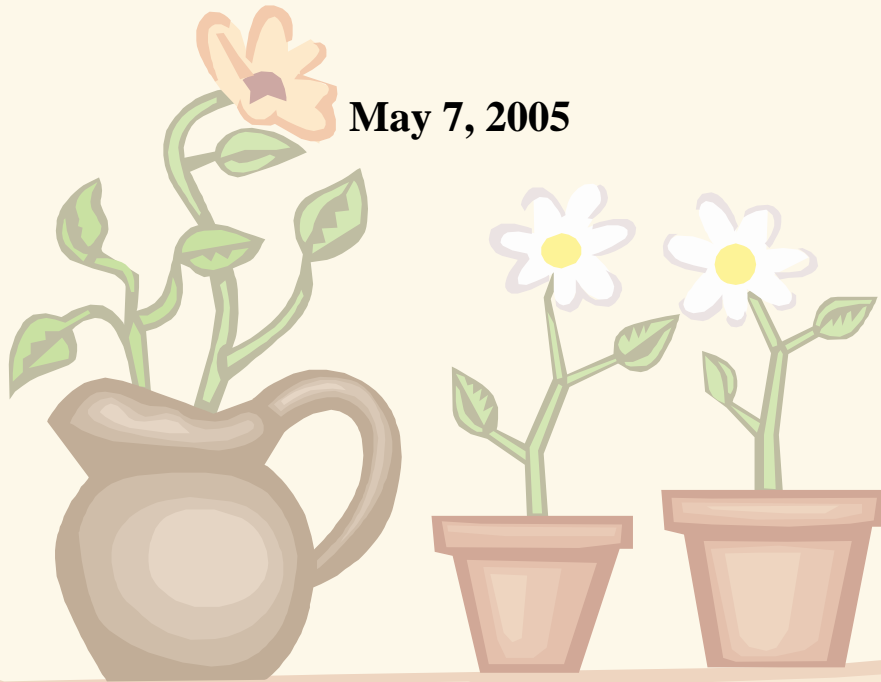


Windows into the Classroom: How a classroom website can help parents feel more welcome and involved in their child's education.

**Rachel E. Brentner
Gray's Woods Elementary School, Intern
First Grade
reb232@psu.edu**

May 7, 2005



ABSTRACT

Parent involvement is an important aspect of a student's education. The student's ability to succeed is not only determined by quality of teaching but also parental involvement in their education. My mentor teacher has already successfully incorporated newsletters, phone calls, e-mails, and notes home into her parent teacher communication process. Because of this I wanted to see how a classroom website can be incorporated as another tool. This study examines how a classroom website can be used to help give parents another way of entering the classroom and learning about what goes on during their child's day. It also looks at whether a classroom website can help increase parent involvement.

Background Information

Description of my teaching context

For the past 9 months I have been working as an intern in Colleen Sheehan's first grade classroom at Grays Woods Elementary School. My mentor and I share a classroom with 22 energetic and wonderful first grade students. Our students' home lives consist of a few students living in lower middle class housing, with the majority of our students living in upper middle class neighborhoods. We have one child with parents who are divorced, whereas the rest of our classroom lives with both parents. From talking to the parents and reading surveys sent home, I began to realize that the main reason why we don't have many parents volunteer in our classroom is because many of my students live in homes where both parents work, or they live in a house with young siblings that their mothers take care of during the day. Because of this I began to wonder if there was a way to help my parents feel more involved in their child's classroom. **More specifically, what would a classroom website do to help families become more aware of what their child is doing on a daily basis?**

What Led Me to This Particular Inquiry and Why is it Important

One of my beliefs is that students benefit when their parents/guardians or families play an active role in their schooling and feel involved in classroom experiences. Teachers and faculty should support this endeavor by providing opportunities for involvement in individual classrooms and school activities. As nice a thought as this was, I wasn't sure how to help them become involved in the classroom, how to make them feel welcome, and how to effectively communicate with them.

