

Bruce-Monroe Elementary School



Marta Palacios, Principal
Washington, D.C.
Student Enrollment: 332
Grades: Head Start-6

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

- Make parent engagement a priority. Realize that substantive parent engagement takes resources—be prepared to dedicate staff, time and energy to the cause.
- Relationships matter. Before people can work together effectively, they should know and trust one another.
- Tap into your knowledge base. Consider how your experiences relate to those of parents, and how your personal lessons can help others overcome their barriers.
- Partnerships with community-based organizations provide support and creativity to projects, and lessen principals' loads.

PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS STRENGTHEN CLASSROOM PRACTICES

When Marta Palacios became principal of Bruce-Monroe Elementary School six years ago, only a handful of parents were active in the school. Palacios, an immigrant from El Salvador, understood why many parents—60 percent of whom are also immigrants—were not involved. Many, Palacios explains, had negative experiences in school, may not feel welcomed by school personnel, have

limited English language skills or work more than one job. Palacios draws from her personal experiences overcoming similar barriers to encourage parents to become involved in the school.

As principal, Palacios hired a parent coordinator and dedicated time and energy to helping parents become active members of the Bruce-Monroe community. The school's expectations for parent involvement have evolved over the years. "At the beginning, we just wanted to bring parents into the school without any long-term goals or planning," she says. "Now we see a real need for parent involvement in student academic achievement, and our focus is on connecting the two." The staff and administration's concentrated efforts led to the Parents and Friends of Bruce-Monroe—an organization involving nearly 100 families focused on issues of teaching, learning, climate and culture in the school. When the District of Columbia Public Schools released ambitious new language arts standards for the 2005-06 school year, Palacios saw an opportunity to further engage the Parents and Friends group.



The school's academic achievement committee, a subgroup of the Parent and Friends, used *Sharing the Dream* funds to build relationships between parents and teachers, inform parents and community members about the new language arts standards, assess classroom learning, and help teachers and students meet and exceed the district's academic expectations.

IMPLEMENTATION

When Palacios designed the school's *Sharing the Dream* project in summer 2005, she envisioned teachers and parents creating a language arts curriculum that drew from the cultural heritages of Bruce-Monroe families and the surrounding Columbia Heights neighborhood. She believed that by integrating students' family backgrounds, languages and cultures into teaching the new standards, students would more easily relate to the lessons and learn the material. She also envisioned the program as a way to take partnerships between teachers and parents to a higher level.

Once Palacios and staff members began talking with parents and teachers, however, they discovered that the project needed a different focus. Teachers said they were just learning the standards and not comfortable enough with the new curriculum to partner with parents to customize it. Palacios recognized that parents also needed a basic understanding of the standards—and teaching strategies—to make substantive contributions to the curriculum. She worked with parent coordinator Lillian Hernandez and Jill Weiler from the Tellin’ Stories Project of Teaching for Change (www.teachingforchange.org)—a community-based organization that helped Bruce-Monroe staff engage parents for several years—to alter the scope of the project. “We started trying to bite off little pieces instead of doing everything at once,” Palacios explains.

The school’s *Sharing the Dream* initiative became focused on increasing parent knowledge about the new standards and classroom teaching while improving relationships between teachers and parents. Palacios, Hernandez and Weiler worked with the academic committee to develop a framework for classroom visits that allowed parents to observe teachers and discuss their teaching strategies and

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ways families could support student learning. The group created an observation form to guide parents’ half-hour visits. Palacios and Hernandez set observation times and shared the form with teachers. Within two weeks of their visit, parents met with the teacher to ask questions about the lessons and identify ways

they could help—in the classroom and at home. Weiler, who works in schools throughout D.C., applauds the parent observation approach. “This should be happening at every school in the District,” she says. “The format is very positive, and it works to build trust and relationships that are mutually beneficial for parents, teachers and students.”

Some Bruce-Monroe teachers, however, did not agree. The D.C. teachers’ union reprimanded the school and accused parents and Palacios of using the observation tool to evaluate teachers. Palacios defended the tool to union representatives. “Parents—especially language minority parents—have very little knowledge of the United States educational system,” she explains. “They need some sort of guide to help them interpret what they are seeing in the classrooms.” Palacios also says she believes that parents have a right to observe classrooms, and that frequent

classroom visits—by parents, administrators and school staff—help boost student achievement by identifying areas for teacher support and holding teachers and the school accountable for student learning.

In March 2006, the observation tool was revised with teacher input, and parent visits to classrooms resumed. The controversy with the union led to more than one victory for the school. Many teachers who supported the classroom visits became more interested in the work of the academic committee. Two-thirds of teachers

attended at least one of the academic committee’s monthly meetings, and many attended consistently. Teachers and parents discussed ways to work together using an academic focus to increase parent involvement and improve student achievement. They developed a survey to gather information about activities parents wanted Bruce-Monroe to offer and, in turn, what skills and resources those parents could provide. The group also created opportunities for students and parents to



get library cards; offered meals for parents attending parent-teacher conferences; hosted an El Salvadorian lunch for teachers to help build cultural awareness; and presented several parent workshops on a variety of academic topics including district standards, testing, dual-language programs, a new math curriculum and home-based activities that connect with classroom learning.

RESULTS

According to Palacios, the most important accomplishment of the *Sharing the Dream* project was developing solid relationships between teachers and parents. “In many low-income schools, parents are seen as deficits,” she explains. “This year, we have been building relationships and changing those perceptions so parents are no longer seen as a threat or a hindrance, but as assets and important sources of support.”

Those relationships, and the activities that foster them, translate to improved teaching and learning in the school. Weiler, who facilitated conversations with the academic committee about data early in the year, offers an example of how the committee identified and spread best practices throughout the school. “We know that test scores don’t say everything,” she told the group at one meeting, “but let’s see what they do say.” What they saw was that students in two fourth-grade classes scored very differently on standardized tests. Students in one class had a 70 percent proficiency rate on the SAT-9 in spring 2004. About 30 percent of students scored “proficient” in the other class. Parents and administrators visited both classes, identified differences in teaching strategies and areas for professional development. As a result, the teachers began working together, sharing teaching strategies and boosting student achievement in both classrooms.

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Palacios says all of Bruce-Monroe’s key stakeholder groups are squarely focused on academics, and she believes mutual support and a continued focus on improvement will yield increased student achievement throughout the school.

NEXT STEPS

In 2006-07, the academic committee, which now includes parents and teachers, will continue meeting once every three weeks.

Now that parent and teacher relationships have been strengthened and both groups have a better understanding of the district’s standards, school administration and staff are returning to their original idea for developing a curriculum that draws from parents’ and students’ cultural backgrounds. In late August 2006, planning began for how to best incorporate cultural connections in new literacy and writing programs at the school.