

The Oregonian

Involved dads instrumental in raising men

Wednesday, September 05, 2007

This week, my 11-year-old twin sons experienced a historic milestone: Their father escorted them to their first day of middle school.

I wish I was there to witness this transition into the first day of the rest of their lives. But I'm in Portland. My sons are now living in Detroit, Mich., where illiteracy is high and high school graduation rates are low.

What was I thinking?

I was thinking about how their father is so much better equipped to raise my sons to become men.

Statistics bear out that the quality of the school is less important than what kind of home environment students live in. Actively involved fathers produce sons who earn better grades, get higher test scores and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. What's more, those students are less likely to be suspended, arrested or experiment with drugs, alcohol or sex.

I'm willing to take that research-based gamble on my sons' development. And when my daughter and I flew to Detroit for a 10-day visit, which ended Saturday, we noted how my sons seem more mature.

"They kind of grew up a little bit," notes my ex-husband, Lee Banks. "They're more responsible."

It was Lee who calmed their first-day jitters. He was the one who fixed their breakfast and pressed their school uniforms of khaki pants and white polo shirts. And he was the one whose hand they clasped as they walked toward their classrooms.

Unfortunately, though, in a school of 700 students, Lee was the minority. "I saw a lot of mothers," he says. "But I didn't see a lot of the fathers."

Perhaps Detroit didn't get the memo. This week's annual Million Father March is intended to encourage more male role models to accompany children to school. The march began in 2004 in Chicago. Since then, it has included 300,000 men from 127 cities, as well as Tamale, Ghana, and London. Portland is participating this week for the first time, because of the organizing efforts of a new nonprofit called the Black Parent Initiative. This leadership development program was created by two childless

The Oregonian

20-somethings -- Johnell Bell, former student representative on the Portland School Board, and Charles McGee, who ran unsuccessfully for the school board in March '06.

Their idea, which was birthed through a grant from the Portland Schools Foundation, actually is the next generation of the public attention focused on boosting reading and math achievement among minority and low-income students. The parent-led Education Crisis Team, championed for years by Head Start national leader Ron Herndon, faded away a few years ago.

"There's no ongoing organization that is still carrying out the work," says Ron Williams, of the Black Parent Initiative, which is making a presentation this morning before the Portland City Council. "We want to unpack the issues that have an impact on parental involvement."

Although, some low-income parents desperately need such an organization, schools also play a role in welcoming parents into the equation and making them accountable.

In Detroit, for example, where more than 90 percent of public school students are black, my sons, Alex and Zavier, had to apply and then be interviewed and tested before they were accepted as students. Parents are required to volunteer at least 16 hours each quarter.

"You have to be willing to step up to the plate here," says Principal John Wilson.

That's good advice for any parent anywhere. So this week, encourage the men in your lives -- including uncles, cousins and brothers -- to be a part of a student's first day back to school. Children grow up so quickly. Better to check them out now behind a desk than later behind bars.

S. Renee Mitchell: 503-221-8142; rmitch@news.oregonian.com This email address is being protected from spam bots, you need Javascript enabled to view it . Comment online: [http:// blog.oregonlive.com/reneemitchell](http://blog.oregonlive.com/reneemitchell)