What Others Think/Know About This Topic

‘A child’s education begins at home, not in the classroom, and certainly the home’s powerful influence does not end when school begins. It is a force to be reckoned with for good or ill, throughout a youngster’s school career (Reg Weaver; NEA President)’

“Parents and educators want the same thing: our children and students to succeed. And when they do, both parents and educators alike are filled with pride. (Reg Weaver, NEA President). If we are working toward the same goal, then we should make sure our parents are as in tune with what goes on in their child’s classroom as they can be. This is a team effort. Studies have shown that “parent involvement in children’s learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children’s learning; the more beneficial are the achievement effects. (Cotton and Wikelund)” Because of this it is important that we give parent’s every opportunity to work with the school in helping to educate the future of our country.

The best way to do this is by allowing parents to work with their children at home. A classroom website filled with activities and questions is a great way to give parents the resources and tools needed to perform this job. “If parents receive phone calls, read and sign written communications from the school, and perhaps attend and listen during parent teacher conferences, greater achievement benefits occur than would be the case with no parent involvement at all. (Cotton and Wikelund)”

Parents play a huge role in the education of their student. They know their child better than an educator ever will.

‘They [parents] are their children's first and most influential teachers from birth clear through high school. It is from their parents that children pick up pronunciation, grammar, and many basic reading skills. In the family environment, they learn how to communicate, work as a team, and get along. Values such as fairness, tolerance, compassion, honesty,

responsibility, perseverance, trust, organization, and respect are learned through everyday experiences in the home. (*Parents Are Teachers Too!*, Wherry)

If this is the case, then one priority a teacher should have is making sure that parents are involved in their child's education and also realize how important they are in their child's development both in and outside of the classroom. I think Reg Weaver concludes this part of the inquiry paper best when he says:

'Wishing for more parental involvement won't make it happen. Teachers and education support professionals must make it happen. We need to connect with parents so they can see that we, like them, are dedicated to their children succeeding. And I think the message we, as educators, want to deliver to parents is that we can't replace you, we can't do it for you, but together, we can make a huge difference for your child.'

Clearly Stated Wonderings/Questions

My mentor teacher has done a great job of sending newsletters home, calling parents, and inviting them to volunteer in the classroom. However, I was wondering if technology could be an effective tool to further enhance this.

- Would it be beneficial to parents/guardians who work during the day and don't have the opportunity to volunteer?
- Could there be a way for parents to look there for resources on how to help their students succeed in school?
- Is there a way that a website can help connect family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles) who wouldn't normally get a chance to visit the classroom?
- Essentially, would a classroom website help bring the classroom into the home?

The more I contemplated the idea of a classroom website, the more I anticipated seeing what would happen if I created one.

- Would more students hand in homework?

- Would more parents volunteer in the classroom?

After creating a website, I might find out that it wasn't useful. This doesn't mean that I didn't succeed or that no learning occurred. On the contrary, I might want to find out why it wasn't helpful.

- Is a website too hard to keep updated?
- Are there better strategies when it comes to helping involve parents in the classroom?

With many questions running through my mind, I started off on a wonderful journey of discovery. The rest of this paper will hopefully immerse you in my learning as I work to find out how parents/guardians fit into their child's classroom experience (specifically through the use of a classroom website).

Inquiry Plan

What I Did to Carry Out the Inquiry in My Classroom

I remember sitting in my room thinking "what next?" I knew that I wanted to create this classroom website and was excited about the prospect of making this work, but I needed to plan what the site would contain and what parents would be looking for when they visited a classroom website. Because of this, the beginning of my inquiry plan started with a parent/guardian survey. I wanted to know what they thought of a classroom website. If I were to find out that half of my class didn't have access to the internet at home, then I would have had to take a step back and re-look at my inquiry question. I also wanted to know how involved parents felt in their child's classroom. If they didn't feel very involved, would a classroom website help them feel more so?

Another set of questions I asked attempted to find out how welcome parents felt in our classroom right now. Did they feel as though they could contact us at anytime, and if so, what were the most convenient ways to do so? I wanted to get a sense about how our parents/guardians already felt about our communication with them. My final questions centered on the website I was thinking of developing. I wanted to know if they could foresee themselves looking at the website on a regular basis. I also wanted to know what they would like to see on their website.

After receiving their surveys, I began to develop the website. I paid close attention to what they wanted to see when they logged on and made sure to meet their desires. I included pictures, weekly news, websites, and volunteer opportunities on my website. Each week I updated the weekly news, letting parents know what their child would be learning in each subject and also giving them questions to ask their student at the end of each day. I also made sure to take pictures of the students working and also their child's work, so that they could have a window into what goes on in our classroom. In order to let them know when the website had been updated I sent out weekly reminders telling them about changes made to the site. I also tried to create a list of people who wanted to be reminded via weekly e-mails.

