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## Back-to-school day



Nikki Hightower, a Boston Public Schools parent, is coached on the microscope by Pam Pelletier, senior program director for science at Boston Public Schools. Photo by Lauren McFalls

**February 3, 2010**

Some 250 parents of students in the Boston Public Schools returned to class on Saturday at Northeastern, carrying books, taking notes and attending seminars and workshops.

The university hosted the second session of Parent University, a free, yearlong education and training program developed by the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to help parents support their children's' academic achievement. The adult learners attended sessions on a wide range of topics, including algebra, the MCAS, K-8 science, self-esteem, planning for college and keeping communication open with their teens.

In addition to providing space and volunteer staff, Northeastern partnered with the BPS to develop the curriculum. Community-based organizations provided a variety of workshops, often in both English and Spanish.

For parents, the all-day program is a potent tool for learning how to teach, mentor and advocate for their children as they climb the academic ladder from elementary school to college.

"The program is about educating, empowering and preparing parents from all over Boston by giving them as many opportunities as possible," said program volunteer Craig Martin, a fifth-grade teacher at the Nathan Hale Elementary School in Roxbury.

Parents said that what they learned would pay off immediately—whether by helping them assist a child with math homework or strongly encourage a teen to go to college.

A seminar on preparing her daughter for college gave Brockton mother Natasha Riley the vocabulary to talk with her teen about the importance of earning a degree.

"When she gets out of high school, she's going straight to college," Riley said. "I wish my daughter was here, too. She would have really enjoyed it."

A crash course on mathematical problem solving gave Roxbury parent Shateara Battle more creative strategies for teaching basic math skills to her five-year-old son.

"He's already on an advanced path in math," she said. "The class taught us quick-thinking techniques to improve his skills."

Alice Levine, who teaches classes for parents through the BPS, led the seminar on mathematical problem solving. Pen-and-paper methods are a thing of the past, she said, so parents used building blocks and tooth picks to familiarize themselves with new strategies for solving problems.

"All children are now expected to be strong problem-solvers," she said. "You have to approach math problems as a puzzle."

Boston Public Schools Superintendent Carol Johnson addressed parents over a sit-down lunch in the Curry Student Center Ballroom. Parents are a child's best advocate and programs like Parent University give them the wherewithal to become leaders in their children's' schools, she said.

"You need to have the tools and knowledge so you can lead at your school," she said. "You have a right to ask questions so your children get the best education."

She called upon the parents in the room to help the school system achieve its goals of closing the achievement

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gap, improving MCAS scores and ensuring that all students are ready for college upon graduation.

"We can't do this alone," she said. "We really do need your help."

The program, organized by the BPS' Office of Family & Student Engagement, includes three full-day Saturday sessions during the school year, interspersed with shorter sessions at schools, libraries and community centers. The University of Massachusetts Boston hosted the first daylong session in October. The final daylong session will take place in May.

Free of charge to parents, the BPS is funding Parent University through a combination of federal stimulus grants and private gifts.

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