

Educational Project Task Choice B

“A COMMUNITY OF RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNERS”

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Approved by Dr. Karen Stinson on January 4, 2012

“A COMMUNITY OF RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNERS”

An Educational Project

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

by

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2011

Abstract

A COMMUNITY OF RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNERS

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Under the Supervision of Karen Stinson, Ph.D

How important are principal and teacher relationships with students, families and the community in building and maintaining student achievement? The purpose of this paper is to examine and support the importance of family and community connections in the success of student achievement through the following Wisconsin Teaching Standards and Administrative Standards. 1.) Wisconsin Teaching Standard Number Five, understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation and how this standard aligns with Wisconsin Administrator Standard Number Three, leading by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to pupil learning and staff professional growth. 2.) Wisconsin Teaching Standard Number Six, effective verbal and nonverbal communication techniques as well as instructional media and technology to foster active inquiry, collaboration and supportive interaction in the classroom and how this standards aligns with Administrator Standard Number Four, ensuring management of the organization, operations, finances, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. 3.) Wisconsin Teaching Standard Number Ten, fostering relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support pupil learning and well being and who acts with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner and how this aligns with Wisconsin Administrator Standard Number Five, Six and Seven, Family and Community Relations, acting within integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner, and context affecting the school, respectively.

Examining the relationships that teachers have with their students, colleagues, administrator, parents and community are crucial in building trust and developing systems of support and academic excellence. Administrators must also develop and maintain these relationships between staff, students, parents and community in order to develop a community of empowerment, trust, achievement and excellence. This paper will examine how these relationships can be built, maintained and extended beyond the classroom to develop a community of learners and academic success.

The role of a building administrator has to be one that fosters and develops relationships. An administrator that builds relationships among teachers, students, parents and the community at large becomes one that is influential, respected and a leader that has the ability to set the “tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the level of professionalism and morale of the teachers (Reig & Marcoline, 2008, p.2) all point to an administrator with quality leadership skills. Relationships are the key. When relationships are built upon trust, communication and empowerment, the school will become a learning community with a positive and inviting school atmosphere that leads to increased student achievement (Edgerson, Kritsonis & Herrington, 2006).

An administrator must know his or her staff, students, parents and community to truly be able to motivate and encourage a positive and successful learning community. According to author, David G. Burgess, motivation has three psychological conditions that explain why people do what they do, or respond to the request of a leader. Burgess refers to these as the C-3 Concept of Motivation. The first concept is one of competence. If an individual does not believe that they are capable of accomplishing what is expected of them, they will not try for fear of failure. An administrator can help someone overcome the fear of not being competent by providing the skills and support needed to empower an individual to take that risk. The second concept of motivation is the consequence of the task. In essence is the consequence, or result of the task worth the effort to the individual. The administrator must provide the training and resources necessary to help reinforce that the consequence is well worth the effort. The third and final concept of motivation is connectedness to others. If an individual does not believe that they are important to others and connected to someone who cares, they are less likely to be motivated to make the change. As Burgess states, “as human beings we are always seeking to satisfy our own psychological needs to have and make choices, to feel competent, to believe the potential consequences of making change are worth the risk, and to be connected to others” (Burgess, 2000, p.6). These concepts seem to be of particular importance in motivating both students and teachers as we encourage them to learn new skill sets and take learning risks daily. An administrator has to learn how to take risks as well in their role as an educational leader.

Visiting classrooms daily, addressing children by name and asking them about the little things in their lives that mean the most to them will create a warm, caring and trusting atmosphere within the school. A study that looked at teacher principal relationships when the principal is highly visible and in classrooms daily, showed greater overall teacher performance, a decrease in discipline referrals and students' academic performance increased (Banta & Sapp, 2010 p. 116-139). Staff, students and the families need to know that they can trust their school leader. If an administrator lacks approachability it can lead to distrust, fear, and the ultimate deterioration of a trusting relationship between staff, families, and the principal (Ruder, 2006, p. 1). When trust is in place children and staff are willing to take on academic challenges and parents are willing to trust change and innovation.

