



Second-grade teacher's open door policy helps ensure students' success in the academic year.

Anyone who is willing to spend over six hours a day with twenty-four seven year olds in approximately 625 square feet of classroom space must either be very crazy or very exceptional.

Leah Joy Oberg, one such teacher at Mountain View Preparatory School, an Arizona International Baccalaureate School (www.azibs.org/az-ib-schools) located in Cottonwood, is truly among the exceptional. Leah exhibits exceptional patience, creativity, and leadership, meriting much of her success in the classroom to an open door policy which encourages parents to not only volunteer for extended hours, but to pop in just any old time.

While many parents historically limit their relationship with their child's schooling to parent-teacher conferences, sports, and special event attendance, Leah, known as "Mrs. Joy" to her students, inspires parents to overcome any hesitation or timidity about making impromptu visits during the school day. She encourages keeping channels of communication open by sending home weekly newsletters that not only keep parents abreast of curriculum themes and focus, special events, and field trips, but to also encourage volunteer participation by thanking and featuring those parents who have visited in the prior week, whether as a drop-in, guest story-teller, or general classroom volunteer. Over time parents have contributed invaluable assistance, ideas, elbow grease and materials including spearheading such fun activities as Christmas and Mother's Day craft projects and constructing props for student plays.

Research shows that children whose parents volunteer in the classroom exhibit better attitudes and score higher academically. Teachers who have classroom support are able to do their job more effectively. And parents who participate in the classroom are better equipped to support their child's homework or special projects. In this age when a majority of parents work, squeezing in some volunteer time can make a huge difference in a child's success. The relationship between home life and school life becomes strengthened through the teacher- volunteer collaboration.

Leah's personal philoso-



phy revolves around the idea that learning is taking place in a child's life 24-7, parents are the primary teacher in that child's life, and she, as an adjunct teacher, is in partnership with parents to optimize the child's educational experience. Ideally, the thirty-two and a half hours a week that children are at school are strategically designed to utilize a child's most productive hours of the day in ways that stimulate and reinforce learning and the development of social skills. Knowing that each child is an individual, with different abilities, talents, and learning styles, a good teacher focuses on the child's strengths and offers strategies to help strengthen areas that need support so the child can feel successful and enjoy their schoolroom experience. Leah finds that a simple phone call to a parent can make a huge difference in forging a connection and encouraging ongoing dialogue about what's happening at school. In the process, she gets to know the child better in terms of the dynamics of the home environment and that child's special place in the family. Trust is built and a sense of teamwork emerges between parent and teacher, further bolstering the success of the student.

Occasionally a parent will take a vital role in the classroom on behalf of their child. New to the community and to the other kids, one student's mom spent the first day of school present in the classroom as a show of





support in helping him acclimate to yet another unfamiliar place. Another mom, whose daughter was academically behind, made a conscious decision to take an active role in her daughter's new school year by volunteering every week for three or more hours, and sometimes for the entire day. While this kind of an arrangement could create an opportunity for some negative behavioral issues for a few children and parents, her decision proved to be highly beneficial for her daughter, herself, and for Leah.

Students may indeed thrive getting a little extra one-on-one attention that an assistant can provide, but so do teachers. The extra help proved invaluable to Leah. In addition to general assistance, the girl's mother helped with fluency reading checks (taking each child aside for a short time to listen to them read, and informing them of their words per minute and number of errors) as well as with scoring simple worksheets and tests, giving Leah a little less paper work and a little more effective, quality teaching time.

Generally speaking, parents love their experience in the classroom. Getting a sense of what the teacher's expectations are and teaching style is like, and how their child functions in an academic setting, watching them interact with the teacher and other children and witnessing how they focus and apply themselves in a learning environment, are all enormously helpful to understanding the big-picture perspective of their child's fast-expanding little universe. Plus it can be a heck of a lot of fun!

If activity is the foundation of education, what else might a really imaginative teacher dream up in order to optimize learning power? Doing nothing. That's right... she turns down the level of the oftentimes frenetic energy of twenty-four excited little people fresh off the playground after lunch with a concept called "Imagination Station." Leah, parent volunteers, and kids all take a few moments' breather in their seats for some quiet time where they have been instructed to sit with their imagination and get com-

fortable with going inside themselves. Encouraged to create a special place they can go for a few moment's rest, they visit this place

or just think "happy thoughts" about what makes them feel good. One volunteer mom has borrowed the "Imagination Station" concept and created an enhanced "time out" experience for her own brood of four children at home – resulting in a more peaceful and cooperative household.

So you see, parents as partners in the classroom really is a successful combination for all — student, teacher, mom, dad, and the rest of the family as well. Whether you are an educator or a parent, as the bright new school year ahead unfolds, consider making valuable time in the classroom for cultivating and walking cheerily and confidently into this notion of an "open door policy." Opportunity knocks!

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in Scottsdale makes use of a social and emotional learning curriculum to build confidence and social skills in learners who have had challenges in general education classroom. These curriculums and programs provide the opportunity for students to succeed despite emotional or behavioral disabilities and become active and contributing members of society. Arizona's teachers are being educated on social and emotional learning and are actively recruited to be instructors of these various programs.

The certified training of teachers and the implementation of this kind of curriculum is a sign that Arizona schools value and believe in the benefits of social and emotional learning on our children. Arizona's education system views health holistically and sees families, communities and schools all responsible for the overall health of children.