

# Project Reach

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*Barnett Shoals Elementary School  
Athens, Georgia*

**B**arnett Shoals Elementary School is a place that solves challenges. When communication between the school and its families lagged and test scores sagged, the teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals and the school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP) created Project Reach. When the first Project Reach community meeting drew only four parents, the organizing committee did not quit. By the third meeting of the year, almost every seat was filled with more than 100 parents, students, school staff members and other family members.

"The program was a success on many levels: participation, enthusiasm, content presented, and goodwill exchanged among school, home, and community," said a teacher involved in Project Reach.

The school is in an economically-stressed community. More than 60 percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. The teachers recognized the need for more frequent and open dialogue between the school and its families. They also realized that some parents had had negative experiences when they went to school and did not see the school as a friendly environment.

Project Reach addressed these issues. The heart of the project was three community meetings, held away from school, where school staff could share information and listen to what parents had on their minds.

The Reach Committee identified some of the challenges to parent involvement. They moved a presentation about the school curriculum, programs, and services to a local church. The meeting included a casual dinner and door prizes, as well as the information session. Four parents, five church members and about a dozen school and ATP staff members attended.

"We were encouraged that four people attended and we went to work to figure out what we learned and how we could take this information and build on it," said a committee

member. Attendance increased markedly to 18 parents and 25 students at the second meeting, when the school's step team performed and, again, dinner was provided. The third meeting of the year was held in a community center and 36 parents and 54 students attended—so many that ATP members ran out of seats for them.

The ATP revamped the presentations to encourage more audience participation, setting up a Jeopardy-style game with remote control clickers as part of a presentation on the state's achievement tests. The third evening included pizza and beverages, another step-team performance, and a presentation on the county's promotion and retention policy tied to state testing.

Buoyed by this success, "we feel that Project Reach has the possibility of creating real change in our school community," commented a teacher.

Next year the committee will work with parents, students, and community members to identify topics they would like addressed at Project Reach meetings, and will encourage other school clubs and groups to perform. Because some parents face transportation problems, the principal has decided to hold half of next year's PTO meetings at the community center where this year's turnout was so encouraging.

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