Successful elementary principals should embrace a "family-like atmosphere". Walking the halls in an elementary school should convey a feeling to everyone that enters that school that this is a place where children come first. Art work, academic and social achievements, and pictures of children, families and staff should be displayed everywhere. What a school values most, is what should be conveyed to everyone that walks through those front doors. A family is proud of its members and celebrates together and so should a school (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008, p. 9).

According to The Lamar University Electronic Journal of Student Research, "daily interpersonal interactions of a principal are necessary to garner trust and support from teachers". Teachers feel more confident and better about themselves and their ability in the classroom when they believe that their administrator and they have a mutual understanding of a "collective mission" (Edgeron, Kritsonis & Herrington, 2006 p. 3). In essence, everyone understands the goal, mission and expected outcomes. Effective leaders need to have a goal and an effective plan on how to achieve that goal. Administrators need to know where they are going, how they are going to get there and who needs to come along. It is critical that administrators have a very clear and concise goal on curriculum, instructional delivery and ample opportunity for staff development and continual learning. Principals have to have their staff believing in a "collective mission". "Teachers instructing students is the primary, critical process in the school. Everyone

and everything else must support the instructional process.” (David Burgess, 2000, page 28)

Teaching staff is the primary instrument in achieving academic success for all students. An administrator cannot underestimate the importance of an individual teacher’s academic influence they have on their students. “Instruction is only as good as those that instruct” (David Burgess, 2000, page 28). Fostering teachers’ growth, professionalism and motivation is an administrator’s number one job.

In David Burgess’s book “The Principal’s Keys-Unlocking Leadership & Learning”, he devotes an entire chapter on the importance of “shared leadership”. Shared leadership is allowing teachers to “own what they do” within a group of trusted peers. Teachers should be allowed to decide how to teach and the structure of their classroom for their students, while the content of the curriculum is determined by state standards and individual school goals. Burgess states the effective use of “self-directed teacher teams” is a form of shared leadership. “Effective teams have mutual goals and respect for the importance of an interdependent working relationship; are accountable for their collective and individual actions; and team members display a strong commitment to the group: the team’s decisions, communications, mistakes, collective lessons learned, and successes (p.20). When teachers in a building are able to successfully implement and maintain effective self-directed teacher teams, the administrators role is to support, encourage, mentor and coach the teams. In order to help foster effective self-directed teacher teams the administration must allow shared leadership, a common mission (goal), and allow the freedom and trust of those building teams to take risks, try new things, make mistakes, learn, collaborate and move forward. Staff has to feel supported, be given common planning time and ample opportunities for continued growth. Administrators should not underestimate the effectiveness of empowering staff to make decisions that affect classrooms and students. Empowerment of others is a very powerful leadership skill.

Administrators have the challenge of finding a balance in maintaining well prepared and talented teachers and accountability in student achievement. When administrators feel the urgency to succeed, often teaching staff feel this urgency as well and it can lead to a disconnect in the teacher principal relationship. (Edgerson & Kritsonis, 2006, p.3) Ron Clark,

Disney's Teacher of the Year, 2003, states when referring to his students, "...guide them as they grow, show them every way possible that they are cared for, and make special moments for them that will add magic to their lives, motivate them to make a difference in the lives of others..." (Ron Clark, 2003). Ron Clark's powerful statement was in reference to his students, however administrators should listen carefully as this statement could be equally as true in referring to teachers. Individuals can be highly motivated to do their best and achieve more when they are immersed in a positive, caring, supported and trusting environment.

Building and maintaining relationships with parents and the general community is equally as important as the relationships an administrator continues to foster with students and staff. Cultivating family engagement with all parents, especially those that may be alienated from the school, must be on every administrators agenda (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008, p. 6).

