

PARENT RESOURCE HANDBOOK

Fernway Elementary School Shaker Heights, Ohio

Fernway Elementary is a 350 student K-4 school in the Shaker Heights City School District. Prior to the 1998-99 school year, school and district policies, curricula, and volunteer information were developed and distributed separately. The effectiveness of these documents depended in large part on the organizational skills of individual families, i.e., the papers were disposed of, lost, or kept in various places. Consequently, the administration, teachers, and PTO leaders often were asked procedural, curricular, and informational questions that indicated a lack of familiarity with the documents previously sent home. It was felt that parents who were less involved in school activities were less likely than active parents to have important information about the school.

The Partnership Schools Committee (staff and parents) and the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) set improved communication (Type 2 involvement) as one of their goals for the 1998-99 school year. It was believed that if families were more aware of school policies, individual grade curricula, and volunteer opportunities, they would have a better foundation upon which to build their child's school success.

A three-ring binder format was chosen as a way to provide a comprehensive informational tool to each Fernway family. One binder was prepared for each family (regardless of the number of children enrolled in the school), to be kept during their tenure at Fernway School.

The principal, teachers, and PTO volunteers worked together to design the concept and contents of the binder called, *The Fernway Elementary School Parent Resource Handbook*. Each binder has a custom designed label on the front with the title and school logo (three hands reaching toward a star representing the partnership of parents, students, and staff working towards excellence), an introductory letter written by the principal and the PTO president, and eleven tabbed sections. The tabbed sections include:

1. District Handbook: a copy of the *Shaker Heights Elementary School Handbook* which outlines district-wide procedures and policies.
2. Fernway School Calendar: a listing of all important dates specific to Fernway School, as well as district dates affecting Fernway School. Previously, parents received this comprehensive information only if they purchased a PTO calendar.

3. General Information: school policies as they relate to Fernway School (i.e., bus procedures, drop off and pick up protocol, sick child procedures), a listing and description of the library, music, physical education and art programs, and a listing of the skills-support personnel and their functions. There is also a sample "Permission for Medication" form in this section.
4. Health and Safety: information from the school nurse such as advice on how to create a healthy learning environment at home, and how to make the transition to school every day as easy as possible. This section also includes guidelines to use when deciding whether to keep a sick child home.
5. PTO/Volunteer Information: a description of PTO functions as well as the "Fernway Volunteer Brochure," a comprehensive listing of volunteer opportunities including the type of help and the estimated amount of time required for each volunteer opportunity that enables parents to choose a volunteer activity to suit their talents and time constraints.
6. Miscellaneous: This section was left empty so families can add information sent home by teachers.
7. Individual Grade Curricula: The next five sections are tabbed for curriculum information specific to each grade level (K-4). This information was compiled by the teachers for each grade and includes goals and expectations for the year, as well as suggestions on how parents can help their child in the learning process. This was the first year that a uniform grade level curriculum was given to each family.

The *Handbook* has been designed to be updated annually. Each family will receive the curriculum for their child's new grade and any updated school and PTO information.

The *Handbooks* were distributed at the school's Curriculum Nights which were held for each grade at the beginning of the school year. Curriculum Nights are attended by nearly all of the families at Fernway School, so it was a good time to distribute the binders. The principal and the PTO president introduced and explained the *Handbooks* to the parents. Teachers gave a copy of the *Handbook* to each family when they met together in the classrooms. Each *Handbook* was labeled with the names of all of the children in that family attending Fernway School and given to the family at the first Curriculum Night attended. Teachers gave parents the curriculum information for each additional child in the family attending Fernway School at their Curriculum Night and reviewed how to add the information to the family's *Handbook*. Teachers gave the *Handbook* to the few families not attending Curriculum Night at conference time.

A formal assessment has not been done. However, informally, the *Handbook* appears to be a success. The school secretary reported a significant decrease in the number of procedure-related questions that were asked during the school year. The principal, staff, and PTO leaders reported that having a comprehensive notebook made it easier to answer parent questions. Also, the message that “all families are important” seemed to be conveyed not only by the *Handbook* itself, but by the distribution method. Assurance that all families were provided with the same resources was helpful since in previous years, “backpack express” delivery had often proven to be unreliable!

Verbal comments from families have been positive. The comprehensive nature of the *Handbook* was appreciated since all pertinent information about the school and classroom can be kept in one central location. Also, the development of the *Handbook* inspired the development and organization of information not previously given to families. Other elementary schools in the district are planning to implement the handbook concept.

A binder, one set of 8 tab indices, one set of 5 tab indices, and a custom designed label for each binder cost approximately \$4.00 per *Handbook*. The PTO and the school shared the cost. Volunteers were recruited to assemble the initial distribution. Numerous volunteer hours were required this year in order to design and implement the *Handbook*. However, in future years only distribution to new families and updating older *Handbooks* will be needed.

We will continue to encourage use of the *Handbook* by promotion in the Friday newsletter and verbal encouragement from the principal, staff, and PTO volunteers. Staff will be encouraged to send home periodic updates and supplements to be added to the *Handbook* in order to keep it an active tool. We also established a PTO volunteer position to maintain the *Handbooks* in future years.

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