Administrator Interview: The Importance of Families and Diversity

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Knowing the importance of parent involvement with their children’s learning in early childhood education, many preschools strive to have parents in the classroom, come to meetings and events for the school, and work with the teachers on helping their children learn. At the Arlitt Child and Family Research and Education Center (Arlitt), administrators and teachers work very closely with parents. The school is located on the University of Cincinnati’s (UC) campus and, therefore, serves the diverse population of Cincinnati and UC. Arlitt also includes a Head Start program, which is a program that helps provide every child with an education and supports parents and families in their goals for their children’s education. I interviewed Mary Beth Wright, the Director of Children’s Programs at Arlitt, about diversity at the school, the importance of families, parent classroom involvement, and programs that are needed to help families and children in their goals for education.

Many families value diversity, and Arlitt is a very diverse school. Some students at Arlitt are funded by Head Start and others pay a private tuition, which, Wright says, “provides diversity in socioeconomic status” (personal communication, September 6, 2013). The school also has many children of international professors and students, a growing Hispanic population, and is consider, by Wright, to be “very ethnically diverse.” Diversity, in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and culture, is incredibly important in the classrooms of young children, as Donna Couchenour and Kent Chrisman (2011) mention, “…understanding diversity in early childhood education is to provide an inclusive environment…each child and family can feel a sense of belonging, regardless of commonalities or differences that exist between them and others in the group” (p. 49). By have such a diverse range of students, the Arlitt Center encourages this inclusive environment and becomes a wonderful school for numerous types of families.

At Arlitt, the educators and administrators understand the importance of family in teaching young children. Wright refers to the parents of the children as the children’s first teachers, mirroring what Couchenour and Chrisman write about families being “children’s first teachers and primary nurturers” (p. 270). When asked about the overall importance of families in education, Wright responds, “Schools can make positive or negative impacts on children’s lives, but without the support of someone in the home it is very difficult to succeed.” And just as children need their family’s support to succeed, so the family needs the schools support to help teach the child, as Tammy L. Mann (2000) says, “The business of supporting parents in their efforts to nurture and support their children is serious” (p. 8). With parents and families also being the people that best know the child, Wright knows that having parents in involved in the child’s education is paramount.

Getting parents involved directly with the school and the classroom is vital, as Wright mentions that parental involvement increases positive child outcomes and successes in school. Arlitt has family advocates as part of its Head Start Program; the advocates help families create goals and help them achieve these goals. Parents are even involved with the Head Start program governance and, as such, make decisions about the staff, program operation and policies, and approve budgets (among other things). Wright lists over ten ways the teachers and staff communicate with the parents, including calls home, face-to-face interactions, and even a Facebook page. By opening up different methods of conversation with parents and allowing them to make some decisions, Wright matches one of the necessities of being a educational profession, as “…education professionals must work with families and communities through such mechanisms as two-way communication and shared decision making” (Couchenour & Chrisman, p. 4). Currently, Wright is working on creating volunteer sub-committees made up of parents and continues to strive for more parent involvement in the classroom.

Some areas of need that mentioned in the interview were funding for preschool, some transportation for going to and returning from school, and affordable childcare. For the tuition of preschool, many parents receive funding from Head Start (as mentioned earlier), but some parents may be in the position where they do not qualify for Head Start funding but cannot afford to pay the private tuition. As for transportation, some parents may not own a car or have the time to drop their children off at school and, as such, there can be difficulties in having the children attend or safely get to preschool. Affordable childcare was the need most stressed by Wright as quality childcare is expensive, but to lower the tuition would mean the childcare facility would have to lower its quality.

An advocacy project that could be made for theses three needs is a discount system connected with parent involvement. When parents volunteer at or take on a responsibility for the school, they receive a certain amount of money off of their tuition. Before parents can fully volunteer in the classroom, they may have to receive some training in working with children and some general guidelines for appropriate behavior in the classroom. Picking up and brining home other children to and from school could count as volunteering and, therefore, could help solve the problem of transportation and tuition costs. Parents who do not necessarily have the time to help at school could help plan projects or events to reduce their tuition costs. There would, of course, have to be a limit to how much money comes off of tuition as not all costs can be subsidized by parent involvement and volunteering. All involvement would be well documented and the amount discounted would come off the next time a tuition check is due.

While the advocacy project could be hard to implement in schools right away, any other ways of encouraging family involvement would benefit schools. Family is crucial to the development of children and, as such, families should be seen as crucial to the school environment. Mary Beth Wright and the Arlitt Center certainly encourage not only family involvement, but also allow some parental say and control in the goings-on of the school. With both a diverse setting and students and staff, Arlitt promotes education about different cultures and families. By keeping a constant flow of communication between the parents and the school, the teachers and staff at Arlitt help give the school an open and accepting environment, where every parent’s thoughts and values are respected and understood. There cannot be a school without families, so there should always be families involved with the schooling.

References

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