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Parent Resources Online:

Helping Parents Support Their Children in the Classroom

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July 16, 2013

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Fall 2011

Kennesaw State University

**Introduction**

Longstanding research indicates that parents play a critical role in student learning. The data and studies available suggest that the degree to which a parent is involved in their child’s learning influences the child’s achievement. In addition to student achievement, research confirms that parental involvement positively impacts student motivation, self-esteem, and behavior (National Parent Teacher Association). Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Involvement outline the multiple ways a parent can be involved: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The research suggests that the most effective type of parental involvement is that which engages parents in working with their children on learning experiences at home (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989).

Because data indicates that a child’s academic achievement is relatively consistent after elementary school (Topor, Keane, Shelton & Calkins, 2010), garnering parental involvement and support from the early elementary level is important. Helping parents learn meaningful and effective ways to support their child’s learning at home becomes a significant part of educating the whole child. With the emergence of technology related resources in education, educational institutions and families have unprecedented access to tools that can increase parent knowledge and facilitate levels of parental involvement.

Many parents of students at Hollydale Elementary have a great desire to help extend their children’s learning at home. This is evidenced by consistently high participation in curriculum nights, parenting classes, and parent involvement workshops. Unfortunately, a significant number of these parents do not know *how* to help support their children’s learning at home. Whether assisting with homework, previewing new content, or reinforcing an area of confusion, many parents do not know where to start or how to help their child in academic areas. As time has passed and educational trends have progressed, there has been a shift in how concepts are taught. For many parents, the methods and strategies used in the classroom today are vastly different than the ways they learned. This presents a challenge and often frustration to all involved parties.

Our capstone project seeks to address this problem by developing a website designed to support parents as they reinforce and extend their student’s learning at home. This website, collaboratively developed by Kirsten Allen and Maggie Phillips, is titled Parent Resources Online and is often abbreviated as “PRO.” Being a web-based resource, family members have immediate access to the information from any location at any time. For this website, the authors created video tutorials of the content and strategies being taught in the classroom and created hands-on learning tasks, real world application activities, and strategies for reinforcing content at home. The content on PRO is highly relevant, applicable, and is directly aligned to the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. In addition, PRO is hosted through Weebly, ensuring easy access and navigation from mobile devices as well as personal computers. With this online resource, the power of technology is utilized to facilitate student learning by preparing parents to support the academic growth of their child.

With decades of data suggesting the positive impact of parental involvement on student success, it is evident that there is a great need to facilitate and extend opportunities for parents to support student learning at home.

**Description of Experience**

This collaborative endeavor began in July 2012, as the authors began envisioning a digital parent resource center that would be accessible to the parents of our students at Hollydale Elementary. As part of the Cobb County School District, Hollydale is located in southwest Cobb County. At present time, the school serves approximately 735 students. The student population is as follows: 2% Asian, 49% African American/Black, 37% Hispanic, and 12% Caucasian. Of the student population, 65 students (8.8%) are currently served in Special Education, 174 students (23.7%) are served in the ESOL program, and 152 students (20.7%) are served in the Early Intervention Program. It is also important to note that Hollydale is a Title I federally funded school.

The ultimate goal of this capstone experience was to develop a website that could provide any parent with relevant information and guidance about supporting the learning of their child at home. Throughout the summer months, a proposal was developed for this experience, appropriate permissions solicited, and brainstorming of ideas began to develop this resource. Once the foundational objectives of this project were established, the planning, development, and composition of this website began. While a plan was explicitly articulated for this website, through the development and continual evaluation of each element, there were significant modifications to the original design, in an effort to enhance the overall effectiveness.

From the beginning of this project, commitment was made to seeking continual feedback and suggestions for stakeholders. Interviews with several parents, with students of different ages, to gain insight into desired components of a digital parent resource center were conducted. These interviews indicated parental desire for information about math computational strategies and a desire for information about student reading development. Next, interviews were conducted with multiple third grade teachers to determine concepts and ideas that teachers perceive to be most important. Using this information, construction began on the Weebly site and began the compilation of digital resources. With a wealth of research-based resources available online, permissions for the sharing of several preexisting digital resources were gathered. In addition, the authors began creating resources specifically tailored for the target population.

After developing the website shell and infusing multiple resources, three third grade teachers explored PRO to offer feedback. Suggestions were received about navigational elements and content to include. However, surprisingly, the majority of the feedback came in dialogue about equitable access. Teachers expressed a concern that PRO could further perpetuate the digital divide. To address this concern, development began to provide a schedule of times of computer access at Hollydale for parents interested in participating. This launched an “Office Hours” schedule and the beginnings of a digital parent resource center.

