

Parent Learning Walk

*Phalen Lake Elementary School
St. Paul, Minnesota*

On National Parent Involvement Day, Phalen Lake Elementary School invited parents and community members to take a Learning Walk. More than 90 adults accepted the invitation, issued in English, Hmong, and Spanish, to learn more about what their children do everyday and why.

With the principal in the lead, the walk began in the kindergarten hallway. The principal called the group's attention to examples of student work that teachers had posted outside their classrooms. She talked about what is expected of students, what is contained in the curriculum and what the students are learning with each activity on display. "I thought these were just pictures on the wall. I didn't know the children were learning so much," said one parent.

Interpreters assisted Hmong and Latino parents. The activity was particularly important at Phalen Lake because the school uses the Core Knowledge Curriculum, which focuses on specific knowledge that the curriculum creators believe every educated person should know.

Parents had the opportunity to leaf through books to compare the work with the posted standards. School staff also helped parents understand the value of homework and its connection to school work, as some parents had commented at conferences that they did not understand the purpose of some homework assignments.

As the tour progressed through the grades, parents could compare and contrast students' work at different grade levels. For example, they compared the memoirs written by third graders with those of fifth graders and saw clear evidence of skill growth. Parents also gained an understanding of the way each year's Core Knowledge builds on prior knowledge. In addition to student work, teachers posted the

academic standards, work that illustrated those standards and evidence of student self-evaluation and teacher feedback.

The principal brought this idea to the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) after school staff participated in similar walks for purposes of professional development. The ATP sponsored the walk because it recognized the need to strengthen parents' understanding of what their children are doing at school. Teachers promoted parent participation through fliers in three languages and personal contact.

Parent Involvement Day included other activities: A performance of the biographical play "Black Eagle" by Mixed Blood Theater; a fifth-grade presentation of a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "What is your life's blueprint?" and an invitation for parents to visit their children's classroom for a Valentine activity. Parents also were invited to have breakfast or lunch with their children. The Learning Walk was scheduled several times during the day to accommodate different schedules.

One of the organizers called the feedback "overwhelmingly positive." "It was good to see so many parents actually paying attention to the student work displayed," said a teacher.

Buoyed by its first experience, Phalen Lake will schedule more learning walks – perhaps in tandem with other events to increase participation and raise parents' awareness of an activity that keeps them in step with their children's school life.

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