

The Middle School Faculty Partners with Parents for Student Success

by Debbie Murray

As middle school students begin to take ownership of their learning, their parents experience a gradual release of responsibility. At the same time, middle school teachers are working closely with students to provide them with the tools and strategies they need to become successful students and life-long learners. While parents may not be directly involved in their children's instruction, they do need to be well-informed about their learning styles and approaches to learning as their children move toward transitioning to their next school. In an effort to increase communication and help parents understand their children in order to best support them moving forward, the middle school faculty formally introduced "Partnering with Parents for Student Success" at the start of the school year.

Partnering with Parents for Student Success was designed as a three-part plan, to:

- (1) gather information from parents about their goals for their child;
- (2) provide clarity about what teachers know about their child academically, and;
- (3) communicate more effectively and more often with parents.

"The overarching idea is that we are working as a team," explained Dr. Eleanor Gensemer, Head of the Middle School. "It is not a new idea for us, but we are now approaching it a little differently.



Our partnership with parents is designed to lead to success for students while they are here and it will help them make a successful transition to their next school."

Meetings, workshops, and conferences are held for parents of each middle school class. Third-year parents meet with the Transition Team in the fall to begin the process of helping parents find the next school for their child. Second-year parents are invited to a meeting to learn about the third-year and the supports that are in place to further assist students in becoming self-regulated learners. Parents of first-year students meet to learn about middle school goals and curriculum. In addition,



The identifying logo of Partners with Parents for Student Success events and programs.

*Top: Chase Brandow and Parker Janson with Classroom Teacher Drew McCorkell.
Left: Fionna Penn and Molly McEvoy.*

“Our partnership with parents and guardians is designed to lead to success for students while they are in middle school and will help them make a successful transition to their next school.”

informal reading and writing assessments are administered to provide specific information regarding the strengths and challenges of each middle school student.

“We have always shared observational data with parents, but we knew we needed to share more concrete information about their child,” Gensemer commented. In order to do that, teachers gave students independent sight word knowledge, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and writing assessments. The scored data enable teachers to show parents a summary of how their child performed on these measures. “A student may test at the fourth level independently on the reading assessment, but is handling material on the sixth or seventh level in the classroom. The child is performing higher because of the support, scaffolding, and structure of the classroom. We want parents to be aware of what we are doing to help their child. We want to talk about the strategies that are being used in the classroom that have been effective for their child.”

As parents begin to look at the next step in their child’s education, the evaluation helps them understand what type of environment their child needs to experience success. Gensemer explained that the key for all Benchmark students is finding the right match when they transition to another school. “If they go to the right school that understands them and has the right supports in place, they do very well. If the school doesn’t have the support the student needs, that makes their school experience more difficult.”

“If we recommend that a child may benefit from another year at Benchmark, we want to be clear as to why we are making that recommendation,” she added. “Parents need to



know, too, that we are not simply scoring assessments but making observations as well. For example, if a student is not automatically applying the strategies they have been taught, that is a huge red flag. It means they are not taking control. Our ultimate goal is that by the time a student leaves Benchmark, he or she is self-regulated, meaning they know what they can do on their own, they know what they need in terms of help, and they know where to go to get it. We also know that this takes time and the process can’t be rushed. It takes time for students to develop the self-awareness and confidence to implement the strategies and tools they have learned to use. We want parents to see that it’s not just about a reading level or grades on a report card. We look at the whole child and their approach to learning.”

Gensemer is pleased with the positive feedback she and members of the faculty are receiving from parents regarding the Partnering with Parents for Student Success program. “As we partner with parents, we become a team because we all care about these children and only want the very best for them.”



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Top: Teacher Kevin Canney with Emily Raech. Left: Danton Hill and Aaron Zubatch.