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, Newsletter, August, 2005, states that "Schools with involved parents engage those parents, communicates with them regularly, and incorporates them into the learning process (The CFCSRI, Newsletter, August 2005, p.1). The first step in engaging parents must include effective communication. Effective communication cannot be limited to one way dissemination of information, i.e. newsletters, website, press releases, but parents must have a way to respond and give feedback. Both informal and formal invitations inviting parents to visit the school, individual classrooms and the principal any time have shown to be strategies that help parents to feel welcome in the school. Including parents in decision making and encouraging communication through parent forums, meetings and school activities can help elicit parent feedback and conversation. Additionally, once a school has effective communication techniques with families in place, engaging parent involvement is the next step in building a school climate that includes parents. Administrators need to actively recruit and involve parents in a variety of school activities (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008, p. 6). For example, eliciting parent volunteers to head up a Parent Teacher Organization, will encourage additional families to get involved and volunteer their time and talents. Information that goes home should be concise, readable, direct and to the point. Parents and

families are busy and few will take the time to read beyond one or two paragraphs. Be positive and open, get to know families on a first name basis, share stories and triumphs about a student when possible instead of waiting to have conversations with parents when it may be about a negative circumstance that involves their child (Flessa, Gallagher & Parker, 2010, p.11). In addition to communicating, building relationships and engaging parent involvement, schools need to “take an active role in helping parents learn a variety of ways to be involved” (The CFCSRI, Newsletter, August 2005, p.2). A school can use workshops, family fun events, resource fairs, open house, and a variety of ways to bring families into the school and invite them to understand that parental involvement goes beyond volunteering in the classroom. Parents can learn about what goes on in their child’s classroom, homework strategies, study tips, reading and math strategies, all ways that parents can be involved positively with their child’s educational experience.

Having parents actively engaged and involved in their child’s learning increases a student’s academic achievement. “A recent review of parent involvement research found that parent-child reading activities produce a significant improvement in children’s language and reading skills from preschool through high school”, additionally another study finds “a strong positive effect on student’s achievement when parents work with students on homework”(The CFCSRI, Newsletter, 2005, p. 3).

Beyond parent involvement an administrator is wise to involve the community as a whole. Connections to the community, family and school help motivate students when they feel that learning is valued by everyone. Administrators need to ensure that their school is “marketed” well by keeping the community updated on all school events and successes (Reig & Marcoline, 2008, p. 7). Knowing and providing families with a directory of community resources can ease transitions for new families to the community and school, help families that may face crisis, and offer assistance to any family in need (Reig & Marcoline, p. 8). Holding a resource fair in your school is an excellent way to bring both the community and families into the school and generate conversations and bridge relationships. Additionally, administrators need to be involved and connected to community resources and “actively recruit” businesses and

community members (Reig & Marcoline, p. 12). Continually assessing student, family and the school's needs and knowing where and how the community can help in meeting these needs is a tool and asset that an administrator cannot afford to ignore.

The research into the importance of community, family and staff collaborations in making a school successful academically, led to the development of a strategic plan in an effort to increase family involvement at Iowa Grant Elementary School. The educational project included a strategic plan that outlined goals, research, and anticipated outcomes (Appendix A). The project included a staff survey that questioned staff's perception of parent involvement and a whole group discussion on what the faculty at Iowa Grant Elementary School, was doing to encourage parental involvement. The Educational Project also included a parent survey (Appendix B). The culmination of the educational project was the Parent Forum Synopsis (Appendix C). Based on the work completed on the Educational Project, the researcher determined that the staff at Iowa Grant Elementary had a good understanding of Parental Involvement and was open to try new ideas and strategies to increase parent and community involvement.

In conclusion, administrators have a list of goals and accomplishments that they wish to see for their school, students and staff. Administrators can not accomplish all of these goals on their own, they need to elicit the collaboration of parents, teachers, and the general community to help their students meet academic success, a success that will be paid forward to the community with each student that reaches their highest potential as they grow up to be contributing members of the community and parents of future students. A community of relationships and learners truly does epitomize a school that collaboratively works with students, families, staff and the community.

Resources

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Appendix A

Julie K. Walter Mini-Strategic Plan

Abstract

My change plan at Iowa Grant Elementary School (IGEMS) included looking at implementing one component, Parent Involvement, in a Title I School Wide Program Change Plan. Currently, IGEMS has exceeded the requirement of 40% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch and qualifies for the School Wide Plan.

