

Cane Run Elementary School: A Parent-Friendly, Family Focused Urban School Jefferson County Public Schools Louisville, Kentucky

Overview

At Cane Run Elementary, parents are an integral part of the day-to-day operation of the school. Through the school's PTA and site-based decision-making team, parents work alongside school to set policy, raise funds, administer programs, hire new staff, and organize events. Formal programs, such as an on-site Even Start Family Literacy program and a state-funded Family Resource Center, bring parents into the school to volunteer, advance their education and receive health or social services. But more important than individual policies or programs, says the principal, are the "million little things" the school does to make parents and teachers partners in children's education. The staff at Cane Run create a "parent-friendly, family-focused" atmosphere through their curriculum choices and communication strategies; in addition, they provide numerous opportunities for parents and teachers to collaborate on projects that benefit students.

Context

Cane Run Elementary serves the urban community of Louisville, Kentucky, which is located in the Jefferson County Public Schools district, one of the country's 25 largest school districts. Approximately 80 percent of Cane Run's 450 students in K-5 are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. The school's student population is 50 percent African American and 50 percent white. The 1996-97 school year marked the beginning of Cane Run's schoolwide program.

Breaking Down Barriers to Family Involvement in Schools

The barriers to parent involvement at Cane Run resemble those faced by many schools: parents' busy work schedules and the need for child care and transportation prevent parents from attending school events, while teachers struggle to find ways to reach out to parents. The school staff has found that meeting families' basic needs, being flexible when drawing parents into school activities, and finding new ways to communicate with parents can result in higher success rates for children at school.

Overcoming Time and Resource Constraints

Meeting families' basic needs. Cane Run staff wanted to increase both the overall number of parents who were involved at the school and the types of activities in which they participated. Using funds from the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), Cane Run established a Family Resource Center, which provided the school with a strong base of support

services for building parent involvement. The Family Resource Center serves the families of all children who attend the school, as well as members of the surrounding community. A full-time coordinator with experience in victim advocacy and social work links families with mental health counseling, medical services, social services, and other community resources. Staff and volunteers help families directly by collecting clothes or food for them in emergencies, transporting them to and from school-related meetings, accompanying them to social service agencies, and paying their GED testing fee. The center coordinator receives guidance and recommendations on the services and programming from parents who serve on the Family Resource Advisory council.

The Family Resource Center also sponsors an affordable after-school program from 3:30 to 6 p.m. every day. As part of the program, parent volunteers and paid staff members offer children tutoring, access to computers, karate classes, games, and other activities. The center charges families \$10 a week for the program, but families who are unable to pay can waive the fee by volunteering their time at the school or at the center.

In addition to the afterschool program, Cane Run uses Title I funds for a Jump Start program for 40 three- and four-year-olds. On Mondays through Thursdays, the program conducts morning and afternoon sessions for preschoolers at the school, with the goal of helping young children develop the skills they will need for success in school. On Fridays, Jump Start staff members visit participating families at home.

Flexible times and places for parent involvement. School staff maintain flexible schedules because they recognize that parents are often unable to visit the school or attend meetings due to transportation difficulties or an inability to be excused from work. “You have to start with their schedule,” explains the principal, an approach that sometimes results in holding meetings outside the school building or after business hours. When parents visit the school without a formal appointment, teachers cover for each other to allow for impromptu parent-teacher conferences. Also, the school recognizes that some parents who are unable to get to the school nevertheless still want to participate in school events. Staff help these parents volunteer their services for the school and Family Resource Center by having them conduct mailings, make telephone calls, and write newsletters out of their homes. In addition, staff often arrange transportation for parents who need it, either by giving them bus tokens or by offering them a ride.

Helping staff communicate with parents. Even though Cane Run welcomes many parents through its doors every day, exchanging messages between home and school still poses a challenge to staff and parents. Cane Run teachers deliver notes or other information in person to the homes of students when all other attempts to reach parents have failed. The school recently installed an answering machine so that parents can leave messages around the clock; during the day the telephone system forwards all incoming calls to separate extensions so that the line remains as free as possible. Teachers can call families from any of Cane Run’s numerous telephones located in the PTA room, library, staff workroom, computer lab, and conference room, each of which provides a list of student names and telephone numbers.

“Communication is the biggest challenge. You have to be committed to getting the message home, even if it means going in person.”

Principal, Cane Run Elementary School

Providing Information and Training to Parents and School Staff

The computer check-out program. In 1993, the school purchased 30 laptop computers and then held training sessions for families interested in checking them out overnight or on the weekends. According to the principal, older students (in grades four and five) in particular enjoyed using the computers and teaching their parents how to use them. The computers proved to be so popular that the school now offers Family Technology Nights; as the principal explains, “We realized that getting families together to learn about technology really works” as a way to get parents involved in children’s education.

Family Technology Nights. Cane Run hosts Family Technology Nights, which evolved from the school’s computer check-out program. The school holds an average of five Family Technology Nights each year, with 20 to 40 parents and children in attendance at each session. As with the computer check-out program, the technological focus of the project has been particularly successful in drawing older students (grades 4 and 5) and their parents. Parents and children who attend the evening activities can use the school’s television studio, Internet hook-ups, desktop publishing programs, and other equipment. One father said that attending a Family Technology Night with his family was such a positive learning experience that it prompted him to buy a home computer for his family.

