

INVESTING IN PARENTS– THE URBAN IMAGINATION NETWORK PARENT DOCENT TRAINING PROGRAM

What's the Urban Imagination Network?

The Urban Imagination Network, designed by Imagine Chicago, links Chicago public schools and five local museums in a program to improve reading comprehension in science and social studies. From 1996-1999, Corliss High School, Dewey Multicultural Academy, Hope Community Academy, Locke Elementary, Suder Elementary, and Terrell Elementary participated. This upcoming school year we have gained three new schools, Byrd Community Academy, Alfred Nobel Elementary, and Laura S. Ward, while Dewey and Terrell are no longer in the network. The museum partners are the Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago Historical Society, Field Museum, Kohl Children's Museum, and the Shedd Aquarium. The DePaul Center for Urban Education provides technical assistance by developing innovative curriculum materials that utilize museum approaches. They also conduct ongoing project evaluation.

How does it work?

Schools in the Urban Imagination Network partner with a museum for a year. Students, teachers, and parents engage in the creation of museum-style exhibits at their school. The network helps teachers and parents re-envision the reading process as a way of gaining and organizing information – and making that learning visible – just as the museum curator researches and then displays knowledge.

This five-year development program, which started in 1995, was significantly expanded at the end of 1997 to include a parent docent training program, a summer institute for teachers, and a teacher renewal program. The parent program, which has become very successful, is focused on effective parenting, reading strategies, and museum connections. Parents learn educational approaches that help their children read, and learn to help with in-classroom exhibit creation and museum field trips.

The program recognizes that developing parental reading comprehension will improve their effectiveness as teachers of their children.

During the 1998-99 school year over 100 parents attended monthly workshops at a school or museum. The workshops engaged the parents in active reading and highlighted the curriculum their children were learning in school. Studying diverse curriculum topics such as Chicago history from a frog's point of view, world geography, and technology, parents also conducted research in the museums. Edith Njuguna from the DePaul Center for Urban Education provided bilingual translation for the Spanish-speaking parents. She demonstrated how bookmaking can be used to help children summarize what they learn.

In April, fifty parents who actively participated in the workshops were rewarded for high attendance with a sleepover at the Field Museum with their children. Amidst the African animals and the larger-than-life exhibit on insects, parents and their children participated in workshops and built reading skills by exploring museum exhibits. The parental program and sleepover at the Field was featured in the *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1999 entitled, "Parents who return to class win rewards".



Children bedding down at the Field Museum

Parents learn computer skills

In May, forty parents attended a computer workshop held in the DePaul University computer laboratory. For some parents, it was the first time that they had used a computer. Parents learned how to do basic Internet research. By the end of two hours they were amazed and delighted at what they were able to find on the Internet. All parents expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the program.



A parent with children at the Field Museum

Graduation

On June 16, 1999, thirty-three parents graduated from the parent docent training program. The graduation ceremony, held at the Chicago Historical Society, was a first graduation for some of the parents. Parents with high attendance but who were not graduating were also recognized. The level of excitement was high as Bliss Browne, President of Imagine Chicago, Douglas Greenberg, President of the Chicago Historical Society and Ken Rolling, Director of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, welcomed the parents and guests. The graduates received their diplomas and a \$250 stipend. They also received a five-volume Family Millenium encyclopedia, generously donated by Betty Mitchell, an Imagine Chicago friend and supporter. Graduates received a family membership from the museum that their children's school will be partnered with in the upcoming year. To conclude the celebration, graduates joined their guests for a luncheon buffet.

Creating an imaginative school

Some parents attended a three-day leadership conference on July 14-16 held at the Marriott Hotel in Highland Park. The parents and core educators in the Urban Imagination Network designed a school action plan for the

coming year that will bring reading alive for the students.

A three-day summer parent development institute, held on July 28-30, focused on helping the parents in three areas. The first day provided basic computer training in Windows as well as an introduction to word processing. The second and third days focused on literacy in everyday life and assessing different learning styles.

What's in store for next year?

Workshops

The parent program will continue with monthly workshops organized around the core content area topics that the students are learning. Parent resource centers will also be available in all the network schools. Computers, donated by Ralph Bloch of the Access Group, will be installed in the resource centers.

Citizen Leaders

The parent program will also be expanded to include *Citizen Leaders*, an Imagine Chicago training initiative that enables grass-roots leaders to develop local community projects of their own design. Parents will learn how to hold meetings, write a proposal, and organize a project. They will receive training in ten workshops every two weeks and be eligible to apply for a grant of up to \$500 to buy materials for the project. The goal is to further involve parents in the schools and their community.

Parents excited about learning

Parents reported a very high degree of satisfaction with the overall program. The simplified material, and hands-on approach of the program, have increased the parents' awareness of the content of their children's studies and transformed the parents into students. The parents are able to apply what they have learned and help their children with homework projects. In the words of a parent, the program has shown her "how to take what we learn and teach my children". The program has also broadened their horizons about the value of museums with many parents now reporting multiple visits to the museums.

-Coral Cawthorn-

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