

## FAMILY

### engagement Parent involvement helps school defy expectations

## TIME TO EDUCATE

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Grisel Cardona broke into a dance after scoring a point at addition bingo on a Friday morning at Walton Avenue School in New York. The children were in class. Parents, around 40 of them, were in the cafeteria playing math games. “What does the winner get?” asked Marilyn Espada, another Walton Avenue mother. “I want an extra hour of sleep tomorrow.”

Every Friday is “Family Friday” at the Bronx elementary school. After drop-off, parents know they can head to the cafeteria for breakfast and an activity in support of their children’s education. On this day the focus was games to play with your kids to make practicing arithmetic fun.



**Parent Association officers Kiesha Griffin and Grisel Cardona play math games at a Family Friday event at Walton Avenue School in the Bronx.**  
ERICA BRYANT

## TIME TO EDUCATE

Family engagement has helped Walton Avenue School defy expectations for a school of its demographics. A high percentage of its children are homeless. Nearly all are economically disadvantaged. Median annual household income surrounding the school is around \$26,000.

The school saw a 94 percent passage rate in 2018 math tests and 69 percent in English.

“It makes a difference when parents are involved,” said Cardona, recording secretary of the Parents Association.

The school’s parent engagement strategy is based on the work of Harvard Education School Professor Karen Mapp, who cites research saying that family engagement is as important as teaching and instruction.

The worst models of family engagement are seen at what Mapp calls “fortress schools” where staff see themselves as having to protect and inoculate children

support vouchers that might prevent more families from losing their housing. The PA pays for class photos for people known to be homeless. It staffs a food cupboard in the school so that families can get through lean times. It is planning self-defense workshop, inspired by the attempted abduction in December of an 11-year-old girl that horrified many parents. Luckily, Griffin said, a bystander went into his house and came out with a bat to stop the attacker from getting away with the girl.

Helping parents meet their basic needs for shelter and safety can give them some space to be focus on activities that support their children’s academic success, and chances of improving their lives.

“If you help the parent and the parent is able to be self-sufficient and take care of themselves financially and emotionally, then the child will have a better chance at learning at school,” Griffin said. “Whatever the parent is going through, the child feels it as well. That is why

from families and communities that don't "value education." When parents don't show up, the attitude is that "they don't care."

The best models are in "partnership schools" where parents are seen as valued partners who have much to offer. Parent networks are valued and cultivated. Staff and parents easily move between the school and the community. Parents participate in meaningful decision making.

Six years ago, Walton Avenue School replaced P.S. 64, a school where 14 percent of the kids were passing their state tests. Kiesha Griffin had children at both schools and said Walton Avenue School has created an atmosphere that is much more welcoming to parents. "It's like a 360," she said. "Mr. Russo knows every child. He stands out every morning to greet every child and parent by name."

In the school's early days, staff found that parents were willing to stay if invited. In the beginning "it was just like 'hey come on in and join us. It is cold out and we have coffee and donuts,'" said Russo. Now Family Fridays follow a rotating schedule focused on special services, community resources, academic activities and opportunities to talk to the principal and staff about how things are going at school. "Everything comes back to setting conditions for students to be their best selves," said Russo.

The school's welcoming atmosphere prompted Griffin to join the Parent Association, of which she is now the vicepresident. It plans its own set of activities, based on parent needs, with the support of the school. This organization has also become an important support network for parents who are raising children under conditions that can be very difficult.

A while back, the water was not working in the apartment building where a group of Walton Avenue Students lived. A staff member went to check on the families and sees why the children weren't in school and Russo recalls that one parent promised to send the child the following Monday. "She planned to take the child to Brooklyn over the weekend so he could shower at a family member's apartment."

School staff got the parents together and coached them on how to approach their city council woman about the problem. They walked them to the door of the office of her office and left them there. The water was turned back on the next day.

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Parents who feel respected, understood and valued are more likely to come to play addition bingo.

There was no extra hour of sleep as a prize for winning the math games, but by coincidence, there was an upcoming "Family Friday" workshop on the importance of sleep and how to set schedules that ensure families get enough of it. "So many of our students are not getting enough sleep," said Russo, as he issued the invitation to the parents. "The more sleep your children get, the more sleep you get."

At the end of "Family Friday" the parents walked out of the Family Friday activity with a big bag of math games, leaving their children in a school that is defying expectations, with their help.

**Oscar Smith and Pauline Parks play math games at a Family Friday event at Walton Avenue School.**  
ERICA BRYANT

**Parents learn math games at the Walton Avenue School in the Bronx.** ERICA BRYANT

**Kiesha Griffin and Grisel Cardona play math games at Walton Avenue School.** ERICA BRYANT

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***Parent Kiesha Griffin***

The PA was inspired by this success, said Griffin. It has added tenant advocacy to its list of activities. “Now we know that we can help parents with that as well,” she said. “We inform parents, if they have any issues with water or electricity give us a call and we’ll help out.”

The PA sends out What’s App messages about opportunities for parents, including GED classes and housing support. “We run across parents all the time that are in the process of being evicted,” said Griffin. “I just hope one day the pay level can go up so people can afford to pay for their rent comfortably and afford a metro card to get to and from work.”

When parents struggle to pay rent, the PA connects them with organizations like BronxWorks to help them prevent evictions. It is also lobbying City Council Representative Vanessa Gibson for housing