About a month into my inquiry, I sent home another survey asking parents/guardians how often they checked the website, what they thought of it, how satisfied they were with the weekly updates, whether they showed the website to any family or friends, and if there was anything else they would like to see on the website. I also asked them how involved they felt they were in their child's classroom, to see if the number had changed, and whether they felt like a welcome and informed member of this

classroom. These questions were given in an attempt to assess my webpage; I wanted to know how it had been perceived so far and how I could make the classroom site more meaningful to parents and guardians.

As the final aspect of the inquiry process, I asked the parents/guardians a final question during parent teacher conferences. The question was; “Do you feel like the classroom website was a valuable tool in helping you feel more involved and knowledgeable about your child’s education?” As a final question I wanted to get an overall idea of how helpful this website was to the parents/guardians of my students.

All of the ways I collected data

Collecting my data came in four components: students work, number of times the website was viewed, new volunteer opportunities, and parent/guardian surveys. Each week there was a question of the week for parents to discuss with their students. If they asked their child the question, they were to have their child write about it and send it in the following week. I also posted opportunities for children to bring in items to share with the class. For example, when we studied Disney World I asked that children bring in any Disney items they may have. For Teddy Bear Day I asked the parents to help their child pick out a teddy bear to bring with them to school. I also let the parents know when homework would be sent home for their students to complete and return. For each of these opportunities to bring things in to share and also complete their homework, I created a check sheet that was used to see who was turning in their work. (Appendix A)

I also added a website counter on the site that let me know how many times the website has been viewed over the course of my inquiry project. About halfway through the project, I posted a volunteer opportunity to help some parents who work during the

day have a chance to visit the classroom. This was another form of data collection to see if the reason for our lack of parent visitations was because we only gave them the opportunity to visit us in the morning. I posted this opportunity on the website to see if anyone would respond to the new prospect.

The main source of information came from parent/guardian surveys. (Appendix E) I was interested in seeing if parents would take the time to fill out the surveys, and what their thoughts were as I continued to meet their desires for the website. I also have collected data in the form of e-mails received from parents. (Appendix B, C, D)

How I Analyzed the Data

A lot of my analyzing happened through looking at trends over time. I wanted to see if more parents would return the surveys once I had begun the website. I also wanted to get a clear picture of how often students turn in their homework and if this would change after the website. By using a checklist I was able to compare over a long period of time and see if there were some students who continually handed in homework.

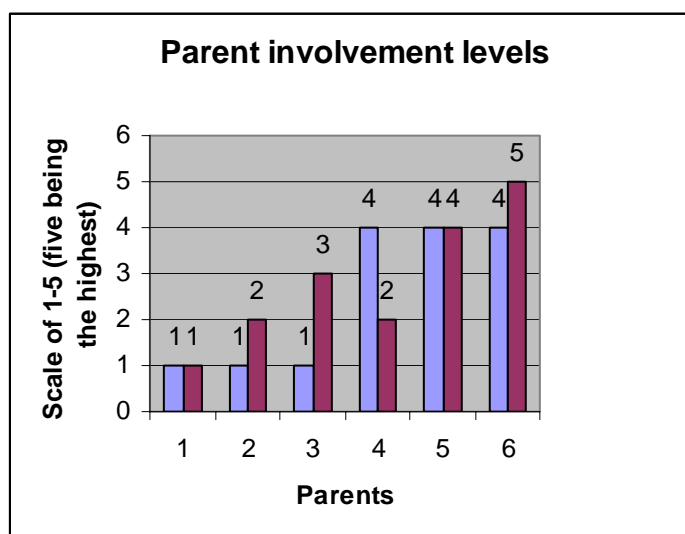
Another way that data was analyzed was through the surveys I handed out. I kept track of who handed in the surveys and looked to see if more parents handed them in after the website was created. They were also a way for me to see what the parents thought of the website. I looked carefully at the comments they made, I adjusted my website to fit their needs, and I used two of the same questions in both surveys so that I could compare them to see whether their answers changed over time.

