
FATHERHOOD INVOLVEMENT

Memphis City School District

Memphis, Tennessee

The mission of Memphis City schools is to prepare all children to be successful citizens in the 21st century.

One of the district's strategic goals is to strengthen the family-school-community partnership to support the academic, vocational, social, and emotional development of all students. In observing several parents' meetings throughout a school year, the district documented a lack of male participation and began plans to get men involved in the educational process. The district cited research that indicates that self-esteem and grades increase with father involvement. Thus, the district's emphasis on fatherhood involvement would contribute to its strategic goal to support academic achievement for all students.

While attending a Regional Department of Education Conference in Kentucky, a Memphis district facilitator met Jim Moore, founder of Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads Of Great Students). Moore founded the Watch D.O.G.S. program in response to the Jonesboro, Arkansas, shooting in 1998. It is presently in 16 states and has been endorsed by the National Center for Fathering and the Urban Fatherhood Initiative. Moore's passion for fatherhood involvement inspired the Memphis district facilitator to bring the program concept to the Memphis Title I Parent Advisory Council. The council approved implementation of the program for the 2000-

2001 school year. The district convened a meeting with the principals to introduce the program. Approximately 40 schools initially implemented the program. Now, the program has expanded to about 70 Watch D.O.G.S. schools, and Memphis is one of its model program sites.

Each school was asked to identify a father representative to serve as the school's coordinator. These fathers were trained on the Watch D.O.G.S. program. Then, each school hosted a pizza night, which served as a recruiting tool to help the coordinators enlist more fathers to assist at the school. Average attendance at a pizza night was approximately 200 people. The schools sent out fliers asking fathers and their children to come to the school for pizza and a meeting. Mr. Moore has attended every pizza night for the past three years inspiring the fathers to be involved in their children's education.

At the pizza night, we introduce the program and sign up fathers for the days and times they will work at the school. A majority of children can go the entire day without a male presence. Therefore, we ask our fathers to serve as a community of fathers in roles such as mentors. Children get the opportunity to see and communicate with positive male role models. In addition, our fathers provide security as extra eyes and ears for the school.

One of the biggest boosts to the program has been that the Title I District Advisory Council strongly endorsed the program and has approved the program for the Title I Center for Parental Involvement action plan for the past three years. Furthermore, the program has been financially supported by the Memphis Grizzlies (NBA basketball team). The Grizzlies sponsored additional training for fathers on drug awareness, gang awareness, traffic control, and conflict resolution. The team has also donated tickets as incentives for our fathers.

The Watch D.O.G.S. program is free. However, we used Title I funds to sponsor lunches to train fathers initially. We have received donations from Papa Johns, Pizza Hut, and Domino's to provide pizza for the pizza nights. We also used our funds to purchase T-shirts for all school coordinators. The program cost a total of \$1000.

To make the Watch D.O.G.S. program a success, we first had to secure buy-in of the principals. We ensured them that this was not another program they had to implement and monitor; the fathers coordinate this program. The fathers only meet with the principal or designee in the morning to receive school expectations and rules. We recently surveyed principals and asked them how effective was the program and did it serve its purpose. We received overwhelming positive responses.

Follow through has been essential. The district provides consistent training and monitoring for fathers and school personnel. We meet and conduct trainings on a quarterly

basis. We have even held trainings on weekends. Also, we have emphasized providing great customer service to our schools. In some cases, we walked schools through the program until it became self-sustaining.

The district benefits from the program because men are getting involved in the educational process to help children meet academic standards and assessments. Superintendent Johnnie B. Watson commented, "I have never seen this many men in one place to support education." Teachers are enthused because the fathers participate in daily school activities as volunteers, mentors, and security.

We will continue to implement the program for the 2003-2004 school year and increase the number of Watch D.O.G.S schools. In August 2003, we will sponsor a Fatherhood Conference in conjunction with Head Start. We want to educate and train fathers at the early stages of fatherhood about being involved in education. We will continue our partnership with the Memphis Grizzlies and local sport franchises. Additionally, we will increase partnerships with social agencies to provide medical, social, and educational resources.

Trevor Thompson, District Contact
(901) 775-7493
thompsonst@mcsk12.net