Training to improve parent and child learning skills. Cane Run’s Family Resource Center offers information and training for parents and students to improve their learning skills. For example, the center has sponsored workshops for parents and children to learn to use the Internet together. The center also sponsored a workshop entitled Parents Helping Children to teach parents how they can help prepare their children for testing. The workshop was held in the evening, and dinner and child care were provided. Additionally, the Family Resource Center, in collaboration with the Even Start program, offers parents with GED additional training in several academic subject areas.

Restructuring Schools to Support Family Involvement

Empowering parents to make decisions. Parents of Cane Run students have long played an active role in educational decision-making because Cane Run formed a site-based decision-making council several years before the schools were mandated by the state to do so. Consequently, when the 1990 KERA mandated that schools operate such a council, Cane Run was ahead of the game. Its council, consisting of five teachers, four parents, two classified staff members, and the principal, has policy-making authority over approximately 90 percent of the daily operation of the school. Parents on the council help interview job candidates, control the school’s \$2 million budget, and make decisions regarding curriculum,

discipline, use of space, and other matters. The principal notes that the council is not merely advisory; it empowers parents to take part in running the school.

“Parents on our site-based decision-making council become truly educated on how a school works from the inside. The challenge for us was to figure out how to explain everything in a language they understand – not educational jargon. The burden of that is on us, to help parents understand.”

Principal, Cane Run Elementary School

In addition, since 1990 the PTA has greatly expanded its membership by speaking to local businesses and community groups and by building a rapport with hard-to-reach parents during school drop-off and pick-up hours. As a result, PTA membership has grown from about 60 parents in 1990 to the current level of more than 700 parents and community members. The PTA has received more than 30 awards for exemplary attendance, and in 1995 the organization won the state PTA’s highest award for a local unit, the Overall Advocate for the Child award. The former PTA president explains that “once we had a rapport [with these parents] and they knew somebody [in the PTA] it was easier for them join.”

Moving beyond traditional school-family activities. Every year as many as eight parents attend an out-of-town retreat, together with teachers, administrators, and other school staff. The attending parents represent the school’s three formal panels on which parents serve: the Family Resource Center Advisory Council, the School-Based Decision Making council, and the PTA board. Other interested parents may attend the retreat as well. Everyone attending participates in workshops on best instructional practices and in activities such as bookmaking, which teachers can use in their classroom and parents can use at home. In addition, parents can attend meetings on curriculum, planning, student assessment, and other education issues. By attending the retreat, parents and teachers are able to socialize and gain a better understanding of each other’s perspectives.

“We have parents who become much more sympathetic to our job once they see it from the inside, and [once] we hear their view on what they want for their kids.”

Principal, Cane Run Elementary School

Bridging School-Family Differences

Cane Run offers parents the opportunity to experience first hand what their children are learning in an environment that is pleasant and non-threatening, an arrangement that can be especially attractive to parents who may doubt their ability to help their children master new content.

“We create an atmosphere where parents are truly comfortable to come into the school building. They want to come back, and they feel that they are part of the school.”

Principal, Cane Run Elementary School

Cane Run offers an Even Start Family Literacy program that provides parents with valuable skills that they can use to support learning at home. More than 20 families enroll in Cane Run’s Even Start program each year. Parents in the program can earn a GED in classes offered in the school building, work with their preschool-aged children in the on-site early childhood center, and volunteer to help with older children in classrooms. Even Start staff run an infant and toddler nursery in the school and offer classes in parenting skills. By attending school alongside their young children, Even Start parents show their children that they value education. Through this on-site work and home visits conducted every Friday by Even Start teachers, the program also helps parents learn techniques for taking a more active role in their child’s education both at home and in the classroom.

Tapping External Supports for School-Family Partnerships

Cane Run is in its first year as a schoolwide program. The principal explains, “Title I is really infused into everything we do, and as a schoolwide program that will be even more true.” His goal for Cane Run’s first year as a schoolwide program is to cultivate a small cadre of parents who understand and advocate the schoolwide concept. The best way to garner that kind of support, he says, is to help parents understand how Title I dollars translate into services and improvements throughout the entire school.

Cane Run also receives major support, in funding and policy direction, from the state’s education reform initiatives. KERA funds support the coordinator and assistant of the Family Resource Center as well as its overall operation. KERA also supports the school’s efforts to implement reforms (such as improving parent involvement) that will increase student achievement by holding schools accountable for outcomes – in particular, student performance on a statewide assessment. The Family Resource Center funding, based on the free-lunch count, is appropriated by the state legislature through the Cabinet for Families and Children.

Evidence of Success

“We create an atmosphere where parents feel truly comfortable to come into the building, and they want to come back,” according to the principal. The principal, the Family Resource Center coordinator, and the PTA president all agree that the best measure of the school’s success in drawing parents into the school building is the day-to-day presence of parents – helping in classrooms, doing volunteer administrative work, contributing to policy decisions, taking adult education classes, seeking services at the Family Resource Center, meeting with teachers, or just visiting the school. The Family Resource Center coordinator

emphasizes that the daily functioning of the center depends heavily on parent volunteers. An average of four parent volunteers work in the center every day, helping with data entry, telephones, and administrative work. The coordinator says parents “jump right in, because this their community, their school.”

School staff estimate that an average of 30 parents visit the school daily, but that five years ago that average was close to zero. One significant indication of the successful involvement of parents in school operations is the four-year, \$100,000 integrated arts grant that the school was awarded in 1992. In winning that grant, Cane Run became the first Kentucky school to include parents in both its grant writing process and its presentation to the state grant committee.

The principal points to steady but modest increases in math and reading scores over the last four years. Attendance has remained steady over the years at about 94 percent. Over the last two years, disciplinary referrals – tracked through the school’s database – have decreased by 30 percent each year.