

Beaverton parents stepped in when school district and students needed them

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Parent volunteer and founder of Rocket Academy at Rock Creek Elementary Gita Pastala Troeger teaches a frustrated Brennan Mittelbach, fourth-grader, a quick way to do division, during a spring session at the elementary school.

Wendy Owen/Beaverton Leader

Correction appended

When the **Beaverton School District** was at its lowest point this past school year, parents stepped in to help.

They went beyond the traditional classroom and playground volunteer jobs to create music and after-school math classes, among other courses.

But what started as an attempt to bolster student learning has been embraced by schools and is expected to blossom next school year.

The parent-led **Rocket Academy** at **Rock Creek Elementary School** and **Music Workshop** with roots at **Raleigh Hills K-8 School** may inspire

more partnerships between schools and parents.

Parents were responding to Beaverton budget cuts that slashed 344 teaching positions across the district and caused class sizes to balloon. In addition, 365 teachers were transferred to fill holes, and many wound up in subjects or grade levels they had never taught.

"When the school year started, I found myself getting frustrated about the budget cuts and the number of school days being cut," said Rock Creek Elementary parent Gita Pastala Troeger, a former teacher.

She said she worried about her children as well as those who didn't have someone at home to help with schoolwork. With more students in classes, teachers had less time to work with students individually and those who struggled could fall behind.

Pastala Troeger and other parents talked with Rock Creek Principal Jared Cordon and found a niche. Rocket Academy was founded.

Mentoring in math

With \$288 in funding from the school's parent-teacher group, 15 parent volunteers started with math and science

enrichment lessons during a no-school day for teachers, inviting all Rock Creek students and, later, added Rocket Academy Workshops every other Friday after school to help selected students keep up in math.

"The math program (in school) is pretty fast-paced," Cordon said. "There were kids I was really concerned about that we still weren't doing a good enough job with."

Fractions and division are especially tough, said students during a workshop this spring.

Working with other parent volunteers and high school mathematicians, Pastala Troeger separated the kids into two classes. The fifth-graders started with one-on-one help and worksheets, while the fourth-graders worked through a math game on computers. Later, they switched.

As they left the session, several kids gave the class a thumbs up. "I liked it," said Simon Niese, 11. "I struggle with math and I felt like this really helped me."

Comparing before and after test scores, Cordon said the kids improved.

In addition, Cordon said, the program helped him realize the wealth of untapped resources among the parents, many of whom come from engineering and other professional backgrounds.

"In this community, we have too many engineers making copies," he said of parent volunteers.

He would like to expand the program and pull in more parents to not only volunteer in Rocket Academy but to teach other parents how to educate their kids at home.

"The idea is to help mentor parents," he said.

Bringing back music

Volunteers were the engine behind the success of the Music Workshop this school year, said Raleigh Hills K-8 School Principal John Peplinski. Music Workshop is the brainchild of Raleigh Hills parent Amy Richter, who was frustrated with the whittling away of music across the district over the years.

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Raleigh Hills K-8 students Meg Unruh, left, and Brooke Rohrer, both third-graders, focus on answering questions about jazz during a Music Workshop lesson in the spring. The workshop was created and taught by volunteers

Wendy Owen/Beaverton Leader

"Music helps us develop mentally and emotionally," said Richter, who has a degree in music and psychology. "I don't think people realize until they get older that they use music as a tool in their everyday lives,"

Cuts to music in Beaverton schools culminated this school year when the district eliminated several elementary music positions. At Raleigh Hills, elementary students had music once every six to eight days.

Richter kicked off the program in February, offering Music Workshop DVDs to any interested public schools for free to use with students in grades K-8.

Six Beaverton and four Portland schools used the program last school year, incorporating it into their school day. Another seven schools are signed up for the fall, Richter said.

The DVDs are a professional-grade documentary series that teaches students about music, instruments, history and style.

The series is supplemented with a set of questions for students, so any staff or volunteer can teach the lessons.

The videos are expensive to create, said Richter, who edits the videos. Each episode costs at least \$20,000, but so far, she has found donations to help cover costs.

Music Workshop doesn't compete with other music programs that remain in schools. It simply keeps music alive in the minds of students, Richter said.

For some kids, it is their only exposure to jazz or the trombone or the big band era. Next school year, the series focuses on rock and roll.

During a spring session at Raleigh Hills, a group of third-graders watched a jazz video, learning about **Dizzy Gillespie**, cool jazz, Dixieland, improvisation, jazz instruments -- clarinet, saxophone, trombone and more. The kids scribbled down answers to questions they were given beforehand, and Richter posed the questions during a pause in the video, calling on students for answers.

After the session, third-grader Lyla Olson said to Richter, "I just want to say, I really enjoyed this class today."

Peplinski said the reaction from students and parents has been "overwhelmingly positive."

"Music Workshop is a wonderful example of how parents can make a difference by working with schools to be educational partners in times of great need," he said.

Correction: Gita Pastala Troeger's name was misspelled.

-- Wendy Owen

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