencils. Older students received fun word games like Mad Libs®.
3. **Make the most of the time you have** available for home visits. Start by targeting the students who are below grade level in reading or math.
4. **Notify parents in advance** that you would like a brief visit. About a week before the visit, call parents to arrange a convenient time.
5. **See if your school district** will provide release time for making the visits. Policies vary from district to district and (sometimes) from school to school.
6. **Leave a schedule** of where you will be visiting (with phone numbers) in the school office.
7. **Keep the visits short.** Tell parents you only can stay for 15 minutes. If they have more to discuss, you can always schedule a follow-up visit—perhaps at the school.

Program Profile: It's a Great Life!

Teachers at Lake Park Elementary School in Lake Park, GA, wanted to encourage students to read more nonfiction. They decided that biographies might be a good first step. “Biographies have high interest for children,” said Teresa Parkerson, the school’s academic coach. “There is something so compelling about ordinary people who become well known because of their deeds.”



The school issued a challenge: Could the 650 students in the school read 1,500 biographies between September and February? Through an arrangement with the local public library, the school library stocked up on biographies. The culmination was a celebration called the Biography Blitz. Last year, more than 350 parents showed up.

Each grade level decided how students would share what they had read. “Children came to school dressed as a character in a favorite biography,” Parkerson said. “In kindergarten, children might read a sentence or two they had written on a card,” Parkerson said. “Older students might be asked to produce a talk or a PowerPoint® presentation.” After the student presentations, refreshments were served. In the fourth grade, for example, “Everyone enjoyed hot tea served in china cups on white tablecloths.”

The biography project has become more popular with each passing year. “We set new goals based on what the students did the year before,” Parkerson said. “And each year, they far exceed our wildest expectations.” Students not only met their challenge—they blew through it, reading over 9,000 biographies in the time allotted. Best of all, teachers have found that students continue to read nonfiction books.

Here's how to make it work for you:

1. Use competition and cooperation. Avoid having students compete against one another to read the most biographies. Instead, have everyone pull together to see if students can break personal records.
2. Involve parents. Offer tips for parents on your website and in your school newsletter. Encourage parents of young children to read biographies to them. Parents of older kids can discuss the books with them.
3. Tie it to standards. At some grade levels, Lake Park teachers required students to read a biography that directly related to the curriculum standards for that grade. “We’ve had FDR, Teddy Roosevelt and Susan B. Anthony walking through our halls,” Parkerson said.
4. Stock your shelves. Lake Park’s partnership with the local public library meant that students had plenty of biographies from which to choose. It eliminated, “There’s no one I want to read about.”
5. Offer a fun reward. As a reward to the students for reaching their goal, the faculty at Lake Park Elementary School treats everyone in the school to a performance. Some years, the faculty have reenacted their own version of “American Idol”; in other years, they chose “Dancing with the Stars.”