

## Parents + school involvement = successful kids

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When Ly Nguyen, a second-grade teacher at Hilton Head Island School for the Creative Arts, wanted to open the school doors once a month on Saturdays, she wasn't sure if anyone would show up.

"In the beginning, I said if I could get 25 families I would consider it a success," she said. So, she was delighted when about 35 families came to both the first and second monthly sessions of "Saturday Schoolhouse," which is an effort to bring more parents into the education loop.

Nguyen is one of many educators working to reach out and get parents more involved. In addition to Saturday Schoolhouse, assistant principals at the school are making an effort to go to off-campus community locations to hold informational meetings on study skills, nutrition, discipline and communication.

The School for the Creative Arts isn't alone in trying to draw parents in. At other Beaufort County schools, family activity nights are held. And at the middle and high school levels, educators are urging parents to stay involved, even if their children aren't whistling the same tune.

### **SCHOOL FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS**

"Saturday Schoolhouse," offers time for parents to work with their kids in extracurricular learning activities. One tool Nguyen uses is Accelerated Reader, a computer program that gives kids quick quizzes on books they've read.

Glenda Dominguez attended February's Saturday Schoolhouse with her first-grade daughter, Ana. The family immigrated from Honduras over a year ago.

"She is taking first grade and she needs to read more. It's important children read more every day and learn more every day," Dominguez said, with a little help translating from her fifth-grade son, Edgardo.

Saturday School gives the family an opportunity to hone their English skills together.

Nguyen knows that Glenda's involvement will help Ana succeed.

Students with parents who are involved in their school tend to have fewer behavioral problems and better academic performance, and are more likely to complete secondary school than students whose parents are not involved, according to various studies by the U.S. Department of Education

### **PRINCIPALS REACH OUT**

Assistant principals at the creative arts school are going the extra mile -- or more -- to reach parents.

"The thought was, maybe if people aren't comfortable coming to us, we'll go to them," said Principal Gretchen Keefner.

A few weeks ago, the principals held a lunch meeting at First African Baptist Church Sanctuary, and met about a dozen parents. Among them was Tracy Groves, whose fourth-grade daughter, Coral, is struggling in math.

Groves said she picked up some valuable homework tips.

In the past, she and her husband, Michael Swinson, would struggle for hours with Coral. Now, when she can't seem to get something, they write a note to the teacher, a tip they picked up in class.

### **BRINGING IN PARENTS**

At Hilton Head Island Early Childhood Center, volunteers are encouraged to take their efforts to the max. Glenn Keller, executive chef at Frankie Bones Restaurant on Hilton Head Island, was originally going to do a cooking activity with his daughter Laura's kindergarten class. But the school encouraged him to give a demonstration to anyone willing to attend. He ended up making monkey bread with about 100 people.

He hoped his event would encourage parents to think more about nutrition and cooking with their kids.

"Granted, what I'm cooking isn't the healthiest thing, but (the activity) helps build the family morale," he said.

The Teacher Parent Advisory Council at the school works to coordinate the activities.

"This year, we've really focused on programs where parents and children can share time together and learn," Principal Adrienne Sutton said.

Generally, it's easy for the center to bring parents in, Sutton said, because at the early childhood stage of education, most parents are involved.

### **BEYOND ELEMENTARY**

Keeping parents involved as students get older, though, is not as easy, educators say.

"A lot of times, parents back off because kids put pressure on them," said Sherry DeSimone, principal of Hilton Head Island Middle School. "They're not as cool if their parents are in the school."

Both Hilton Head Island Middle and Bluffton High schools use e-mail notification and School Messenger, an automated phone system, to get news out to parents.

Robert Anderson, principal at the Bluffton campus, said parent participation in PTA groups tends to decline as students get older. The thing educators have to do, he said, is make sure parents understand that they still need to be there.

"Despite what Johnny tells them, Johnny still wants his parents involved," he said. "They still need mom and dad over their shoulder saying 'I like what you're doing, I don't like what you're doing.'"