

Parent Power!

Helping you make sense of schooling today August 1999 • Vol. 1 • Issue 4

Back-to-School Advice You Need TO GUARANTEE YOUR CHILD A YEAR OF LEARNING



It's hard to believe that in a short while, kids will be headed back to school. Once a wistful time for parents and children, it increasingly overwhelms parents with hundreds of things left undone. Thoughts of school supplies, clothes and carpools can overtake the most important aspect of back-to-school preparation – laying the groundwork for a productive academic year. Now is the time to ensure this school year offers your child the best opportunities for learning. Here is some practical *Parent Power!* advice to help you maximize your child's chances of success.

Your first step should be to determine what your child is supposed to be doing in each core subject. Syllabi and textbooks are general guides, but often provide little in the way of concrete standards or expectations. Is this the year, for example, that your child will study geological rock formations? When do they cover your state's history? Knowing that can help you plot out activities, support and help prepare him better for school challenges.

You also want to know how well prepared your child is for the coming year. How did he fare in math, in English, and in science at the end of last year? Did your child struggle with one subject or skill in particular? Check to see how that

subject was taught. It could be that he needs more practice at home or it could be that he needs a different approach all together.

Whip out that report card and remind yourself what the teacher had to say. Were there some big challenges in learning that – with the summer solstice bearing down on you at the end of the school year – have slipped your short term memory? Our children's school demeanor does not change drastically over a few short months. Preparing for the next year involves making sure you remember how he has fared from year to year.

Now that you've refreshed your mind about where Johnny's progress was when he was last in school, and learned about what is likely to happen and be expected of him this year, it is time to make a more objective assessment of how full an education is being provided. School standards are sometimes lower than we would like or not as specific as we need. For example, many strong and popular curricula today expect second graders to be learning poetry. That may not be the case in your school. You need to figure out where your child should be, not just where he is, to help make this and future school years more productive.

There's a lot of help available. Unlike a few short years ago, there are today some well-developed tools or

services that will help gauge where your child should be at his age. *Parent Power!* readers may recall discussions about the What Your First-Grader Should Know series by E.D. Hirsch. It is widely acclaimed as one of the best ways to take a child's academic temperature, and we recommend it to you to make your first major assessment.. There are programs that both help you assess your child's academic skills as well as provide any supplemental services he may need. Huntington Learning Centers and Sylvan Learning Centers are two national companies and there are an increasing number of highly regarded local firms started by teachers. For information on more personalized local solutions, check with the *Association of Educators in Private Practice* at 1.800.252.3280 or www.aaep.org.

Once you have figured out the necessary school content, it's important to know how your child's school works to ensure that the goals both you and the school set will be reached. Some schools group children by ability in some or all classes. Some believe that this allows teachers to tailor the pace of learning to different groups of children, while others prefer more heterogeneous, natural

What's Your Child Reading?



If you were handed a summer reading list at the end of school last year, you were probably relieved to have a guide and some support in encouraging Susan to read this summer. Most parents know how challenging it can be to beat the peer pressure over television, movies and video games. But are the books the school – or even the library – recommended the best picks for your child?

A glance at some summer reading lists sent red flags up among some parents we talked to. First, there was the issue of whether the books were well-suited to the child's reading level. One second-grade reading list recommended single theme picture books, for these seven and eight year-olds, rather than the more appropriate chapter books that many of them can handle. Then there's the issue of content. A fifth-grade mother was shocked to find her local library recommending the book Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade, a story about girls who taunt each other, dislike school and have a miserable year. Why introduce such negative thoughts to children whose eyes are still bright and hopeful about their school experiences?

But for every book that might be unfulfilling or filled with negative messages, there are thousands that would challenge, excite and help build a lifetime love of reading for even the most reluctant child. Many parents are happy to see their child reading and do not bother too much with the specifics. Like us, though, children want to like what they're reading, and contrary to popular belief, they do not need material dumbed-down to suit their current interest. Works like Treasure Island, Gulliver's Travels, Little Women, Sherlock Holmes,

Robinson Crusoe and Huckleberry Finn have fascinated children for generations. While the language in some of these books might challenge the average fifth- or sixth-grader, good abridged editions are available.

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Rather than Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade, parents of ten-year-olds might consider one of the seven Chronicles of Narnia, that transport children to another land to solve mysteries, build friendships, and learn of good and bad. Parents can and should make substitutions or supplement traditional reading lists.

