

the NEW SCHOOL

Studies and teachers suggest that involving parents in their children's schools improves the quality of education and helps build community. Then why isn't the cooperative preschool more popular?

By Carly Berwick | Photography By Yoko Inoue



CAMOUFLAGE Maple Street School blends into the subway station

The scraped metal side door of the Prospect Avenue subway station in Brooklyn looks like it leads to a janitor's closet. Press the buzzer, and muffled subway announcements and the street noise of grinding truck gears give way to the ecstatic squeals, anguished shrieks and thumping feet of 50 toddlers and four-year-olds. Inside, three four-year-old girls rush a visitor. "We are doing a dramatic ice play," one shrieks. A paper igloo lurks in the corner, and a teacher sits with a half-dozen other kids hugging themselves. "It's cold!" Today is all about ice.

The preschoolers at the Maple Street School are used to visitors. Their parents can drop in whenever they want, and no teacher or director will harrumph and suggest now is not the best time. That's because the parents run the school.

Maple Street is a parent-cooperative preschool in Brooklyn's Prospect-Lefferts Garden neighborhood. In approximately 1,000 co-op preschools across the United

States, parents run the boards and put in sweat equity, helping to lower tuition costs. In many co-ops, parents also serve as assistant teachers, with each family putting in one day a month in the classroom.

Co-op families bond over floor scrubbing or late-night teleconference calls — or over complaining about both — and become something more than parents who share drop-off and pick-up times. They become a free-floating neighborhood and de facto civic group, planting gardens, picking up recyclables from local businesses, agitating for cleaner streets. Parents often start co-ops when they find there's nothing locally that emphasizes economic and racial diversity — a powerful model of voluntary integration for parents as much as children.

Equally important, co-ops offer a partial solution to the demands for and expense of daytime childcare. In the past 30 years, as more women have gone to work, men are not working less, and sadly, Swedish-style paid leave for both parents remains unlikely in this country for the next decade. But education research over the same time tells us parental involvement in the early school

years are just as, if not more, important for children's success in school than focusing on it the time SAT prep rolls around. The co-op system is one model for how working parents may be able to participate in their young child's day.

A Mother and a Teacher

The first American cooperative school was founded in 1916 at the University of Chicago. Faculty wives banded together to establish a preschool for their children who were too young to attend public elementary school. Many had read about kindergartens in Europe and the importance of early childhood education; others simply felt isolated raising children alone. The Berkeley Hills Nursery School, established in 1938 and still in operation (but no longer a cooperative), popularized the co-op philosophy through newsletters and books: Mothers should help teach and monitor children to improve and lower the cost of education. These early examples spawned numerous followers.

In the '40s — when educational theories emerged that said environment, not

School in Austin, Texas, also requires parents to assist teach one day a month. Director Pat Sefton says people make it work: “There are quite a few working parents: some have flexible schedules, several are stay-at-home dads, others have nannies for the afternoons.” Economic diversity is an explicit goal of the school, which, according to its Web site, was established in 1953 as “one of the first interracial and intercultural schools in the state.” Sefton says, “It started in a low-income neighborhood and was attractive to those families because it was more financially accessible.” But as the neighborhood and structure of working families has changed, the school, says Sefton, has had to work harder to attract low-income families, mainly through scholarships and outreach.

In New Haven, Conn., the Abiyoyo Cooperative Daycare consists of 12 families who pay tuition on a sliding fee scale. “Parents can work in the school, but it’s not mandatory: it’s the working parents co-op,” says Cristina Matos, director of Abiyoyo. “I love that we teach the children way beyond the ABCs, and I want the children to feel that they are walking into their own home. The kids love to say, ‘My mom does the shopping for Abiyoyo,’ or ‘My mom painted that on a work day.’”

Parenting on the Curriculum

As several long-term studies, such as the High/Scope Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) have shown, high-quality preschools improve the lives of the low-income children who attend them. Following three- and four-year-olds preschoolers into their twenties and beyond, researchers found that these stu-

dents consistently stayed in school longer than control groups who had no preschool; did better in school; were more likely to continue on to college; were less likely to need special education; and were less likely to have been arrested by age 19. Preschool in and of itself does not ameliorate the effects of growing up poor — but a good preschool can. That knowledge has helped sustain the Head Start and Early Head Start (for children from birth to age three) programs, and has driven the call for state-sponsored universal pre-K.

