

The Learning Curve

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Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

Macon Bears win Georgia Indoor Wheelchair Soccer Championships

Team prepares for National Championships and basketball season



The Macon Bears celebrate their victory as State Champions.

The Macon Bears are champions once again. After taking the first Wheelchair Basketball Championship to be sponsored by the Georgia High School Association, they followed it up this year by becoming the 2004 Georgia Indoor Wheelchair Soccer Champions.

"We all feel real good about it," said Coach Glynn Watkins with a smile. "It's something we've been looking forward to for a long time."

The game is played on a basketball court marked off to resemble a soccer field. Each team has six players on the court in addition to the goalie, and each 24-minute half is divided into three 8-minute periods. According to Watkins, this is "to allow for the rotation of players."

The players are allowed to move the ball using their feet, hands, or wheelchairs, and they are allowed to carry the ball as long as they bounce it every three seconds. "It's a lot like handball," Watkins says.

The season runs from the end of August until November, and this year's championships were held at Rutland High School. The Bears have practice once or twice a week, and Watkins works them on passing, speed, setting up screens, and "always tries to end it with a good hard scrimmage."

The top four teams in the state head for the tournament for two semi-final games and the championship game. In their first game, the Bears went up against West Georgia Wolverines, beating them 15 - 7. In the finals, they took on the Atlanta Wolfpack, and without ever losing the lead, won the game 11 - 8.

"Over the past four years, we've been in the running for the top," said Watkins. The Bears have been 2nd in the soccer championships several times and are the defending champions for the basketball league.

Over the next few months, not only will they be defending their basketball title, they have also been invited to the National Wheelchair Soccer Championships to be held in Atlanta.

Bibb County Home School Coordinators work to increase parent involvement in the schools

Classes, workshops, social events, and home visits used to help parents take a more active role in their child's education

Under Title I of No Child Left Behind, schools are instructed to get parents more involved in the schools because statistics show a higher parental involvement means a child will achieve much better. To facilitate this, the position of Home-School Coordinator was created to help "create connections between the parents and the school," says Bruce-Weir Elementary Coordinator Elaine Moore.

With more and more parents working, it is becoming harder for them to find ways to participate. This does not mean they do not want to help; they just do not know how. Many parents have come to the schools expressing a desire to find some way to be more involved in their child's education, and all they need is someone to point them in the right direction. "The people are thirsty," says Vineville Coordinator Debra Ross. "They want to help."

Each school's coordinator is in charge of bringing the parents into their schools, so each has a different approach to the issue depending on the community they are involved with.

From workshops to training classes to social get-togethers with speakers to visiting homes, the coordinators will do anything to help make the parents feel more involved. "If you can establish a relationship with the parent, there's nothing you can't do," says Ross.

Charlene Walker at Rutland Middle School will be offering at least nine workshops over the course of the year to help parents at home, including one on assisting their children with their homework. Some schools are even offering academic classes for parents so they will know exactly what their children are learning.

Hamilton Elementary, King Elementary, Rutland Middle, and Burdell-Hunt Elementary all offer GED classes. According to Gwen Phillips at King, where they also offer computer and math classes, "I've seen the light come on in their eyes. It's enlightening to hear how they go home and know what they're kids are learning."

According to Cheryle Garrard of Barden Elementary, "parents want to learn how to use a computer," so they offer computer classes in the mornings and evenings to interested people.

Weaver Middle's Leola Murphy sponsored a get-together called 'Coffee and Conversation with a Counselor.' It lasted for more than an hour before school started and about 150 people showed up to ask their counselors specific questions, listen to presentations, and hear a representative from River Edge Behavioral Health Center speak about making good decisions.

Jeanelle Fry of Rice Elementary makes sure she makes a connection with all of the parents.

She will stand outside before and after school, greeting the parents as they pick up their children. She recently had an event for students and their fathers to get together and express concerns, ask questions, and get to know each other. "It was inspiring to see so many dads interested in their kids' education."

Visiting a student at their home - accompanied by a counselor or social worker - is essential in understanding a child and their behavior. Should a student show an excess of absences, drop in grades, or decrease in behavior, the coordinator can organize a visit to see if there are outside issues involved. According to Walker, there are so many outside conditions that could affect a student in the school, a coordinator needs to have a full understanding. "You don't know the conditions if you don't do a home visit."

Different methods for different schools, but each is working towards bringing the family closer to their children's school life.

According to Program Support Specialist Benjamin Roundtree, Title I considers parental involvement as a cornerstone in improving education, and the coordinators will do "whatever it takes to bridge the gap between parent and home. The law requires we break down all barriers."

Parent Mentor Nalini Isaac helps teachers and parents educate their exceptional children

State-wide program strives to bring all resources together to ensure each child receives a complete education

"We build cooperation and collaboration between families and educators," says Nalini Isaac of Georgia's Parent Mentor Program. In its third year statewide and second year in Bibb County, the program comes from the Georgia Department of Education's Division for Exceptional Children. The program brings parents who have children with special learning and/or physical needs into the schools to help teachers and administrators educate their children. "When families are involved, there are better results."

Isaac works with parents and teachers to create a bridge of information about a child's needs and the best way to work with them. According to her, there are many advocacy groups and agencies which offer resources and assistance to either parents or teachers, and Isaac wants to make sure everyone is getting as much information as possible. "I'm creating a network so it's all inter-related."

She is organizing reading workshops, creating a quarterly newsletter, compiling a database of active organizations and advocacy groups, creating packets of information, and working

with the Transition Fair. "There's a whole system out there dealing with these issues," she says, and she knows "finding the resources can be hard for [a parent or teacher] with their hands full already."

Isaac knows first-hand that it is possible for children to overcome their disabilities given the right opportunities and resources. Isaac was told her daughter, who was born with Down Syndrome, would never be able to read.

However, she now reads at a fourth grade level, is a Gold Medallist in horseback riding in the Special Olympics, ice skates, and plays soccer.

When Isaac was offered the opportunity to head up the Parent Mentor Program in Bibb County, she did not think twice about accepting. She says the job consists of what she has been doing for years to help her daughter's education: providing information specific to her daughter and trying to learn as much as possible so she can be a resource to others. "It's something I'm passionate about and love doing," she says. "We want to let people know, with the right help, [the children] can do everything they want to."



Nalini Isaac prepares a display for a workshop on helping teachers for children with disabilities' reading skills.