Your choice of books must also be based on the appropriate reading level for your child. Children given books below their reading level are just as turned off to reading as those who get overwhelmed by far too difficult reading material. If much of the language is over your child's head and the chapters are longer than her attention span, your child is going to gain little from reading it. Books for younger children often have suggested ages on their covers to help parents choose appropriate books. Most bookstores arrange books by reading level, too. While this may provide some guidance, those levels are often based on artificial averages. Just because your child is eight years old, does not necessarily

mean that she reads at the second-grade level.

A better way to determine if the book is appropriate for your child is to have her read a page from the book aloud. How many unknown words does she encounter? If she encounters five or more words she cannot read without difficulty, the book is over her head right now. On the other hand, if she flies through the passage and understands everything, she is ready for a greater challenge.

You don't have to navigate the rows and rows of bookstores and libraries alone. There are organizations like the Great Books Foundation which offers excellent recommendations for younger children in its *Junior Great Books series*. For high-schoolers, look at *Introduction to Great Books*. You can check out the Great Books website at www.greatbooks.org.

Another place to look for good reading material is a book entitled Books to Build On: A Grade-by-Grade Resource for Parents and Teachers. This easy to use reference recommends great pieces of literature, good readings about history and geography, visual arts, music, science and mathematics, all indexed by grade. If you inspire your child now to books that last a lifetime, your child will be always be drawn toward reading.





Wyoming Public School Succeeds with Parental Support

Back-to-

Imagine a public school principal who has to field requests from expectant parents to place their unborn children on the waiting list for his school's kindergarten class! That is the situation Norm Carrell of Ft. Caspar Academy in Casper, Wyoming faced until his school established the rule that children had to be born and have a social security number before they could be placed on the list to attend this unique, parent-initiated school.

Five years ago the local superintendent approached Carrell with an idea for a new type of elementary school in his district. He was inspired by parents who wanted a more academically rigorous school and more involvement in their children's education. Carrell visited and researched several other schools in neighboring states that had adopted such a model. These schools of choice required significant parent involvement – support of high academic standards, mandatory attendance at parent teacher conferences, and regularly signing homework sheets – and boasted outstanding academic achievement. The concentrated focus on traditional academic progress, discipline and ethics has earned such schools the name “back-to-basics.”

When Carrell announced his findings about the success of back-to-basics schools, literally hundreds of parents and other community members attended meetings to find out more. Plans were drawn up and a proposal submitted to the school board. Despite the support and efforts of many parents, including many that had previously left the district to homeschool, the local school board voted down their proposal after much heated public debate.

Support for the new school continued to grow. Parents made the school board

accountable for turning away their idea. The next fall, they elected new school board members. Following a brief controversy, these parents again applied to the school board. This time the motion passed.

In the fall of 1995 Ft. Caspar Academy – a new public school – opened its doors to 110 students in grades K-6. Originally they expected to have only one class per grade, but parent demand forced them to have two classes each for grades K-3. Even then there was a long waiting list. In the last five years the school has more than doubled in size and added grades 7 and 8. A section of ninth-graders will begin this fall.

The curriculum at Ft. Caspar Academy is structured and consistent. All the teachers train for two summers in the Spalding Language Arts program, an excellent integrated language arts program that emphasizes phonics, writing and reading comprehension. The math and social studies programs adopted by Ft. Caspar Academy are also top notch, and are partially credited with 30-40% gains on standardized tests in several grades. Ft. Caspar Academy, which mirrors other district schools ethnically and economically, continues to achieve at the highest levels in the state.

Principal Carrell, when asked to explain his students' success, points to parental involvement and choice. “They agreed to take back parenting responsibilities if the school would focus on academics all day.” The other big difference, of course, is that parents choose to send their children to Ft. Caspar and feel vested in that decision. They've been so successful that other schools are looking at Ft. Caspar to see how to produce the same results.

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BACK-TO-SCHOOL ADVICE YOU NEED

groups of children. Many schools offer special programs to challenge bright kids or to help kids who are behind. What sort of activities and curricula are used in these special classes? Would your child benefit from these programs? You may not always be able to direct how your child is educated. But, it's important that you've at least made the effort to identify the kinds of approaches your teachers will use and to make clear that you're ready to be an advocate for change if something falls short of the goals you've now set.

Information is power and most teachers welcome your insights into how your child ticks, what it is you're hoping he'll achieve this year and how you plan to jump in when necessary to ensure he gets there.

Throughout the year *Parent Power!* will highlight various ideas and programs that have been proven to help kids learn better, but for now it is most important that you have a clear idea of where your child will be headed this year and the approaches that will get him there.

