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## Hanging a safety net for parents

By DEE AXELROD/ Staff Writer

Marilyn Price-Mitchell had her hands full after her husband died when their daughter was 3-years old.

Busy with the demands of single-parenthood, she found herself parenting a child with problems no one could identify definitively, although the girl qualified for the Individual Education Plan that is the hallmark of special education.

The schools seemed to point a finger at her parenting. Price-Mitchell had her own beef with the schools. No one was communicating very successfully.

"The way I was used to getting things done in the business world often butted heads with teachers or administrators who were very defensive and thought they knew more about my child than I did," she said.

Price-Mitchell decided to take what she'd learned personally and professionally from a high-profile career doing organizational and management training for Fortune 500 companies to create a structure to help people talk to each other.

With Susan Grijalva, she applied her speciality in organizational design to co-found ParentNet, aimed at fostering parent-school and parent-to-parent communication, in 1996. The first ParentNet site was the Overlake School, a private, independent school in Redmond, Washington.

ParentNet will be launched at four Bainbridge public and private schools in October, marking the first time the program – now in place at 20 elementary schools in Washington, Florida, Oregon, Kansas and California – has been tried at a large, public middle or high school. Participating schools will include Sakai Intermediate School, Hyla Middle School, the Island School and Bainbridge High School, which will offer the program to parents of ninth-graders.

"I am extremely excited to be working with our PTSO to bring ParentNet to Bainbridge High School," BHS Principal Brent Peterson said in a statement announcing the program launch. "Now more than ever, parents need support and encouragement in their efforts to connect with one another."

Not exactly a program, a definition that implies a specific message to be imparted, ParentNet is a "structure that allows parents to come together in a safe place." As fundamental and obvious



Courtesy photo

**ParentNet co-founder Marilyn Price-Mitchell, BHS ParentNet co-chair Teri Jellad and Sakai ParentNet co-chair Susan Wing.**

as that might seem, the safe space isn't always a given in the sometimes emotion-fraught and frustrating gap between schools and parents, Price-Mitchell points out.

One of the foundations of the safe space is the ParentNet contract. The document that specifies respect for diversity, emphasis on first-person knowledge rather than hearsay, preservation of confidentiality and a generally positive tone is a cornerstone, Price-Mitchell says.

"We don't talk about individual teachers or administrators or curriculum issues," Price-Mitchell said. "We're here to be better parents."

## **New liaisons**

ParentNet also bridges the school-parent gap with trained "school liaisons."

"A lot of the time, when parents get together just with other parents, there tend to be reactive parents," Price-Mitchell said, "parents who, if they're angry about something that goes on in the schools, they'll seek out other parents to collude with them to make something happen.

"So, over the years, parents and schools have grown apart because administrators are afraid."

But faculty liaisons and parent leaders who receive ParentNet training learn to facilitate these meetings and to keep people "on the contract," Price-Mitchell says, to "keep it safe," and to help the parents navigate the school culture, when there's that grey area between parenting and school.

If, for example, a student is having an issue with a teacher, the liaison may suggest the right route to find redress.

"A lot of times parents don't know what the right route is," Price-Mitchell said. "I'd been in the business world lots and lots of years, and when I was trying to navigate the culture of a school as a parent it was 'oh my goodness. This is so different from what I'm used to.'"

In several grade-level meetings throughout the school year where parents talk and share strategies, liaisons reinforce "helpful" behaviors like openness that tend to build engagement and collaboration and discourage "harmful" behaviors like blaming, competition, judgments and apathy.

Bainbridge teachers and parents will receive the first training Oct. 16, with a second session slated for mid-November.

"We're taking some baby steps," Price-Mitchell said. "We're pioneering the fact that parents and parents and schools can work together and collaborate to make things better. I wanted a program that had the potential to change the culture of a school.

"The schools that have had this now for more than five years, if you talk to the principals, they'll say it absolutely has."

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Interested parents, teachers and school administrators are invited to attend ParentNet workshops from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 16 at Sakai Intermediate School or 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Nov. 6 at Bainbridge High School. Register online at [www.parentnetassociation.org](http://www.parentnetassociation.org) or call 842-4331.

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