The creation and development of relevant and meaningful became the primary focus of the project throughout September and October. Time was spent locating and linking research-based online tools and resources to the site. As resources were collected, the authors began developing ideas for a multitude of new resources to create. Next began the collaborative development of resources to help parents better understand reading levels, reading strategies, and ways to support student reading growth at home. In addition, the Cobb County Library system was utilized to develop lists of available texts, sorted by Fountas and Pinnell reading level. Math resources were also developed to help parents better understand the math strategies being used in the classroom. Collaboratively, over twenty video tutorials covering addition, subtraction, and multiplication computational strategies were developed and recorded.

At the end of September, PRO was further field tested with teachers and parents to gather ideas for further improvements. Access was provided to parents prior to a September PTA meeting and support through the initial exploration of the site was provided to parents as needed. After exploring, parents participated in a focus group discussion to share feedback on their experience with and perceptions of PRO. In addition to receiving logistical feedback, numerous suggestions called for the inclusion of additional math and reading resources. Through these conversations with parents, the great potential for this resource was realized as parents consistently indicated a frustration with supporting homework completion and understanding at home.

Shortly after these field tests, development began on a survey type instrument to further assess the impact of implementation. The evaluation plan called for the administration of a baseline survey and a post-implementation survey to gather qualitative information about parent usage, degree of implementation, and impact. The baseline survey was distributed to fifteen participants in October and the results were analyzed and recorded. In addition, this feedback was used to make enhancements to PRO based on parent usage and suggestions included on the instrument. A strong trend in this feedback was the desire for more reading related resources. With promotion from third grade being contingent upon passing the Reading component of Georgia’s Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, many parents felt urgency to support in this area. In response to this feedback, the authors began writing and developing a series of videos about “Book Talks.” These videos included suggestions for book talks as well as modeled reading conversations with third grade students. The authors also began compiling and creating an array of online and printable reading resources for diverse third grade readers.

As December began, through conversations and events at Hollydale, it was learned that many parents were unaware of numerous community based resources to support their learning and their student’s learning. It was decided to develop a section of PRO devoted to providing additional resources to parents. Independently and collaboratively, representatives from a variety of community organizations and programs were researched, contacted, and interviewed for information to share with our audience. In this section, community information, resources to support early literacy, as well as information about supporting students during standardized testing situations were communicated. This was found to be a pivotal component in the education of the whole child.

Throughout the winter months, diverse resources continued to be compiled for PRO. As indicated by website hits, there was consistent parent usage during this time. While “Office Hours” at Hollydale were provided, to ensure equitable access, there was very little participation. It was found that the vast majority of site usage was happening outside of school. While this raised questions about addressing the digital divide, it did provide guidance in planning for future open-access opportunities.

Approaching the midpoint of implementation, additional questionnaire to administer to participants was collaboratively developed. This questionnaire contained Likert rating scales and presented questions not included in the pre/post implementation survey. Upon analysis of results, it was found that many parents perceived the site to be a very helpful resource for supporting their child; however, they found the content to be too extensive. Despite a relatively small sample size, multiple parents indicated that they struggled to isolate that which was of most importance and generally felt overwhelmed by the quantity resources. This feedback was pivotal in making major modifications to our site as we began streamlining and reducing the visible content. While keeping all previously presented resources on the website, only the most relevant and meaningful content remained visible.

Throughout the spring of 2013, PRO continued to be monitored, maintained, and revised. The authors continued to ensure the visibility of the most powerful and timely content. Individually, several parents were supported with usage and were provided tutorials on usage. During this time, the authors worked to ensure that the quantity of content was not excessive. However, at this time, there was a slight increase in the available resources, to align with desired resources indicated on the survey.

To evaluate the potential impact of PRO, the pre/post survey was administered to participating parents. To gain the most insight, parents that consistently utilized this resource as well as parents with irregular and inconsistent usage, were surveyed. The sample size for the post implementation evaluation doubled from initial administration with thirty participants. While this statistically skews the data, it provided a broader scope of feedback.

**Deviation and Results**

While initial plans called for the development of a digital parent resource center, the logistics and content of PRO evolved throughout this project. Through constantly seeking feedback and suggestions from all stakeholders, enhancements were made, which made this resource more meaningful while simultaneously making it easier to navigate.

Early on in the planning, PRO was as envisioned as an elaborate and expansive digital resource center that included information to support student learning in all content areas at multiple grade levels. As planning and soliciting feedback began, focus for this project was placed on third grade reading and math. This allowed for focus on two critical areas indicated as high priorities by parents and teachers on surveys, and allowed for mainstreaming of the content. During initial planning, the translation of all content and media into Spanish, the native language of some of our population was planned. As PRO developed, it was realized that the Spanish translation components were rarely, if ever utilized. The majority of Spanish-speaking parent usage came at Hollydale with the support of the bilingual parent liaison. Therefore, it was decided to utilize our time and resources on expanding the quality and caliber of the resources instead of on translation.

The initial plan also called for the inclusion of filmed lessons in each of the content areas. After filming these lessons and evaluating the purpose of this resource, it was decided not to include these on PRO. While these lessons were meaningful to students, they did not deliver the content to parents in an efficient manner. The authors found that there were more appropriate ways to deliver the same content, in a much quicker way. To ensure continual access to this information, additional video tutorials with explanations and demonstrations were included.