Problem/Concern: Parent Involvement/Incorporate with Title I School Wide Program

Stakeholders:

-Parents/caregivers

-Teaching Assistants

-Teaching Staff

-Custodial Staff

-Administration

-Administrative Staff

Stages of Change:

1. Vertical slice of stakeholders or groups affected;

Everyone in the school is responsible for Parent/Home involvement in the school. Relationships within the building and out in our communities reflect on the school and our goal as educators and partners. Administrative and Clerical Staff are often the first “face” of the school when parents and/or community members walk in to our school. Custodians help shape the appearance of our learning community. Food Service feeds and nourishes our children helping to set standards for healthy lifestyles and nutrition. Administration is the leadership and guidance that leads our school community and encourages parent involvement and partnerships. Teaching staff and assistants have the day-to-day contact with our students and help shape their knowledge through instruction, modeling and encouragement. Teaching staff reinforces the need for parental involvement, involvement that includes responsibility, respect, support and discipline to help children grow to become lifelong learners, problem solvers and independent adults.

2. History of Organization

-What has worked and what hasn't worked? In the past IGEMS has held a “Reading Fest” in the spring of every year. In the early 2000's the Reading Fest was very popular and many families participated. Over the years the program has lost some of its enthusiasm and family following. Families still attend the annual event but the numbers have dwindled.

-Key historical facts: Strained relationships amongst staff have caused some tension and lack of communication. Hurt feelings, whether intentional or not, have caused communication to become a struggle, grade levels have become more isolated while key staff have felt torn and “stuck in the middle”.

-Stories: A recent success that the school has had was a “Polar Express Family fun Night”. Families were invited to join the staff on a weeknight and attend various stations, including hot chocolate, crafts and reading. Over 70 children attended and both children and families expressed a great deal of fun and excitement.

3. Individual and/or organizational values, beliefs and guiding principles

Overall IGEMS has a highly qualified and dedicated staff. Staff is willing to and does work with parents and the community. Academic success is what I perceive to be the number one value held by administration and staff. Unfortunately, large proportions of students that attend IGEMS are extremely impoverished and have dysfunctional family dynamics and systems. Children struggle to have their very basic needs met, if a child is not physically and emotionally healthy, academic learning takes a back seat to their most basic needs. Understanding the dynamics of our school culture I strongly feel that as educators we need to partner with parents to help our students reach their greatest learning potential.

4. Forecasting. New trends? Governmental decisions (standards, regulations...)

At a time of political distrust and funding cuts both schools and families are facing very real challenges. IGEMS needs to see this as an opportunity, versus a catastrophe. Change can be positive, the school community needs to look outside of the box and see possibilities. During a time of great change, it is a time to venture to try new ideas. I hope that the school community will brace this opportunity to partner with parents and truly work together for the sake of our children.

5. Preferred Future: (What do you want to hear/see/feel)

-Knowledge: Parents becoming partners in their child's school and learning. That education and school become a priority and understand that continued learning is a lifelong skill set. Parents seek to be a key partner in their child's educational life.

-Skills: The school is able to share key learning strategies and educational values with parents through modeling, newsletters, open invitations, parent/teacher conferences, open communication, parent nights, parent education and establishing educational partnerships with families.

-Application:

Suggested Goals:

- Weekly Classroom Newsletters, incorporating a "Classroom Home Connection" (Classroom Teacher)
- Monthly School Newsletter that includes a "School Home Connection" (Principal, School Counselor)
- Trimester Family Fun Events, one event each trimester
 - events need to be fun and educational
 - parents need to be actively involved
 - children need to see parent and school relationships blossom

Develop a Parent Teacher Connection (PTC) Group made up of parents, grade level teachers, support staff, specials staff, reading staff

- Set a mission/vision
- Establish a timeline

6. Existing State:

-Strengths: Enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff, some parental involvement,

-Opportunities: Monetary community supports, school wide community

-Problems: Individual pride and ownership, staff tension and communication barriers

-Threats: transportation, separate communities, lack of cohesiveness, at-risk families

7. Action Steps:

Timeline:

-Send out staff email 02/23/11

-Staff Meeting, present on parent involvement and have staff complete a parent involvement survey 03/01/11

-Staff work group established 03/01/11

-Staff work group meets and sets priorities, and shares staff survey results, 03/21/11

-Staff work group meets and establishes parent contacts, letter to parents, and parent survey, 03/29/11

