



ParentNet[®] at the Bear Creek School: An Interview with Karen Firminger

The Bear Creek School in Redmond, Washington, is a leader in classical education for Grades K-12 in the Pacific Northwest. Bear Creek offers a rigorous college preparatory curriculum from a Christian worldview. In 1999, ParentNet was brought to Bear Creek by the school's founder, Dr. Nancy Price, and by Linda Hernandez, who was then head of the upper school English department. The program started in grades 7 and 8, and now supports K-12 in various forms.

Parent Karen Firminger started her involvement with ParentNet at Bear Creek five years ago, and now serves as the ParentNet Chair. She talked with us about her successes and challenges with the program.

What are a few things you consider essential for ParentNet to firmly take root in a school?

Well, your principal or head of school must support the idea. The founder of our school saw ParentNet as a tool for parents to connect and our current Head of School, Patrick Carruth, understands the value of ParentNet. In fact, we meet monthly to ensure he is up to speed on issues and understands our goals. Most importantly, he ensures that the school is supporting our endeavors; this is critical as we are really working in partnership.

You also need a faculty advisor who understands the program and is available for meetings. As the program grows, a school may need more than one faculty advisor.

I believe you need some education specifically for teachers – in addition to administrators. There may be resistance from teachers who fear that ParentNet meetings are a place where parents will complain about them. I had face time with our teachers and was able to explain the overall concept – and how the ParentNet Contract prohibits discussion of any particular teacher. I feel this was a start for teachers to fully grasp the goals of ParentNet. Now, teachers approach me and thank me for what ParentNet is doing at Bear Creek.

Getting your parent-teacher group involved is also essential. At Bear Creek, we have a Parent Teacher Fellowship (PTF) and we also have a Booster Club. PTF has helped financially to bring in speakers. In fact, Bear Creek is one of ParentNet's founding schools, and for years our PTF paid the program fees, before it became a free resource. In my mind, the investment into parent education and community building is a good use of funds.

You mentioned the ParentNet contract. Can you tell us what you like about it? What other ParentNet tools do you find most useful?

I must confess that at first the ParentNet Contract struck me as a bit “too much.” I was concerned it would be restricting. But now I realize it is in fact liberating. Because of the contract, we can have highly effective meetings in which discussions are idea-oriented, and not people-oriented. No one is telling you how to parent. ParentNet is just offering ideas, support and resources. Parents can take home any ideas they want to apply and leave behind ideas that they just don’t agree with. And the contract’s privacy requirement of course offers a lot of reassurance to parents.

When I first started with ParentNet, the “Imagine” poem in the front of the parent handbook really ignited my passion. That was a big inspiration for my being trained as a facilitator.

Also, the “Harmful Behaviors vs. Helpful Behaviors” in the handbook is fantastic! When parents read that, it gives them an opportunity to be self-reflective. I strongly believe that this sort of reflection can change a school’s culture. I share this page at every ParentNet meeting, even at the large events.

One other tool I love is the parent feedback. We have modified the ParentNet surveys to meet our needs, and the results are always enlightening in one way or another.

A great part of Bear Creek’s success with ParentNet has been a willingness to do things differently, to think outside the box. Can you give us some examples?

Well, as is so often the case, it’s a “problem” that initially forces you to think outside the box. We had some grade-level meetings at which only seven to 10 parents would show up. That doesn’t mean the meetings weren’t successful – they were. But I really looked for ways to grow the program so that all parents of students in all grades could benefit.

Early on, I realized there were some topics being discussed at several grade levels – so why not get outside speakers to come in and speak on those topics? Our first outside speaker was a policewoman whose job is to pose as a predator on the Internet. She shared just how easy it is for a predator to find a child. Talk about an eye opening experience for parents! We also had one of our dads who is a computer expert share how to safeguard your computer from unwanted outside sources, including predators. This event, called “Child Safety on the Internet Highway,” was very well received and parents left with new insights and resources.

From there, we had Dr. Laura Kastner, who wrote “The Launching Years” as well as other books. She was our first evening speaker, and there was a real sense of community as we had over 60 parents in attendance. Our PTF paid her speaking fee.

To start the fall season off one year, we invited Dan Miller to share his inspirational story based on his book, “Living, Laughing and Loving Life.” Because Dan’s message was applicable to children as well as parents, he agreed to speak during the day to the students, and that evening he came back and spoke to parents at the ParentNet event. He addressed over 500 parents and students at the middle- and upper-school levels, and everyone was blessed by his message of perseverance, resilience and positive outlook.

