
HAMILTON HELPERS PROGRAM

Hamilton Elementary School

Sanford, Florida

Hamilton Elementary Cluster Magnet School for Communications through Advanced Technology educates over seven hundred students each year. Eighty-one percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and we are considered an “at-risk” school. In order to improve the students’ educational performance, we have instituted a number of innovative programs. The Florida Department of Education recently selected Hamilton Elementary as a regional winner of the Family Involvement Award. Our Hamilton Helpers program was presented at the Florida PTA Leadership Conference in July.

The Hamilton Helpers program promotes four goals: 1) to increase the number of parents/guardians who participate in school-related activities; 2) to provide parents/guardians with information on school and community resources, student health, and education; 3) to offer parents/guardians training in the areas of parenting skills, reading, and technology; and 4) to provide a support network for parents/guardians so that they can succeed in supporting and encouraging their students’ education.

Hamilton’s Action Team created many tools to facilitate communication within the school and between the school and families in order to encourage parents/guardians to become involved in the Hamilton Helpers program. For this first program year, we devoted a lot of time to establishing effective lines of communication.

At the beginning of the school year, the Action Team conducted a Hamilton Helpers orientation meeting for the faculty. We gave each teacher a folder containing a letter of support from our principal; an overview of the entire program; a sample recruitment script (for teachers to use when calling parents to join the program); a Parent Commitment form (to notify the Action Team of the parents/guardians interested in Hamilton Helpers); a sample Hamilton Helpers Agreement (to formalize the commitment between the parent/guardian, student, teacher, and principal); and a September Communication Log (for teachers to record contacts with Helpers). Our principal emphasized her commitment to the program and explained that the program is a part of our School Improvement Plan and, therefore, mandatory for all staff.

The Action Team created several promotional tools. A Hamilton Helpers brochure explained, “Who are Hamilton Helpers,” “What do Hamilton Helpers do,” and “Who are the Action Team members and how do I contact them.” These colorful bi-fold brochures have been used at all Hamilton Helpers meetings to help family members understand the program. A bimonthly Hamilton Helpers newsletter, *Helping Hands*, informs everyone of Helpers’ activities, volunteer opportunities at the school, and Helpers’ suggestions, and responses to surveys. We also distribute goody bags to Helpers on a monthly basis. The bags contain information on parenting, reading, technology, health and community resources, as well as coupons, bookmarks, and other “goodies.”

We held four Hamilton Helpers meetings during the school year. Parents/guardians participated in training classes on technology and education, the Success for All reading program, and parent survival tips. We provided dinner, babysitting, and entertainment. Families communicated their needs and concerns through surveys and small group discussions. The meetings’ sign-in sheets included 118 signatures of participating parents/guardians.

The most impressive data which substantiates the effect of Hamilton Helpers is our PTA membership increased from 44 members during the 1998-1999 school year to 201 members this year—a 219% increase. Our SWISH (fluoride treatment) program is now completely manned by Hamilton Helpers. Helpers enthusiastically support Hamilton’s faculty and administration. Families feel their input is valued and that the students are the focus at our school. Many Helpers assert that their children are taught by the very best teachers. According to one family member, “The positive attitude of the staff and encouragement of the children make the children successful. My child loves to go to school!”

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