

# Education Comes Home

*By Chris Bouneff*

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**T**he perception is pervasive: Education is in crisis. A new age is needed. Teachers and schools must change. Broad experiments with charter schools and vouchers are necessary. National testing may become a requirement.

The traditional role that educators filled — teaching children — has expanded to include social and economic issues.

With this sea of change, you don't hear much about parents. Schools and educators are being called upon to evolve. Should parents also undergo a metamorphosis?

In many ways, they already have, and that's part of the challenge facing schools today.

Schools once taught children from two-parent homes in which one parent stayed home, engaged the kids, read to them, and helped them with their homework until the algebra

grew too complicated.

But economic evolution makes today's battle a survival of the fittest. And to be fit, both parents often have to work full time. Throw social evolution into the mix with its higher divorce rate, and you have a blossoming number of single-parent households that have no choice — they have to work, full time, to make ends meet.

The victim in all this is time, parents and educators say. Time with children, time helping with homework, time for one-on-one activities. And unless there's a change on the social and economic fronts, it's up to schools, again, to adapt.

But educators want parents to come along for this ride because the research is undisputed: Children are more likely to succeed in school if their parents are active in their education. "Involving parents will make a difference," says John Jensen, a Boise State University secondary education professor and director of the Center for Multicultural and Educational Opportunities. "Schools have to find a way to make ... parents feel school is accessible."

But how do you increase participation when parents don't have the time to volunteer at school or join a parent-teacher organization?

It takes some innovation from a system that once erected a barrier between home and school, when the only communication with parents was a quarterly report card or a call from the principal when a child misbehaved. Now, teachers are beginning to look at parents as partners — as an educational aide with tremendous influence over children.

If a parent believes school is important, the reasoning goes, then a child will believe the same. "It's amazing the power parents have and the resource we have available to tap into," says Judy Cline, a first-grade teacher at McKinley Elementary School in Boise.

Cline, who has taught for nine years, addressed the problem as an education master's candidate at Boise State. For her final project, she developed a home writing program that brought parent and child together — a form

of family homework. Families can put as little as 10 minutes into daily assignments, but the tasks guarantee that parents and children sit down, interact and talk.

Parents and children read stories, draw pictures and practice writing, even writing letters to each other. Each activity reinforces a writing skill, such as organization or word choice, that Cline teaches in class.

The program is too new to quantify its advantages, but Cline says children who

children's education.

As families changed and time became more scarce, families lost their ability to involve themselves through traditional means, Milton says. She sends home one packet a week that includes a storybook and a math-related game that parent and child play together, helping parents to stay active and show their children that school matters.

"I feel I'm also involved in parent education," says Milton, who now teaches first grade at Linder Elementary School in Meridian. "Parents want to help their children, but they don't know what to do. Helping your child at home is the most important thing you can do for your child's development."

One of Milton's parents, Juli Nall, says the games are not only fun for her daughter, but they bring mother and daughter together. And as a single mother of two, sometimes she struggles to find time.

"It makes me have to sit down with her," Nall says. "I sit down with her, and it's good one-on-one. And it tells me the level she's learning at."

would never be excited by writing glow with pride when they read their parents' letters in class.

"When you ask parents to model something, you have to ask how much modeling do we really do? How often do we sit down ... to write?" Cline asks. "The advantage of this program is that parents come along with us. This is where we can tap into the parent to complement what's done in school."

Another BSU education graduate student, Linda Milton, developed a series of home math games while teaching at Star Elementary School because parents asked her what they could do to stay involved with their

*Chess is one way John Thiel spends time with his son Atticus, a first-grader at Adams Elementary in Boise.*

**'We seem to have to remember why we're here — to educate children. And the first educator is the parent.'**

Jensen says many educators now recognize that parents are an important part of the equation. And more and more educators are trying to bring parents into the fold.

The efforts are more advanced at the elementary levels, especially among early childhood educators from Boise State, who are required to take a class focused on parent participation.

But programs are active at the middle and high school levels, as well. Teachers send home regular notes, require parents to sign homework logs for their children, and hold more teacher/parent conferences at night to accommodate working parents.

At Franklin Elementary in Boise, the school has a regular support group where parents can share their experiences over donuts and coffee. And for families in need, who educators often overlook, the school offers clothes, food and immunization fairs. Jensen says some resistance remains, however, as teachers cling to the idea that they are the education experts and the parents are just parents. Jensen says he experienced such treatment firsthand when teachers at his older daughter's school dismissed his questions until they learned he was a profes-



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sional educator. Only then did they take him seriously.

Teachers and administrators have to encourage parents to get involved, Jensen says, and teachers have to do more than send a note home with children when they misbehave.

Call with praise as well as punishment, he advises teachers, and make home visits so you understand the homes from which your students come.

"I don't know why educators have had a problem with parental involvement," he says. "We seem to have to remember why we're here — to educate children. And the first educator is the parent."

But Jensen and other educators also realize that homework packets and more phone calls can't replace traditional parenting. Molding a good student also takes more effort at home.

Former BSU students Sandi and John Thiel of Boise decided they would make a commitment to their young son and daughter, who are in first grade and kindergarten, respectively. Sandi found a part-time job as a cartographer with the state so that she could spend more time with the children. She reads to the pair for at least 30 minutes each night; John, a full-time attorney, practices chess with his son, who regularly beats his mom and challenges his dad at the complex game.

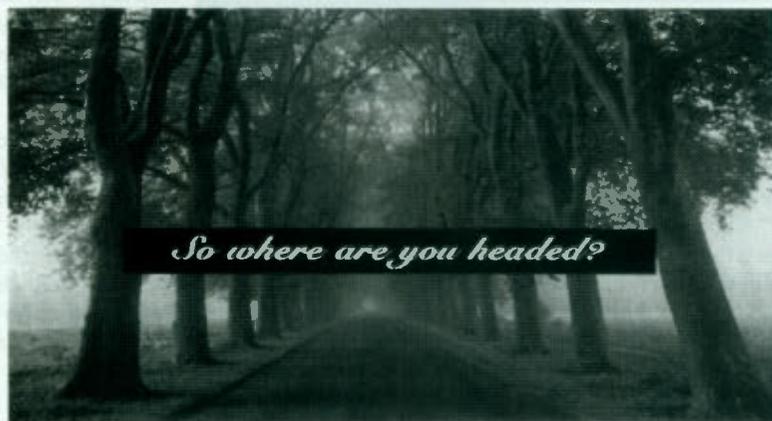
"I like the fact one of the parents is home," John Thiel says. "It's important to have that contact."

Staying home is easier for someone in a two-parent, middle-class family. As a single mother, Nall works full time and can't afford to drop to part time, so she makes time for her two children even on hectic days. She turns off the TV and reads to her children, and she arranged through her work to volunteer at Linder Elementary one day a month. "Being a single parent is tough enough, but I want them to achieve," Nall says. "If I stay involved in their school, that helps them love their school."

Even Jensen says he's rearranged his life to spend more time with his 13-year-old son. He comes to work at 8:30 each morning instead of 8 so that he can drive his son to school and gain personal time.

And he tries to make time for his son even when it would be easier to relax than talk during that free five or 10 minutes each night.

"It's important in today's society that parents find some time to talk with their kids and to share some insight into their values and why they think those values are important," Jensen says. Because, in the end, schools can modernize and teachers can become more proactive. But it's still old-fashioned parenting that has the greatest influence. □



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