

Snapshot #12

Parent Involvement Spring Glen Elementary School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research clearly demonstrates that parents' involvement in their children's education is positively related to student achievement and affective outcomes such as attitudes toward school. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's 1984 document, *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis* identifies elements related to parent involvement which are present in effective schools.

At the classroom level:

1.5 Learning progress is monitored closely.

- Teachers encourage parents to keep track of student progress, too.

1.12 Incentives and rewards for students are used to promote excellence.

- Parents are told about student successes and requested to help students keep working toward excellence.

At the school level:

2.10 Parents are invited to become involved.

- Parents have various options for becoming involved in schooling, especially in ways that support the instructional program.
- Procedures for involvement are clearly communicated to parents and used consistently.
- Staff members provide parents with information and techniques for helping students learn (e.g., training sessions, handbooks).

Readers of this snapshot are encouraged to review the research summary document, *Parent Involvement in Education*, which is also a part of this School Improvement Research Series.

SITUATION

Spring Glen Elementary School is located thirteen miles southeast of downtown Seattle and is one of twenty elementary schools in the Kent School District. The Kent district also has three high schools, one continuation school serving junior and senior high students, and five junior high schools. The district serves a total of 19,000 students.

Approximately 400 students in grades K-6 are enrolled at Spring Glen. About 12.5 percent of the students and 15 percent of the staff are of minority racial or ethnic status. Students represent a wide range of socioeconomic levels. A distinctive feature of Spring Glen is that it has a much larger percentage of male staff members than most elementary schools; for example, both kindergarten teachers are men.

CONTEXT

Spring Glen is a new school and an alternative school. During the 1986-87 school year, the Kent School District charged five of its principals with the responsibility of designing an alternative elementary curriculum. This curriculum was intended to meet the needs of students whose families desired a nontraditional educational approach or who had not previously been successful in more conventional school settings.

The five principals, including Spring Glen's current principal, Del Morton, designed an instructional program with the following major elements:

- Whole language instruction. Spring Glen maintains a strong focus on an integrated curriculum and utilizes principles of whole language instruction as derived from developers in England, Canada, and Australia.
- Teaching to various learning modalities. Students are tested to determine their strongest learning modalities, and instruction appropriate to those modalities is provided.
- Creative staff utilization. Specialists (physical education, music, librarian, etc.) serve as basic education teachers during the basic skills "block" each morning, thus dramatically reducing the student-teacher ratio.
- Cooperative learning/heterogeneous grouping. Students build critical thinking skills and learn teamwork through working in heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups in all grades and all subjects.

The new school and its innovative offerings were publicized before the beginning of the 1987-88 school year. Criteria for prospective staff members were identified, and teachers who felt they met these criteria were invited to apply. At the same time, Morton began providing information about Spring Glen through local newspapers and speeches to community groups to stimulate the interest of parents.

Staff were hired, and Spring Glen acquired a student body from the two groups referenced above. Many were from families who are very involved with their children's schooling, knowledgeable about educational practices, and drawn to such features as cooperative learning and low student-teacher ratios. Others were students who had experienced failure in more traditional school environments and whose families hoped Spring Glen's innovative approaches would make a positive difference. Spring Glen staff say that these two general "types" of students bring different strengths and needs to the school's cooperative learning groups.

Because of Spring Glen's alternative approach to schooling, parents have had an unusually high

level of involvement from the beginning. If children go to Spring Glen, it is because their families made a conscious choice in favor of the school, not just because they happened to reside in an attendance area. Moreover, many parents had a high level of involvement with their children's schooling before coming to Spring Glen, and thus intended from the beginning to participate in the school's programs.

In addition, Spring Glen's unusual transportation needs require that parents be involved for field trips and other outings taking place during the school day. Spring Glen is geographically distant from the rest of the Kent School District; in fact, it is technically within the boundaries of the Renton School District and rents its building through a lease agreement with Renton. In order to be able to provide transportation for students, Spring Glen makes use of district buses only after the transportation needs of other Kent schools have been met. Thus, school begins at 10:00 a.m. and ends at 4:00 p.m. at Spring Glen, and any outings scheduled during the school day are completely dependent on parent drivers. Spring Glen staff happily report that, with the school's high degree of parent interest, there are always adequate numbers of volunteer drivers for these events.

In this 400-student school, fully 260 parents were involved in instructional and noninstructional school activities last year. In addition to providing transportation for school outings, Spring Glen parents are also involved in a variety of other activities through the school's Parent Partnership program, including:

