



## Northwest Family Magazine, August 2002

### ***Building Parent-School Communities: Northwest Parents Take the Lead***

There is a quiet transformation taking place in a handful of Western Washington schools. Mothers and fathers meet with other parents at their child's grade level, discussing topics from the mundane to the profound. The facilitators are parents themselves, trained to keep the group on task and reinforce positive communication skills. At the beginning of each meeting, parents discuss ground rules to guide conversations. They agree to speak for themselves, avoiding hearsay and gossip. They support a common philosophy -- that through open communication with one another, they become more aware of their own parenting styles, make better-informed choices, and help build a community where their children thrive. Their mission is simple – to become better parents. They agree not to discuss individual teachers, school policy, or curriculum issues. Instead, with the help of a committed faculty liaison in attendance, these parents learn how to work within the school culture to problem-solve and create programs that positively affect the lives of their kids.

A grassroots program called ParentNet®, started by parents in 1996 at the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington, has grown to include thirteen public and private schools, mostly in Western Washington. Other schools in Oregon, Kansas, and Florida have followed the Northwest lead and in 2000 the National ParentNet Association was formed to help schools across the country with the training necessary for successful implementation of the program. Spearheaded by Susan Grijalva, an educator, and Marilyn Price-Mitchell, an organization development specialist, ParentNet is changing the culture of schools.

The idea of ParentNet sounds simple enough. Bring parents together by grade level of their children, let them discuss topics on their minds, and trust they come away with new ways to work with their children. In the process, you hope parents will develop ongoing support networks, become more “tuned in” to what is happening in their children's lives, and have the skills to help their kids and others when necessary. This “it takes a village to raise a child” approach is not new. What is innovative about ParentNet is how it is implemented within a school and its success is driven by mothers and fathers. It provides a proven structure for parents at any school to create a program that builds community and has widespread positive effect within the school culture.

As you can imagine, the content of ParentNet meetings varies widely depending on a child's grade. This year, parents with pre-schoolers compared notes on control issues, like food battles, tantrums, and small acts of defiance. Attend a high school meeting and you find those control issues still alive in topics such as curfews, driving, unchaperoned parties, drugs and alcohol. Elementary and middle-school school parents peered into the world of chat rooms and instant messaging, discovering ways of managing their computer savvy households. Other topics across the age groups included in-depth discussions of how to help students balance homework, activities, and family-time; the effects of bullying and how to work with schools to prevent it; and how to encourage a child's growing independence while maintaining parental expectations for behavior.

Whatever the topic or age of child, ParentNet seems to provide a needed lifeline for parents. A third-grade parent says, "It gives me a frame of reference for my parenting." There are few places where parents of similar-aged children in the same school environment can come together to discuss relevant issues, challenges, and values. Hearing diverse points of view helps you evaluate different parenting approaches. An 11th grade parent sums up a common sentiment, "I feel better knowing that I am not the only one trying to cope with the changing lives of our kids."

In addition to common-sense discussions, ParentNet meetings often generate ideas for new programs within a school. One school formed a diversity committee to encourage higher level parent participation from multi-cultural groups while another school helped create an after-school homework club staffed by parent volunteers.

Several features of ParentNet make it different from a typical support group. Summaries of meetings are shared with teachers and principals in an effort to let them know what is on the minds of parents. Often, they respond with new ideas or ways of working with students in the classroom. ParentNet meetings frequently create opportunities for further dialogue with school staff as parents attempt to solve problems or clarify issues that are relevant to both. At the Eastside Catholic School, parents discussed concerns about a school dance that was creating social stress on their kids. Following up with the principal to discuss their concerns, parents felt the school really listened to them and acted on their suggestions. When parents from the Eton School had concerns and questions about their children's homework, teachers held a special meeting to help educate parents on the type of homework given and how they could best support their child. Both parents and teachers felt that the meeting produced positive results.

A model of parents helping parents, ParentNet is flexible enough in its design to meet a variety of needs. When a 10th grade student at The Overlake School died this year of cancer, a ParentNet meeting was used to discuss how parents can help children cope with loss. With the help of two guest hospice workers, parents learned how to communicate with their kids about grief and how to help students express feelings of loss. Carol Yamada, parent facilitator for the meeting, said, "The parents in attendance felt they had taken a positive first step in the healing process by coming together, appreciating the good memories, putting voice to their feelings and concerns, and learning from each other. The meeting ended with a strong sense of the need to live each day to its fullest and to continue the dialogue with each other."

School and grade transitions are often traumatic for children and families, particularly when they are apprehensive or have unrealistic expectations. Many successful ParentNet meetings have addressed these issues by inviting parents whose children have already made the transition to dialog with those in the process. The Emily Dickinson Elementary School in Redmond, WA, one of the first public schools to adopt ParentNet, invited parents from the Evergreen Junior High School to meet with 6th grade parents. The conversation that took place helped answer many questions, both academic and social, about the transition to middle school. The last ParentNet meeting of each 12th grade class at The Overlake School includes parents who sent their kids off to college the previous year. Hearing stories of what one might expect, from roommates to homesickness to academic challenges, is a valued gift to parents.

“ParentNet is not an instant solution to the many challenges of raising children,” says co-founder, Marilyn Price-Mitchell, “it’s a process that begins with parents taking leadership and responsibility to bring about positive change in their school communities.” The research on parent involvement in education is indisputable; parents play a crucial role in the home and school environments by facilitating the development of intelligence, achievement, and competence in their children. With the recognized strong link between parent involvement and children’s success, it is vital that parents and schools build supportive and respectful communities where children can thrive.

The first and most important prerequisite to beginning ParentNet is a high parent-school commitment to the process. Next, it takes a few committed parents to lead the way. Leadership training is provided by the National ParentNet Association after which participants return to their schools to train committees of parent facilitators in each grade. Financial commitment for training, materials, and fees varies depending on the size of school and, in most schools, is funded by the PTA or other parent organization. The average annual cost per school is \$1000-1500. However, schools who cannot afford the program are encouraged to apply to the National ParentNet Association which is committed to assisting with scholarships and grants. For more information about the program, look at their comprehensive website at [www.ParentNetassociation.org](http://www.ParentNetassociation.org).