Parent Power! Helping You Make Sense of Schooling Today

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To share a unique experience as
a parent educating your child or
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Looking At Your Child's Math Program



In recent years children's achievement in math has suffered due to low expectations and an alarming tendency in today's instructional programs to expose children to too many topics in a shallow and repetitive way. Many children are struggling in math, quite simply, because they are not being taught math well. Instead, many textbooks emphasize visualizing math concepts, liberal use of calculators and group work over basic skills, formulas, and teacher-led instruction. For example, rather than teach students how to figure the area of a circle or how to multiply fractions explicitly, teachers are encouraged to "allow students to bump into mathematics that is embedded in [word problems] as they work in pairs or groups." Your child could spend a lot of time on this sort of math before he bumps into the answer.

One parent in Lake Oswego, Oregon, a community considered awash in great schools, tells of the day his daughter was sent home with a pack of flash cards. At first this father was thrilled that the school was emphasizing the importance of drilling. But then he read the note which said, "Please practice with your child every night. We will not be covering this material in school." Notes and remarks like this are not unusual, and often come from teacher's manuals designed by book companies. The anxiety many parents are feeling today over children who don't seem to grasp basic math concepts is often attributed to the child's failings, not

the math program. Research is beginning to the opposite - that our children are failing precisely because of bad programs or ineffective teaching methods.

Urged by parent outrage at some programs and a precipitous decline in student achievement, California recently adopted explicit math standards that make it difficult for schools not to teach math well. For example, California students by the end of fifth grade should be able to do long division with multiple-digit divisors and to represent decimals, fractions, and mixed numbers on a number line. By the end of seventh grade they should graph functions, use the Pythagorean theorem, and evaluate algebraic expressions.

California's standards make sure children are prepared for algebra instruction in the eighth grade. Children who take algebra before high school score higher on the SAT and are admitted to selective colleges more often. Postponing algebra until high school greatly decreases a child's chances of reaching calculus in high school. Although few American high school students take calculus, it is a common expectation for their peers in other developed nations.

Good academic standards like California's represent the first step to forcing schools to be accountable and to choose programs wisely. Ensuring the delivery of good instructional programs also means that all children will be taught math well. That includes poor children, who can succeed in math as well as anyone else, but if they are not taught, they will not

learn. Children in Lithuania, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Italy (not to mention Japan, Germany, France and Russia) continually outperform our children on international math exams. They all learn high-level math. Those countries are home to higher poverty rates than the U.S. and demonstrate that there is no excuse for leaving children mathematically challenged. How can you make sure math programs work in your school? Here are some tips from those who have done it and succeeded:

1 Identify the book and program in use. Ask for research proving its effectiveness. Why was it chosen by the school or district? When is the next review of math books and can you assist in the deliberations?

2 How often is math taught? Every day is not too much. Is math class primarily games? Is it drill and practice? Are new concepts introduced before the old ones are learned?

3 What is the goal of the homework? Some schools send home lessons that are brand new and expect parents to recall third grade math. Homework should be review and practice.

4 When you have a full picture of the program, the approach and the assessment your school uses, do some independent research and comparison. California's standards are posted at www.goalline.org, as is a lot of other great material on the websites listed in the resource box this month.



Good Websites for Parents

www.goalline.org

StandardsWork
202.835.2000

This website offers an eight-step process for creating and attaining high academic standards in schools.

www.saxonpub.com

Saxon Publishers, Inc.
800.284-7019

The use of Saxon textbooks, now spanning from kindergarten through calculus and including physics, has resulted in documented success-from higher scores on standardized tests to increased enrollment in higher level mathematics and science courses. Teachers have reported increased confidence and enthusiasm for mathematics following the use of the Saxon program.

www.execpc.com/~presswis/PRESS
414-453-8116

Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools provides a blueprint for effective parent-initiated school reform.

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"I just received a copy of your June 1999 newsletter and am pleased with it. Even though my oldest child is only three, I am already gathering information about what to ask the school that my child will attend...There is no going back if inadequate schooling is not obtained right from the start!"

**-Lisa,
Van Nuys, CA**

"I just read the latest issue of Parent Power! and would like to congratulate you on this informative issue. I am especially pleased to see the article on grammar in schools. I am very concerned about [my son's] lack of proper grammar usage."

-Sherrie (email)

"Your topics are exactly what my husband and I discuss and find quite frustrating in regards to our school system."

- Jenny (email)

"As a public school teacher, I appreciate what you have to say about standards, charter schools, and truly helping our children."

**-Troy,
El Paso, TX**



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