What You Learned or Now Know

Claims and Evidence to Support the Claims

1. **A classroom website can be beneficial in making parents/guardians feel more involved in the classroom; however, it depends on parents and guardians themselves: their needs, relationship with technology, desire to participate, etc.**

In half of the cases, parents' perceived level of involvement changed after the website was established. Below is a bar graph showing what six parents put as their level of involvement based on the February 11, 2005 survey. The second set



of bars show what they perceived as their level of involvement during the April 1, 2005 survey. Involvement levels were based on a scale from one to five with one being very low feelings of

involvement and five being very high. Parents one and five recorded the same level of involvement for both of their surveys and parent four perceived their level of involvement as decreased after the first survey.

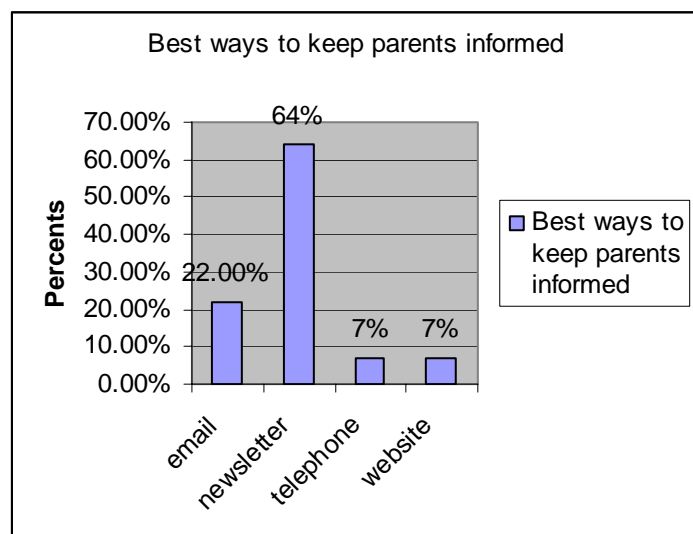
One parent who particularly seemed to benefit said during the first survey, "It is frustrating for me that I can't be more involved this year, I have a younger one at home with me so that makes it difficult" (Appendix E6). On the second

survey she stated, “The website has helped me to know what they talk about in school and we are now having some great dinner time discussions” (Appendix E12). This is a great example of how important a classroom website can be for mothers and fathers unable to visit the classroom during the day. Another parent that works full time stated that she thought the website was “great for those of us that are unable to be physically in the room” (Appendix E8). I have also received emails from parents letting me know how much they appreciate the classroom website. (Appendix B, C, D)

2. A website can be one great tool in helping parents feel like a welcome and informed member of the classroom.

After surveying parents they all responded by telling me how much they appreciated the classroom website. One parent said, “Having A***** with me when I go through it gets him very excited – he knows I’m supporting what he does in school, and I can share my enthusiasm with him sincerely” (Appendix E12). The reason I call it one tool is because we have one student whose parents don’t have the internet so it

doesn’t reach that family (Appendix F). Also it is important to communicate with students’ parents through different venues. During my first parent survey, I asked them to rate the way they



preferred to be contacted. I found out that seventy-one percent of parents who returned the survey liked to be contacted through a weekly newsletter. Twenty-two percent then stated they would rather be contacted through email, and only seven percent said that they would like to look at a website or receive a telephone call (Appendix E).

3. Communicating with parents/guardians does not have a one-size-fits-all solution. Though it was successful in some cases, my classroom website failed to increase the level of involvement in some families.

Because of the low number of parents wanting to primarily view a website, my third claim is that the website didn't help in involving all parents into the classroom. The first time I created a survey and sent it out I received 14 out of 22 surveys back. This was a percentage of 63% of parents returning the survey. The second time, this percentage decreased with parents only returning 45% of all the surveys I sent out. This was only 10 of the 22 surveys. The parents who did return them had many positive things to say about the website, but this only gave me an idea of how less than half of my student's parents felt about the website.

