

New Parent Orientation

*Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center
Peoria, Illinois*

Everyone knows how tough the first day of school can be, especially for brand new students! But many forget how hard that same experience—filled with required forms, unfamiliar bus routes, and complicated school calendars—can be on parents. The administrators at Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center haven't forgotten. At their New Parent Orientation event, they guide parents through a host of potentially confusing activities, making sure they know the ropes before their children start school.

Members of the school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP), who developed the orientation, help fulfill a key goal in the school's improvement plan—to empower parents to be involved. The school builds on the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.” Accordingly, it is important for the school to increase the ranks of supportive parents. First, though, they knew that parents need a primer with good, basic information about their children's education.

The school prepares for the event by sending out letters to the parents of every newly enrolled student. Teachers also send notes home with siblings reminding parents about the event. Making the orientation mandatory helps to ensure that *all* parents receive vital information about their children's success in school. In fact, registration is not considered complete unless the parent has attended the orientation session.

In 07-08, a few days before classes started, about 100 parents and 50 teachers gathered at the school for the meeting. Staff members guided them through the paperwork required to complete their child's registration. Parents then attended a presentation about the school's program and education philosophy. At the end of the session, parents visited their child's future classroom. Teachers answered any questions the new parents had and introduced the day-to-day classroom routines.

Valeska Hinton boasts excellent parent involvement! However, every activity has its challenges. One challenge that the school faced with the New Parent Orientation was making the program inviting and motivational not only for parents, but for staff as well. The school jumped this hurdle by having each teacher plan an enjoyable introductory activity for the parents of their future students. Staff members also ensure that parents feel welcome by providing both verbal and written information in friendly, non-jargon-laden terms.

Valeska Hinton's hard work is paying off! Last year, the event was more popular than ever. “This gets better and better every year,” one person said.

The orientation cost \$300 to produce. The price tag covered printable items, child-care, and anything that teachers needed for their classroom presentations. The school used Parent Involvement Funds to cover the expenses. The school plans to continue the practice every year, and they are working on improving the orientation for returning parents.

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