

Republic of the Marshall Islands Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) Project

By Evelyn Joseph

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) is providing service to parents with the goals of improving student academic achievement by facilitating parents' knowledge of, involvement in, and contributions to the schools in which their children are enrolled and increasing students' readiness for school by providing early childhood education information and training to parents. Parents As Teachers (PAT), an early childhood parent education program, is a partner, and Women United Together in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI) is a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) group executing this work.

The RMI public education system includes 76 elementary schools with an enrollment of 9,233 students (2006) and 5 secondary schools with an enrollment of 2,083 students (2006). A large number of these students are at risk of educational failure because of low academic achievement levels and low rates of persistence in school.

Parent Involvement

Research suggests that parents' increased involvement in their children's education would contribute substantially to improving the low

achievement levels of students. However, even though surveys and focus groups conducted over the years show that RMI parents value education highly as a means to a more secure and prosperous future for their children, there are many factors that have contributed to limiting their involvement and voice in schools. Thus, the need for the RMI PIRC derives from two different but related problems: (1) the unusually high number of "at risk" students in RMI public schools and (2) the absence of a strong tradition of parental involvement in education since the advent of schools modeled on those in the U.S. RMI students are "at risk" because of their low rate of persistence in school. A recent World Bank report titled *Educational Performance in the Republic of the Marshall Islands* states that for every 100 students who enroll in 1st grade, only 80% will complete elementary school. Of those, approximately two-thirds will go on to high school, and only 60% will complete high school. The result is that for every 100 students who enroll in grade 1, only about 30 will subsequently graduate from high school. There are many reasons for the high dropout rate among RMI students, but one of the most important has to do with the inadequate school readiness of children as they embark on their formal education.

Dr. Joyce Epstein's Six Keys to Parental Involvement are setting the standard for parental involvement for RMI schools using the Cluster Model (an RMI PIRC school improvement initiative).

Local populations are highly mobile. Shifts from outer islands to urban settings also have adverse effects on school-age children. Healthy child rearing and effective early childhood education have been among the casualties of this population shift. As would be expected, it is largely young families who have migrated to the urban centers, leaving behind their customary sources of child rearing support in the form of community, elders, and extended family. These young families often have little knowledge about parenting, child development, or early childhood education. The WUTMI and PAT project targets parenting skills from prenatal to 5 years of age. At present, this is the only parenting education program in the RMI providing service to families with children in that age group. The specific populations served by this program are teen parents, families with low income, and families with low literacy—groups that typically have fewer years of schooling than the population as a whole.

Evelyn Joseph, Director, RMI PIRC, PREL, may be contacted at josephe@prel.org.