Recently we hosted our first book club. There were five parenting-oriented books parents could choose from, and they had five weeks to read one of the books. Then we gathered at an evening event and broke into small groups and shared what we liked and what we didn’t like. Each group had a facilitator as well as a co-facilitator. Notes, in this case book reviews, were posted on the school’s ParentNet page so the community could benefit even if they didn’t attend.

In February of 2008 our PTF, Booster Club and ParentNet teamed up to host an “Art of Active Listening” seminar. The school supported and promoted the event. Over 100 people turned out for this morning seminar, where parents from the same grade level sat at tables with coffee and treats. Before the seminar began, they heard quick announcements from the various parent groups, and it was a great way for parents to learn what these groups were up to. So working jointly on big events – and cross-promoting one another’s efforts – may be the route our school takes in the future.

Though these events were not the “traditional” ParentNet meetings, I need to stress that all of these activities still operate under the ParentNet Contract. When we offer a speaker, for example, the audience members know that this is not about telling them how to parent their children. We just ask that they be open to another perspective.

One last out-of-the-box idea for us was to start the “Parent Perspective,” a ParentNet newsletter published twice a year. Our editor, Shannon DuBois, selects a parenting topic to tackle. She writes a main article and she interviews an outside source. We also provide follow-up on a previous event and advertise an upcoming event.

What advice can you give to schools who want to start the program, or who are trying to strengthen their existing program?

To get the program going, I think it really has to be just one or two highly committed parents with passion and vision and a very supportive teacher or counselor – or even better, a top administrator.

If I brought ParentNet to a new school I would evaluate a few possibilities. Should you start with the lowest grade and gradually build the program from there? Or do you start where parents start losing confidence in their parenting (or should I say when children start having a mind of their own?) at the 7th or 8th grade level. Or maybe an outside speaker is the best way to expose the school community to ParentNet and its potential benefits?

Once ParentNet is going in a school, it’s important to make recruiting and training of facilitators a priority. It’s hard to put on large events while building and maintaining a trained facilitator base, so get to know your parents and understand their gifts.

I’ve delegated somewhat, like finding a parent who is a writer to serve as newsletter editor, an IT-savvy parent who is managing the ParentNet portion of the Bear Creek website, and a “Creative Memories” scrap-booking parent who takes photos at the events and displays posters of our community-wide events. I really try to recruit volunteers based on their gifts.

And of course, the trained ParentNet facilitators are the ones who make the program work. Whether it’s greeting at our big events, preparing coffee and treats, or facilitating a small group – no matter what the task, the facilitators are the backbone of ParentNet!

You also need to publicize your events in a variety of ways, not just one format. So advertise it in the school newsletter, on outdoor posters, on reader boards, through personal invitations, in e-mail reminders and by phoning. It’s amazing the different forms of communications you have to use to raise everyone’s awareness. One secret to share: Send out a final e-mail reminder a day or two prior to the meeting. It works best if it is sent on the school’s e-mail system, too. Again, be creative: Bear Creek’s ParentNet volunteers have been known to walk the carpool line handing out reminder fliers and candy!

Also, I really believe that food can be a key to networking and enticing parents to stay after a community-wide event. We try to honor our parents with a beautifully set table of fresh flowers and special foods like strawberries dipped in chocolate! At our small grade level meetings, we try to offer coffee and simple treats.

You must always, always respect the authority of your administration and your staff, and get their approval and buy-in with what you are doing. And the fact that ParentNet is separate from the school administration is a good thing. Through ParentNet, you can tackle some subjects that the school itself might not be able to.

Finally, expect that not everything is going to work. You're going to get some doors closed on you, and you can't satisfy all parents' needs at the same time. We had one speaker where the feedback forms revealed that some parents really liked him and a few really did not. No matter – having the feedback form allows us to grow and understand what works and what doesn't. We'll move on, and continue to take risks!

What has surprised you about ParentNet at Bear Creek?

It is so affirming knowing that we are not alone in our parenting. Meeting other parents and hearing their insight is so valuable. No matter if we agree or disagree with their viewpoint, we can still honor each other by actively listening. It's a nice surprise to see how much the community desires and needs this type of connection.

I think the best surprise has been finding out that I'm in community with other parents who are willing to grow not only as parents, but also as people. Being teachable parents can only benefit our children and our school!

Information about ParentNet can be found at www.parentinvolvementmatters.org. Do you have more questions for Karen Firminger? You may contact her at karenfirminger@hotmail.com. You may also visit The Bear Creek School's ParentNet site at www.tbcs.org/page.cfm?p=100

*Interview conducted by Barbara Edmondson
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