Parent involvement is one of the most important aspects of quality early education: Home and school are mutually dependent, particularly for three-year-olds. A case in point are the 40-year-old Chicago CPCs, public preschools open to any three- to five-year-old in the neighborhood, not just the poorest ones. “Every center has a room where parents can hang out,” writes David Kirp in his 2007 book, *The Sandbox Investment*, plus GED and literacy classes. In the Perry Preschool Project, parents also receive home visits and tips such as “observe your

child closely” and then “carry it forward.”

In her 2006 report, “The Economic Benefits of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs: What Makes the Difference?” Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute, describes the profound benefits of active parental involvement at the CPCs. She quotes University of Minnesota education professor Arthur Reynolds: “It’s a family-school partnership model of involvement. I think a kid notices whether a parent is involved or not — it’s a source of pride for the kid: They’re not in this alone.” The Chicago Centers feel like homes, with wash sinks and bathrooms and outdoor patios, according to Kirp. Parents like the welcoming atmosphere, kids like it, and just as important, teachers like it, so they tend to stay in their jobs longer.

Besides the beneficial sense of familiarity, parental involvement reflects a more nuanced approach to early education. Galinsky advocates that educators steer away from curricular debates over hard skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) versus soft skills (emotional maturity, such as learning to focus and listen), and recognize instead that, “Firstly and very importantly, children’s intellectual learning occurs through their emotionally engaged social connections with other adults and children.”

A comprehensive curriculum is not just about reading and math, seconds Dr. Ann S. Epstein, director of Early Childhood Programs at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. It involves “intentional learning.” That means, says Epstein, that a teacher needs “to be able to spot and support children’s learning while they are playing.” In many ways, intentional learning sounds simply like good parenting. Your 18-month-old points at



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CIRCLE Mornings begin with singing.

the big “b” in a book and says, “bah,” so you respond, “Good! Bah-bah. Like, ball or bee.” As Epstein puts it, “It’s very important that teachers and parents understand how children develop socially, and much of the learning takes place from social learning.”

High-quality preschool education boils down to three factors: Overall teacher preparedness and sensitivity, an “intentional” play-based curriculum that emphasizes careful mentoring of social and developmental skills, and parent involvement. Co-ops incorporate all three factors by nature of their setup: Teachers are either parents or hired by parents; curricula are almost uniformly child-centered; and parent involvement — that’s the heart and soul of it.

Money and Time

Working parents have all kinds of stress, especially concerning money and time. Co-ops ask parents to put in even more time. Home visits and volunteering were hallmarks of the Perry School Project, but “often because of work requirements, it’s not possible for parents to be at home for a home visit or volunteer to be in the classroom,” says Epstein. Even the Chicago CPCs have had to alter what they ask of parents in recent years. With welfare reform and both parents generally working more, “the old ways of involving parents don’t work anymore,” says Galinsky.

So new ways are evolving, as childcare has become a necessity for the 60 percent

of families in the U.S. with working parents and children younger than six years of age. Many families are lucky enough to have trusted grandmothers or other relatives who will help out. But many more aren’t. Nearly 4 million children are in daycare centers, nursery schools, state-funded preschool, head start, or other non-parental homecare situations, or Head Start. Yet the country has no federally mandated paid maternity leave or childcare system to help working parents for the first five or six years until public school starts.

Universal pre-K remains less than universal: State programs such as New York’s cover about 10 percent of four-year-olds for a maximum of \$4,000 a year, according to a 2005 Cornell report. Nationally, the quality of teachers varies widely, from highly trained and highly paid in New York, for instance, to high school graduates paid \$10 an hour in Florida and New Mexico, according to the 2005 National Pre-K Study, summarized by Yale’s Child Study Center. Co-ops can apply for state funds that would provide free tuition for a number of pre-K students, but they must conform to specific regulations that may conflict with the co-op’s goals.

Maple Street participated in New York’s universal pre-K program last year. That necessitated a separate classroom for four-year-olds in the program, among other complications. This fall, instead of participating in that program, the school will offer a reduced tuition plan for lower-income families.

Meanwhile, other families find themselves caught in the middle-class bind — too poor to afford private school tuition, especially for multiple children, but too wealthy to qualify for assistance. A Head Start for the middle class might look more like a loose union of cooperative preschools, supported with federal and state aid through scholarships, land grants or rent assistance. Everyone wins: Working parents who long to see their children more, schools struggling to figure out how to offer a great early education to many children, and, of course, the two-, three-, and four-year-olds themselves, spending their days with family and friends. **x**