

opinion

NEW IDEA: FAMILIES THAT LEARN TOGETHER



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Twenty Cincinnati families celebrated this month after helping one another overcome challenges and – for many – experience for the first time true educational achievement. They completed a family learning program where they spent at least four hours a week, for six months, working together to improve their lives and learn together.

The graduates range from preschoolers to a great-grandmother. They include several families of Hispanic/Latino, Chinese and African-American descent. Their stories show a commitment to their families and community: from a grandmother working to get her 4-year-old grandson ready for kindergarten while also pursuing a GED, to a mother of three who learned how to help her children succeed in and outside the classroom and raised her awareness of resources that will help her become more self-sufficient and a more engaged parent and citizen.

The June 3 graduation ceremony recognized the completion of an innovative, intergenerational education and Family Service Learning program launched at Beech Acres Parenting Center last fall. Our organization was one of five to receive a \$175,000, three-year grant for Toyota Family Learning, a nationwide initiative created by the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) and funded by Toyota.

As we see it, the most effective way to raise a community of great kids is to give parents and caregivers the tools they need to be successful. Toyota Family Learning provides a proactive, innovative approach to building practical skills that help



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Justice Cornett, center, decorates what will become a pink fish kite following a graduation ceremony for Toyota Family Learning at the Cincinnati Museum Center. She is a member of one of the families that completed the six-month program.

families engage in education and community, and that promotes sustainable change.

Study after study has proved that parents engaged in their children's learning increases student achievement. A parent's willingness to get involved in their child's education – inside and outside the classroom – can greatly benefit and strengthen the parent-child relationship, as well as the school and community.

National outcomes from Toyota Family Learning include parents and caregivers gaining:

- » Increased skills for reading and computer literacy.
- » Increased engagement with their children's schools, especially through volunteering activities.
- » Increased community involve-

ment and leadership by up to 50 percent.

» Increased frequency of reading to, with, and listening to their children read.

» Organizing and planning skills, teamwork skills, self-efficacy, sense of pride and worth, content knowledge and leadership skills.

To make these strides, we must reframe the way many parents view school, many educators' views on families' roles in schools, and use engagement strategies that work. Toyota Family Learning includes components of successful family literacy programs such as parents learning alongside their children in classrooms, enhancing the home literacy environment, and greater parental engagement in schools. Our pro-

gram also includes participation in an online learning community, familytimemachine.com.

This program demonstrates that partnerships that include a national family learning expert (NCFL), a local organization (Beech Acres) and engagement of a local school district (Cincinnati Public Schools), backed by corporate seed money (Toyota), can bring family learning programs to scale in a way that will have long-lasting benefits for families, schools and the community.

We encourage community workers and area agencies to further explore this dynamic as they look for ways to close the gap between classroom and lifelong learning for the many vulnerable and low-income families in our community.

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