-Parent Focus Group letter and parent survey are mailed out 04/15/11

-Parent Focus Group meets, 05/12/11

-Staff work group will meet to discuss Parent Focus group and set goals for the 2011-12 school year

Responsibilities:

-Set up meetings, meeting minutes, write parent letter –Julie

-Help assemble parent survey and determine which parents to invite-staff work group

-Facilitate Parent Focus Group, Julie and Mrs. Quam

8. Potential Barriers:

-Staff morale is low due to political climate

-Meeting designated timelines

-Not being on the staff at IGEMS

9. What would my mentor/friend/confident say?

I think that a good friend would know how passionate I am about parent and community involvement in a child's educational experience. It does seem like an overwhelming task but certainly achievable. Parents and educational staff need each other to help our children reach their highest academic and individual potential, with the partnership of both it seems more achievable than accomplishing this task alone.

Evaluation Summary:

Overall I feel that the project has gone well. The staff gave me good and insightful feedback on parental involvement at a staff meeting back in February. The staff work group, although small in numbers, has had great enthusiasm and ideas as we move forward. I am very excited to see how the Parent Forum goes on May 12th. I'm looking forward to being able to present, facilitate and gather information from the families at this venue. After the parent forum I plan to meet with our staff work group and set our goals for the coming year in how we will involve, invite and help parents feel welcome in participating in their child's academic experience at IGEMs. I do however feel like I will be leaving this plan hanging without guidance as I will not be at the school next year. I hope that the staff work group will continue the work and I would love to come back for some of the Family Fun Night!

Appendix B

Iowa Grant Elementary Middle School
Title I, School Wide Program
Parent Focus Group Questionnaire

1.) Please circle the number of parent/family involvement activities that you and your child(ren) have participated in at Iowa Grant Elementary in the past 2010-11 school year. (ie; Holiday Program, IEP, class play)

0 1 2 3 4 or more

2.) Overall, please rate your parent/family involvement experience(s) with IGEMS on the following scale:

1 2 3 4 5
Poor Average Positive

Please elaborate on your response:

3.) Are you satisfied with your child's reading achievement at IGEMS?

1 2 3 4 5
Extremely Satisfied Extremely
Dissatisfied Satisfied

Please elaborate on your response:

4.) How many minutes on a school night does you child spend on reading or being read to?

5.) How many minutes on a school night does your child spend on homework?

6.) Do you feel that parent/teacher communication is sufficient at IGEMS?

1 2 3 4 5
Extremely Satisfied Extremely
Dissatisfied Satisfied

Please elaborate on your response:

7.) How often are you able to completely read your child's classroom newsletter?

1	2	3	4	5
Never		Majority of the time		Always

Please elaborate on your response:

8.) How often are you able to completely read Iowa Grant's district newsletter?

1	2	3	4	5
Never		Majority of the time		Always

Please elaborate on your response:

9.) How comfortable are you contacting your child's classroom teacher?

1	2	3	4	5
Not Comfortable		Comfortable		Very Comfortable

Please elaborate on your response:

10.) Do you feel welcome in your child's classroom?

1	2	3	4	5
Not Welcome		Welcome		Very Welcome

Please elaborate on your response:

Thank You For Helping with the Academic Success of Your Child!

Appendix C

May 12th, 2011
Parent Focus Group
IGEMS

Facilitated:

Mrs. Julie Walter and Mrs. Claudia Quam

Attended: (9 parents)

Angie Schulting	Lori Breiwa	Jodi Solomon
Jenny Washburn	Tracy Kite	Tammy Rickard Cullen
Beth Connolly	Tammy Money Penny	Amy Kite

Summary:

Twenty-seven families were invited to attend a one-hour Parent Focus Group. Nine families attended and seven families completed the Parent Survey. Of the nine families that attended eight completed forms to offer to volunteer and/or continue to participate in future Focus Groups. I have these names and contact information.

The meeting began by welcoming parents, introductions and the reason for the meeting as well as information about Title I dollars and “School Wide Program” and qualifications. Focused on the importance of Family Involvement in education and that Family Involvement was our focus for this particular meeting.