4. Our class website failed to consistently affect the rate at which students returned homework.

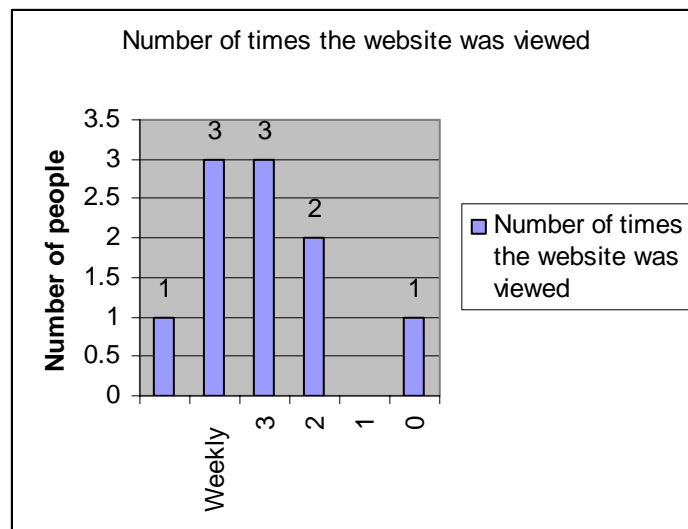
I made sure to let parents know when homework would be sent home so that they could keep an eye out for those papers. Interestingly, every time we have had a field trip form to turn in 100% of the papers are returned (Appendix A). Over the months I looked at the number of students who turned in homework (Appendix A). Turning in homework doesn't effect a students grade and it isn't mandatory,

however, it is strongly encouraged that they do the work sent home. I noticed that before my website 14 out of 22 students handed in their homework consistently. After the webpage, an average of 8.5 students turned in their work. This isn't to say that homework decreased after the website was created. If you look at the amount of homework turned in (Appendix A), it seems to be very sporadic. There are a lot of variables that could come between students turning in their homework, such as parents not knowing their child has homework, or students losing their homework.

5. Classroom websites are not always visited consistently throughout the families in a given class/classroom.

I had a website counter that would let me know every time someone viewed my website. From the month of March-April 20th only 109 people viewed my site in the span of almost two months. To be accurate this number also includes the number of times that my Penn State advisor and/or mentor teacher viewed the site. It also takes into account the times I checked to make sure everything was working, the times that fellow interns visited the site, and also any school districts

that checked out the URL located on my resume. If you look at my classroom of 22 students, there are 43 parents who would have been able to view the



site. I have updated the site six times and if it had been regularly checked each week by every parent, then my counter should have at least told me that 258 people viewed the website. But less than half that number shows up when I look at the website counter.

With this bit of information I conclude that not all parents are regularly looking at the website. Based on the 10 surveys I received, only one person looked at the website more than once per week. Three people said they looked at it weekly, three said they had only viewed the website three times, two parents said they looked at the site twice and one person told me that they had never viewed the site.

Another form of data collection I used was to have “questions of the week” posted on the website and also opportunities to have children bring in items to share with the class. Of the six questions I posted only two were answered. The first week, two students answered my question, and the second week only one child answered the question. I also gave students three opportunities to bring in items to share and no one did.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The implications for my future practice as a teacher

All in all, I found out that the website did help the parents who checked the website to become more aware of what happened in the classroom. But the trick was that the parents had to actually access the site, and it is clear from my data collection that this didn't seem to happen.

During parent teacher conferences, I asked whether they looked at the website and if so, did they find it beneficial for increasing awareness? Of my students whose parents came to conferences all but three of them said that they looked at the website at least once, and all of them agreed that the website was a great tool. Two parents did let me know that a drawback to the website was downloading the pictures took so long and this kept them from viewing the entire site. One parent stated that each of her three boys had classroom websites and noted that the older their students got, the more beneficial the website was because they have more homework to keep up with. A couple of the parents even told me that they had shown the website to grandparents and co-workers (Appendix E10, E11, E13, E14). One parent gave me two thumbs up and told me to end my paper with “It’s a good thing.”

In a sense, this bit of information was confusing. If so many people found the site beneficial, then why didn’t they return the surveys? Also, if they liked the site then why does my website counter only tell me that it was viewed only 109 times? Many of the parents admitted that they had only looked at the website once but they liked what they saw and how informative it was. Being too busy and forgetting about the site were two reasons parents gave for only looking at it once.

Through all of my evidence, I have come to the conclusion that a classroom website is another great way to help parents feel like a welcome member of their classroom. This can also be done through newsletters, face-to-face contact, phone calls, and e-mails. I still feel very strongly that it is important we give parents every opportunity to get involved with and know about what is going on in their child’s classroom. That is why it is important to create many opportunities for parents to

volunteer and also to give them detailed information about what is going on in their child's classroom. A parent is a vital tool in the achievement of students, without them we cannot completely succeed as educators.