- The annual all-school barbeque, an event for staff, students, immediate and extended family members. The barbeque is held at the very beginning of the school year. It is intended to make Spring Glen families feel welcome and provides opportunities for those families to interact informally with school staff and with each other.
- The PTA board, a leadership group with 55 members(!), each of whom has a distinct role and sphere of responsibility.
- Serving as parent volunteer facilitators. Two parents take responsibility for overseeing the volunteer activities of other parents. These facilitators work with the parent involvement coordinator on the Spring Glen staff, and are in charge of such activities as recruiting parents for activities.
- The parent talent bank. Spring Glen staff and parent leaders are developing a computerized talent bank to facilitate matching parent skills, preferences, and availability with school needs.
- Serving as in-classroom volunteers. Individual teachers and parents negotiate the ways that parents will help out in classrooms.
- Monitoring student activities on field trips. The heavy use of parent car pools for field trips also ensures that there are plenty of parents on hand to monitor student activities at field trip sites.
- Receiving school-related communications through school newsletters. A newsletter is published for parents of students at each grade level. These newsletters contain "ideas" sections, which provide tips on how parents can support their children's learning at home.
- The RICH Program. RICH-- Reading Is a Cool Habit -- is a parent-operated program in which parents model and encourage good reading habits, students read a specified number of minutes each day, and parents sign forms validating children's reading. RICH program coordinators provide specific directions for encouraging and monitoring children's reading. Children receive symbolic and sometimes tangible rewards for their successes. At the beginning of each year, both children and parents sign contracts agreeing to participate.
- Reviewing packets of their children's schoolwork sent home weekly. Teachers send home

manilla envelopes of children's work, and parents sign and return a form indicating they have reviewed the materials.

In addition, parents are involved in a great deal of informal communication with teachers, as well as the more formal parent-teacher conferences. Because of the high degree of parent involvement at Spring Glen and the considerable numbers of parents at the school at any given time, principal Del Morton set aside a parent lounge for parents to plan, share, and store supplies for parent-sponsored activities.

PRACTICE: INTENSIVE PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Since a school's parent involvement program can scarcely be observed in an afternoon, it was determined that the best way to get a sense of Spring Glen's program was to interview some of the school's more active parents. These parents were asked how they got involved with Spring Glen; what kind of parent involvement activities they engage in; how they feel about their participation; and how their involvement has influenced their feelings about the school, their children, and themselves.

Mr. and Mrs. C. Mr. and Mrs. C. are parents of a Spring Glen sixth grader. They moved to the area from the midwest two years ago and enrolled their son in a conventional neighborhood school. Their son was not doing well in that school environment, and so the C's were interested when a neighbor told them about Spring Glen. They liked the description they were given of Spring Glen's program and enrolled their son last year. He is doing well and is happy in school, and the C's are pleased with the change.

The C's are PTA members and active on committees. Mrs. C. helps out in the library and is a frequent field trip volunteer, as well as helping with preparation of two of Spring Glen's newsletters. Mr. and Mrs. C. put into practice the guidelines offered to parents for supporting their children's learning: they provide encouragement to their son regarding his homework, help monitor his homework time, and have him practice writing his spelling words at home. They also review the materials sent home weekly by their son's teacher and sign a sheet indicating they have looked over his work.

The dramatic change in their son's school performance and attitude was repeatedly noted by Mr. and Mrs. C. "We plan to stay involved," said Mr. C. "We like our son's teacher and the Spring Glen program," added Mrs. C. "We like everyone here. Even the custodian is nice."

Mrs. B. Mrs. B has daughters in grades one and three. A former teacher herself, Mrs. B knows the value of parent involvement and enjoys supporting her children's school experience. She has been involved with Spring Glen since it opened its doors.

Mrs. B. had been disenchanted with the neighborhood school her older daughter attended in grades one and two. When she volunteered in the classrooms at that school, she found that she would wind up actually assuming teaching responsibilities, because important teaching functions were not being taken care of by the regular teacher. Mrs. B. felt this was inappropriate and undesirable, and she is pleased that at Spring Glen, she is utilized the way a parent volunteer should be -- printing signs and poems, cutting and pasting materials as requested by the teacher, and so on. She also participates with her children in the RICH program.

Mrs. B describes herself as a conservative person, and part of her motivation for volunteering is

to keep an eye on the way controversial parts of the curriculum are presented. She has found no cause for distress in Spring Glen's handling of these subjects.

She intends to remain involved with Spring Glen's program and anticipates that the nature of her involvement will change as her children become older. Of her feelings about the Spring Glen staff, Mrs. B. says, "People are very friendly. It gives you a warm feeling from the very beginning."

Mrs. H. The mother of a first grader who also attended Spring Glen as a kindergartener, Mrs. H. first learned about the school from a newspaper article. After attending a parent/community meeting at which Del Morton described Spring Glen's program, she decided to enroll her daughter.

Mrs. H. is the chairperson for the RICH program, a responsibility which includes informing parents about the program and how it operates, carrying out the recordkeeping needed to track children's reading accomplishments, and updating the hallway display indicating the progress of each class in numbers of minutes read. These duties keep her occupied for about four hours each Wednesday.

On Fridays Mrs. H. is a classroom volunteer, helping the teacher by constructing materials for learning activities. "They can't keep me away from this school," says Mrs. H. "I love it. You feel like you're all family."

For more information about the Parent Partnership component or other aspects of Spring Glen's program, contact Del Morton, Principal, Spring Glen Elementary School, 2607 Jones Avenue South, Renton, Washington 98055, (206) 859-7494.

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