Shared some research on the importance of Family Involvement: “The most consistent predictor of children’s achievement and social adjustment are parent expectations of the child’s academic attainment and satisfaction with their child’s education at school”. Discussed that families need to instill that education is important. I asked the group, “How can we instill the value/importance of education at home?” The group came up with the following list:

- Reading with your child
- Modeling reading by reading yourself
- Volunteering
- Tie in and extending school activities
- Use down time, car ride to talk and practice “facts”
- Asking questions/showing interest
- Set goals with your child
- Everyday activities/ “teachable moments”

Had a long discussion on early interventions, the importance of working with parents from the moment their children are born, the importance of reading to babies, toddlers, preschoolers and children of all ages. Parents agreed how important this outreach is and we discussed how we might reach parents early on before their children are in school. Maybe we need to bring this curriculum to the high school? IGEMS does do a yearly Babysitting Workshop but the students are quite young, 10, 11, and 12 and the information is more basic and focused on safety. The discussion led to 3-year-old screening and how do we reach parents? Not all parents know about these screening opportunities. Should be a community effort!

- ads in paper
- medical clinics
- prenatal classes
- hospital new baby packets
- flyers around town
- WIC clinics
- women's health clinics
- share information with Birth to Three and Head Start
- letters home
- child care providers

This discussion brought up the topic of communication and newsletters. The group stated that they preferred bullets of information vs. paragraphs; they don't always have the time to fully read the newsletter but will scan for important points. One parent said that they preferred very brief information about what was going on in the classroom, I asked if statements like "Ask your child how many planets are in our solar system?" would be more helpful and a couple of parents agreed that this would be more beneficial. The group would also like dates highlighted in the newsletters. A suggestion for this might be to always have a box or area of the newsletter with important dates so that parents always know exactly where to look. The final newsletter comment was that they often have too much information "less is more".

An additional comment was brought up concerning communication was about children that visit the nurse during the day and that parents are not always informed about this. A template with a check off list would be a quick and easy solution. Another parent also mentioned that her child was "flagged" at the high school for an unauthorized Internet link. She stated that her child told her about it and that she was never informed from the school. She felt that she should be informed about such infractions. This might be something for the technology department to look into current policies on this subject.

Email communication was a concern with some of the parents because they sometimes don't know if their emails get through to the staff. Mrs. Quam mentioned the districts problems with some emails going to spam. A suggestion would be to have teachers always respond, even if it's a quick "thank you I received your email" and to have staff check their spam daily.

One parent brought up a concern about a cheerleading extra-curricular/fundraising event run by high school aged children. It was unorganized and she felt lacked adult supervision. We should look at policies under fundraising, supervision and school sponsored events vs. non-school sponsored events.

Mrs. Quam asked the parents how they felt the fall parent teacher conferences go with everyone in the gym. Most parents responded that they preferred conferences in the teacher's classroom. Parents also expressed that they did not care for "child led" conferences and if there were "child led" conferences they would like time without the child present to talk with the teacher. Parents did state that they preferred the "Specials Teachers" to be in the gym for conferences.

A discussion began about "Back to School Night". Most parents do like the opportunity to bring their supplies to school prior to the first day of school. Parents of younger children want to be able to bring their little ones to the classroom on that first day...right of passage...pictures...☺ Parent's also enjoy Open House at the beginning of the year and many expressed that Open House was a fond childhood memory of their own and would like to see it come back. Mrs. Quam stated that next year's school calendar is set but that we could look at making changes for the following school year.

A long discussion also began about the Christmas Program. Many different views on the program, some parents want the children separated, others wanted the older children pulled from the program and others like the program just the way it is and has been. This might be a good area to do a specific survey with parents on for the following school year. There were very strong feelings expressed about this topic.

In conclusion I asked families how they thought a “parent education” or “parent focus group/education group” three times a school year would be accepted. The group agreed that they would find it beneficial but they are the parents who probably wouldn’t need to attend.... I also mentioned the opportunity for parents to attend the classroom one evening two or three times a year and “learn” the strategies to use in reading and math that will help their children when working with them at home. The parents were very receptive to this idea, especially at the primary ages.

The group met beyond our one hour and the evaluations were very positive.