I have also learned that parent involvement is a two way street. You can create fantastic e-mails, set up a detailed and useful website, send home notes, call parents, and create many different volunteer opportunities. If they don't respond to your attempts then that is where parent involvement ends. I think as teacher it is our job to make them feel like they are important, and give them opportunities to work with the class and stay informed. We must do our jobs; however, we cannot make the parents do what we want them to do.

As a future teacher, I plan on doing my job to the best of my ability. I realize that I won't be able to achieve everything without parent involvement and support. Because of this I will work my hardest to make sure that parents are informed. I want to go out of my way to help them understand how important they are to me and their child. Will I continue to create classroom websites? I think the question boils down to these few wonderings.

- Is it worth the hours I spent updating it?
- Could I have spent those hours doing something else to increase parents' awareness and involvement in the classroom?

My answer to this is that it will vary with every classroom; I will have to look at the individual parents. In this classroom, it seemed that six parents really appreciated the website. These were parents who turned in both of the surveys expressing their excitement and thanks over the site. These were parents that also let me know that

without the website they would be unable to see what went on in the classroom. Would I update the website for those six parents? Absolutely. Those parents are equally as important as the others who are able to regularly volunteer in the classroom.

For one reason or another they are unable to come in to help, but they have just as much of a right to see pictures of their child working, and evidence of the work we have done in the classroom. They, more than anyone else, deserve to see what is happening during a typical school day because they haven't been able to. I can't think of another way I would rather spend my two hours a week than making sure these parents felt cared about and connected to their child's classroom and teachers. A picture is worth a thousand words, and my website contains many pictures they can look at and also many informative details about our daily work that they can read and discuss with their child.

Each child is important; as are their parents. Anything that can let the parents know I care about them and desire for them to be as much a part of their child's learning experience is "a good thing" and I will continue this if at all possible in the future.

Any New Wonderings that I Have Developed

One thing I began to realize through talking with parents and also looking at their surveys was that many parents worked during the day and were unable to meet the time slot we allotted for parent volunteers. "Schools with the most successful parent involvement programs are those which offer a variety of ways parents can participate. Recognizing that parents differ greatly in their willingness, ability, and available time for involvement in school activities, these schools provide a continuum of options for parent involvement. (Cotton and Wikelund)" Because of this I started to initiate a new opportunity for parents to volunteer in the classroom from 11:45 until 12:30. The plan is

for them to come in, read a story to the students, and then help listen to our students read during the Drop Everything and Read part of our day (aka DEAR time). I set up a calendar with available dates and also gave parents information on this new opportunity. So far one parent has come in to volunteer and she told me she was excited about the opportunity because she works full time, but could take her lunch break at this time to help out in the classroom. I would like to continue this new opportunity to add more options for the parents and also see if it helps increase parent involvement in the classroom. Some other wonderings I have come up with are:

- Would the usefulness of websites increase as students got older?
- Would the effectiveness of a classroom website be different for different classrooms?
- If I had started the website at the beginning of the year would I have come up with different results?
- How can I make newsletters full of the same information my website had but also keep it easy to read and functional?
- Is the classroom website worth the time and effort it took to keep it updated?
- Is there anything more I can do as a teacher to help increase parent involvement in the classroom or are there any other ways to help parents feel more welcome and informed?

References

- Weaver, Reg, M. (2005, March). Parents and Educators Team Up. *NEA Today*, 7.
- Cotton, Kathleen and Wikelund, Karen, I. (n.d.). Parent Involvement in Education. (Online), April 16, 2005. NW Regional Educational Laboratory.
<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/3/cu6.html>
- Wherry, John H., I. (2002, March). Parents are Teachers Too!. (Online), April 16, 5005. Education Full Text 1/00-1/05. [http://p9000-web5.silverplatter.com.exproxy.libraries.psu.edu/webspirs/start.ws?customer=c1050119&databases=\(FT\)](http://p9000-web5.silverplatter.com.exproxy.libraries.psu.edu/webspirs/start.ws?customer=c1050119&databases=(FT))