Another deviation from the original plan came in the timing and audience. While initially planning to introduce this resource to all third grade parents in early August, a variety of logistical issues prevented this. Instead, there was a gradual phase-in, increasing the number of parents each week. This allowed for further support of the parents and ensured their understanding of the resource and the content. In addition, this practice allowed parents to begin utilizing PRO whenever desired.

As explained in paragraphs above, continual evaluation was conducted to ensure authenticity, accessibility, and effectiveness. These evaluation instruments were also utilized to assess the impact of PRO. The initial administration of the Parent Survey, in October, indicated that most parents provide their child homework support on a daily basis. This administration also indicated that most parents felt uncomfortable with the content being taught in the classroom. Similar to that response, the majority of parents indicated a lack of confidence to the fifth item, “I feel confident supporting my child’s classroom learning at home.” After implementation of PRO, with varying degrees of participant usage, we saw a shift in the data. The survey, administered in May, indicated that parents were spending more time reading with their child at home. Furthermore, the data showed that parents gained a better understanding of the content and felt more confident in their abilities to support their child’s learning. It is sufficient to say the data indicates PRO had a positive impact on parent content knowledge as well as on parental confidence related to supporting student learning.

The qualitative data garnered from focus groups and interviews provided information related to the degree of usage as well as the impact perceived by parents. It was found that parents primarily used PRO to find appropriately leveled reading books and to help support student understanding of math concepts. In consulting with the teachers of participating students, it was found that the students were consistently utilizing appropriate math computation strategies. While it is possible that other factors influenced this, it is also likely that PRO contributed to the student application of strategies and information.

**Reflection**

Every element of this project provided a new and meaningful learning experience. The most poignant learning experience was learning about the importance of considering viewpoints while remaining objective and targeting a specific audience. More specifically, at the midpoint of this project, a major overhaul of PRO was required. Parents felt overwhelmed by the array of content and were unable to determine which resources were most appropriate. We had spent extensive amounts of time to develop a broad array of resources and felt that the more content, the higher the quality of PRO. As classroom teachers, we felt that all the information was important to share with parents, and we had this thought confirmed through teacher solicited feedback. Through continual reflection, we realized we were looking at PRO through “teacher glasses,” what teachers want to see. With our target audience being parents, we knew we had to change and improve PRO to be meaningful to the parents. While it initially seemed, to us, that the quality of the site was regressing, we quickly realized it was becoming more “parent-friendly” and accessible. Ultimately, it is important to consider what you know to be important, however, it is equally important to make decisions that are objective and appropriate for the target audience.

This experience also taught more about adult learning theory and strategies that can be used to support the learning of adults. While teaching young children seems natural to me, facilitating the learning of adults was more challenging. I had to learn ways to convey information to parents without breaking down the content to the degree which it would be explained to a child. This was difficult as I frequently found myself trying to explain and illustrate concepts too much. Exploring methods to activate the background knowledge of parents, without knowing their diverse levels of previous experience, was challenging. It was desired that parents to be able to connect the information to their learning experiences about the concepts. Through this experience, I learned about the power of many digital tools and resources that allowed me to facilitate adult learning experiences. Because of the nature of online learning experiences, there are inherent levels of differentiation available to help support the learning of the participants.

The broad nature of this project allowed us to apply our learning of the International Society of Technology in Education Coaching Standards. Overall, this project allowed us to facilitate the diffusion of innovation and change, by developing a plan for and applying strategies to initiate and sustain PRO with stakeholders. By developing an array of digital and multimedia resources, we addressed each component of Standard 2, Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. Extensive research was conducted to ensure learner-centered strategies were employed and that these strategies facilitated authentic learning experiences for participants. Instructional design and differentiation were at the forefront of all of our planning and resource development. We also worked to create an authentic and effective digital learning environment for parents. By managing our digital tools and resources, blending online and traditional learning experiences, and facilitating collaborative learning, we developed a safe and meaningful place for parents to learn. While this required one-on-one parent support at times, it expanded the participation and made the implementation more powerful. In addition, continual efforts evaluate PRO, seeking feedback and information to help us enhance this resource. By administering multiple surveys and conducting focus groups and interviews, we were able to gather multiple sources of feedback to increase the overall effectiveness of this resource.

In moving forward, to others interested in building digital parent resource centers, solicitation of continual feedback and stakeholder evaluation is encouraged. The target audience must be given regular opportunities to make suggestions for improvement. Starting at the beginning of a project, before an instructional plan is developed, garner feedback from all stakeholders. Learning what is most important to these individuals preserves time and allows for a more clearly articulated vision. As teachers, it becomes very easy to look at resources and want to share. However, it is important to consider the parents and their knowledge about the content and instructional approaches. By gathering feedback frequently and consistently, it is possible to begin objectively looking at tools and resources and isolating that which is most important to the participants.

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