

Karen Wontan – Comments to the National Math Panel – September 14, 2006

Good Morning. My name is Karen Wontan, I am the parent of two young children. My son is a student at the Murphy K-8 School here in Boston. I am here today as an advocate for my son's math learning and an advocate for schools partnering with families to raise academic achievement. I hope the panel will be able to examine districts that are building these partnerships and the impact they are having on student learning. I know that my experience with the Parent Leadership Team in Boston has made a huge difference for me and my son as well as many other families in the district.

I first became involved with the team two years ago because I wanted to help my son with his math homework. Now, I had been a math major at MIT and had always done well in math through high school, but frankly I was perplexed by what he was bringing home, so I had to get involved.

Fortunately, through parent workshops, Boston gave me a chance to find out more about what he was learning and the way he was being taught. The workshops were a real eye-opener for me. I got to see how children were being challenged in class because I was challenged to think about the math they were learning.

In addition to information about the goals and approach of the curriculum, the workshops give parents a chance to do the math their children are doing. Parents are asked to solve problems and think about how they got their answers. I have to say that when I had to go back and start thinking about what was really going on, for example, when I was carrying that "1" while adding a column of numbers, I began to see what the teachers meant by the words - "developing computational skills with understanding." The workshops convinced me that children understand the math better when they can explain how they got an answer. When parents are asked to solve a problem in their heads without paper and pencil and then describe how they figured it out, they are surprised by all the different ways people work the problem.

This is just one example that demonstrates to parents why teachers want students to learn different approaches to a problem so that they can solve them efficiently. In learning how to approach a problem in several different ways the children develop real life skills and are more valuable to their future employers where flexibility and creativity are a plus.

My experience is not unique. I lead parent workshops, and it is so gratifying when parents come back and tell me about the progress their children are making. These workshops would not be possible without the commitment of the administration and teaching staff.

I am glad I decided to get involved and learn more about my son's math program. I love helping him with his homework. He is excelling in math and recently he confessed to me that he likes solving math problems.

I believe that this school family partnership is a critical component of Boston's math program and has contributed to the increase in student achievement that we are seeing here. I am eager to continue my work with the Parent Leadership team so that more parents can be advocates for

their children's learning. I also want my daughter, who will be starting school in a few years to have as much success in math as my son is now having.

I would like to thank the panel for this opportunity to address you today and hope in all your work you will be able to examine the impact of parental programs like the one that is happening here in Boston.