

Parent Leadership Institute Helps Parents Play a More **Active** Role

There are plenty of parents who might think 8 a.m. is too early to let the kids jump rope or play with a hula hoop.

But allowing youngsters to jumpstart their school day with a little physical activity — served up with a side of fruit or granola — is one of the things that has made Parental Guidance at Roberts Paideia Academy a success.

“Back in the day, we played outside, we had a banana here and there, and we didn’t watch TV all day long,” says Pamela Carter, a longtime parent volunteer who helped hatch the plan for Parental Guidance, the child development program at Roberts that meets before and after school each day.

“Nowadays, our parents are so busy trying to make things better for their families that they’re not spending as much true quality time with their children,” says Carter.

The busy mother of four — her children are 21, 7, 4 and 2 — is a prime example of how parents are partners in their children’s success.

While Carter has been involved with Cincinnati Public Schools since childhood (she graduated from Hughes High School), her relationship with the schools in the district changed dramatically a few years ago.

That’s when she signed up for the Parent Leadership Institute (PLI), a free, six-session workshop led by Parents for Public Schools (PPS) of Greater Cincinnati that teaches parents how to devise plans to improve schools and address gaps in classroom successes.

After completing PLI, parents are awarded a \$250 grant and possible matching funds, which they can use to address a specific need at their child’s school. The requirements are simple: identify a project, make sure it involves other parents and make certain it impacts student achievement.



Pamela Carter (bottom left) helps students with a science experiment at Roberts Paideia Academy.

“What we do is train parents on how to be better advocates for their children’s education,” says Audrey Holtzman, a parent coach for PPS. “Then, looking at their school’s comprehensive plan, they determine what the deficiencies are and they create a project to solve the problem.”

HOW IT WORKS

Essentially, PLI takes what parents want for their children and their schools and helps them design a blueprint that benefits everyone — students, teachers, parents and the community.

It’s not a cure-all for everything affecting school performance, but it has proven to be worth the time and effort, as parents learn about everything from interpreting test scores and the impact of the federal No Child Left Behind Act to the different ways of educating kids and communicating effectively.

How to conduct successful meetings, learning styles vs. personality styles, the importance of body language and how to maneuver in a big-city school district also are among the many subjects they examine. And, they learn how to be action-oriented problem-solvers who engage other parents.

Once they complete the classes and graduate with the know-how needed to implement their vision, parents are expected to roll up their sleeves and get to it.

"If they want to look at the performance of black males versus another demographic in a subject like social studies, parents now can address that," says Holtzman, who points to one dad's efforts as an example of what parents can achieve.

"The school has every component it needs to be 'the village' we so often talk about. But when parents and teachers build trust, that's when you make real progress."

- Pamela Carter, parent volunteer

"We had a single father of four boys come in, and he decided he wanted to get more men involved at Pleasant Hill Academy," Holtzman recalls. "He noticed he was always the only dad to show up at school functions. So after he went through the training, he said, 'I know how to do this ... Donuts for dads!'"

Soon, the father was circulating fliers, sending notices home with students and scrambling for incentives to get dads to early-morning meetings at school.

"Last year, he drew 65 fathers," Holtzman says proudly. "After the initial meet-and-greet, the principal brought out test scores and showed dads what areas their children were lacking in and where they needed to do more work.

"The principal even gave them a copy of the test so they could see what's expected," she says.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Carter, who launched Parental Guidance at Roberts Paideia, says her success story began long before PLI. Still, it was her involvement with the program that helped her figure out how she could help struggling parents.

"PLI showed me how I could affect student achievement through what I was doing with my own child. And now I tell my story every chance I get," Carter says.

Her "story," as she puts it, began more than two

decades ago when, not long after high school, Carter gave birth to her oldest daughter.

There were tough lessons for a young mother to learn, and plenty of mistakes were made, she says. And by the time she realized what she could have done differently — from homework to discipline — the issues were harder to fix.

In later years, her family grew. And by the time her next daughter (now 7) was 3 years old, there were suspicions that she was severely autistic.

"My first thought when her day care provider told me that was, 'What is she seeing that I'm not seeing?' I knew she garbled her words and there were many times when I was in tears at the store while she acted out. There was a time when I hated to go out in public; we cried every night."

So Carter decided to do something.

She took control of what her daughter ate, throwing out candy and drastically reducing her sugar intake. The family got rid of cable TV and only allowed the kids to watch educational shows. She rejected suggestions that she medicate her child into behaving and got serious about structured one-on-one time with her daughter.

"That summer after preschool, I changed her environment and everyone had to be on board," Carter recalls. "Later, she went from being non-verbal and running out of class to reading a lot. She loves to read."

So not long after, when she heard about PLI, it was a no-brainer. Carter wanted in.

And as for her project? She knew that in addition to providing quality care before and after classes, Roberts parents could use a little help themselves.

Now, Parental Guidance includes a support group and an after school multicultural book club. Parents talk about children's learning styles, how to navigate school life — even pointers on how to talk with teachers. They also share strategies on what's working with their children and where they could use some parent-to-parent advice.

"That's what Parental Guidance is all about," says Carter. "The school has every component it needs to be 'the village' we so often talk about. But when parents and teachers build trust, that's when you make real progress.

"Parents have to be creative," she adds. "We have to pay more attention and put the children first. I know. My parent involvement has made all of the difference with my own children." ★