

Parent engagement matters most for student success

Education series: Yvonne Johnson and Chandra Pitts 3:20 p.m. EST December 18, 2015



(Photo: Supplied)

Editor's note: This week, The News Journal opinion pages are featuring a series of essays written by members of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission. Read the series at www.delawareonline.com/opinion. Submit your view to letters@delawareonline.com.

When parents and families are engaged in their children's education, the outcomes are significantly better. Virtually all parents and families want to be involved and supportive. The challenge is to put engagement into practice, but that is not always easy. Engagement requires time, effort, and knowledge of how to positively influence the education of your child. For some, engagement means heading up the PTA, baking cookies for the school fundraiser, volunteering during the school day, or chaperoning class trips. Yes, that is engagement.

However, direct engagement means working with your child at home and representing your child's interest in a very complex public education system. Engagement also means giving a voice to the interests of all children. Engagement is particularly difficult for low-income families in which parents, or a single parent, work several jobs, work overtime, balance competing demands with limited resources, have limited or no transportation to reach their child's school, and struggle just to keep their family safe and secure.

For all the challenges, nothing that can be more influential in a child's education or in the overall success of a school than the active engagement of parents and families who give voice to the interests of all children and actively support the efforts of educators.

We have never known a more important time for parents, students, and families to unite and raise their voices in support of the efforts now underway to strengthen Wilmington education. The proposals from the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission need and deserve voices of support from parents and families—not only in the city but also throughout New Castle County and Delaware.

All parents and families have a stake in the success of these efforts. And the stakes are high. The success and failure of public education in Delaware and its largest city is impacting every area of life for our entire community. Test scores do not capture how well our education system is working. Rather, the real indicators are long-term socioeconomic factors that impact us all: High rates of crime, violence, poverty, and drug use are further compounded by the lack of livable-wage employment opportunities. The school drop out rate in Wilmington is 60 percent, and nearly 130 Delaware children are expelled from school annually. These issues are far reaching.

The goal of public education is to make sure that every student has a chance to excel, both in school and in life. Education is not "the great equalizer" when schools serving low-income students receive fewer resources, face greater difficulties attracting the best teachers and are ill equipped to meet the diversity of student needs.

As parents, family members, and community partners, our role is to speak up to ensure the highest student outcomes possible. We need to raise our voices for children throughout Wilmington and Delaware. A key component of the commission's proposals for change is focused on strengthening parent and family engagement. We believe that accomplishing this is critical to all other changes. We are committed to reaching out to parents and family members in Wilmington and beyond to help them become more engaged and active agents for the improvement of public education for all Delaware children.

Yvonne Johnson is a resident of the Red Clay Consolidated School District and a parent advocate. Chandra Pitts is a Wilmington parent in the Red Clay Consolidated School District and is president and CEO of One Village Alliance, a grassroots advocacy organization for young men and women throughout the tri-state area. Both are co-chairs of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission's Parent, Educator, and Community Engagement Committee.



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