

A FORCE FOR Good

Alum leads growing national program aimed at helping preschoolers reach their potential

By Betsy Rogers | Photo by Geoff Story



A bulletin board of newspaper clippings, poems, sketches, and photographs help inspire Sue Stepleton and staff at PAT.

IMAGINE A NETWORK OF 10,000 TRAINED EDUCATORS who meet individually every month with families of preschoolers to maximize every child's readiness for school. Imagine the opportunity these educators have to foster literacy, learning, emotional health, sound nutrition, and an appreciation for human diversity. Imagine the promise for every child fortunate enough to participate.

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is this network, and Susan Stepleton, MSW '79, is president and CEO of its National Center in St. Louis.

With its increasingly global reach, PAT is uniquely positioned as a force for good. Its trained parent educators visit more than 270,000 families and a third of a million children in 3,000 local program sites in this country, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, China, and Germany. Mexico and Belize have nascent programs. It serves children in homeless shelters and leafy suburbs, military bases, and Native American communities.

Commitment and Drive

At the helm is a woman described by her colleagues as "high-energy," "brilliant," "passionate," and an "exemplary executive." Edward Zigler, the Sterling Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale, has worked with Stepleton since she took charge in 2002. "She has exactly the right leadership skills," says Zigler, one of the founders of Head Start. "She has great intelligence and is one of the fastest learners I have ever encountered."

Mary Rose Main is the retired national executive director of the Girl Scouts of America. Like Zigler, she serves on PAT's board of directors. She appreciates Stepleton's drive, energy, and enthusiasm. "And she brings that enthusiasm to others," Main adds. "She has a

passion for early childhood education." The depth of Sue Stepleton's commitment and her expansive vision are clear in her own words as well. "The intent of the Parents as Teachers program is universal access," she says. "The motivation is to level the playing field so that all kids start school with maximum readiness — good language development, good social and emotional development. The premise is that all parents can and want to do the best job they can with their children."

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We're here to give them the information and support they need."

Stepleton joined PAT after 13 years with Edgewood Children's Center in Webster Groves, Missouri, which serves children with severe emotional, behavioral, and communications disorders. She acknowledges a "missionary zeal," both about working with the children at Edgewood and about PAT, whose proactive approach in helping children achieve their

greatest potential is "particularly gratifying" for her.

Parents as Teachers began in St. Louis in 1981. By 1984 its basic curriculum, Born to Learn, had proved so successful that the Missouri legislature, in what Stepleton calls "an amazingly forward-thinking step," mandated it in all the state's public schools.

PAT brings families and parent educators together in personal visits, at home or elsewhere, in which the educator gives the family tools to promote learning, to maximize the amazing power wired into every little brain. The program draws on the most current research about brain development and puts it into a curriculum that parents can understand and use. PAT trains its educators in adult learning, so they know how to engage parents and encourage them to challenge and stimulate their children.

Though the program is national, Stepleton says, "it is always locally implemented." So in Missouri, for instance, parent educators are likely to be public school employees. Elsewhere, they might work for Head Start or a nonprofit agency.

The National Center serves as the "backbone" for the program. The staff numbers 65 — trainers, curriculum writers, developmental psychologists, and others. "Our role is quality assurance, providing the training and keeping it current, writing and revising our curricula, conducting research, and public policy advocacy work," she explains.

New Initiatives

Under Stepleton's leadership, PAT has launched significant new initiatives. Consider homeless shelters: locally, PAT's parent educators working in shelters used the basic

Born to Learn curriculum. Nationally, PAT developed a fruitful partnership with the Toy Industry Foundation, which has an ongoing interest in shelters. A collaboration followed when the local educators explained the particular needs and constraints they encounter in shelters, and PAT responded with a program called *The Power of Play*. It provides for playgroups and other means of supporting parents in that setting. It encourages children, Stepleton says, "to learn to hope and dream." The Toy Industry Foundation brought its resources to bear, supplying funding and educational toys.

"She's terrific at bringing together other parties who want to do things for children," Main observes. "She has really helped us link with many other organizations and agencies in a collaborative way that then broadens the resources available to work with children."

In another initiative, PAT developed a literacy kit with the support of several corporate and foundation partners. Building on PAT's central focus on literacy, the kit is a new tool to help low-literacy parents in particular feel comfortable helping their children learn to read. It shows parents how to use simple, everyday

Most recently, the U.S. Department of Defense has asked PAT to tailor the Born to Learn program specifically to military families. "We're dealing with things like parents being deployed and long separations and constant moving," Stepleton notes. Military families, she observes, are often headed by very young parents living far from home on low pay, often without support systems. "These are families at serious risk," she asserts. The program is already in use on four Army bases.

Success Sparks Growth

Though Parents as Teachers began spreading internationally about 15 years ago, to New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada, Stepleton has led its expansion into non-English-speaking countries. "She has overseen moving the program to China and Germany," Zigler notes. PAT became available in China two years ago and in Germany last year, when public welfare officials in Nuremberg asked for help preparing its growing numbers of immigrant children for public school.

International expansion is exciting but challenging. "The very first conversation we have with anyone is

"The role of grandparents might be very different." So making the basic model culture-specific is essential.

"There's a step beyond that," she adds. "We have things to learn, whether it's from Native American parents or Chinese parents or Russian immigrant parents in Germany. We're all learning better ways from each other." The head of the New Zealand PAT program, for instance, is a Maori who has helped the organization appreciate indigenous cultures and honor ancestors more deeply. This contribution, Stepleton says, "has helped us make good connections with Native Americans. There are real commonalities that these families have with New Zealand families."

Stepleton has steered PAT's growth in other ways. In August 2005, it absorbed a Minneapolis program called MELD, which had similar goals but targeted teen parents and ethnic populations. MELD, struggling to continue its work, asked PAT to take over its programs. PAT agreed, and its program is spreading in Minnesota as a result.

Advocate for Change

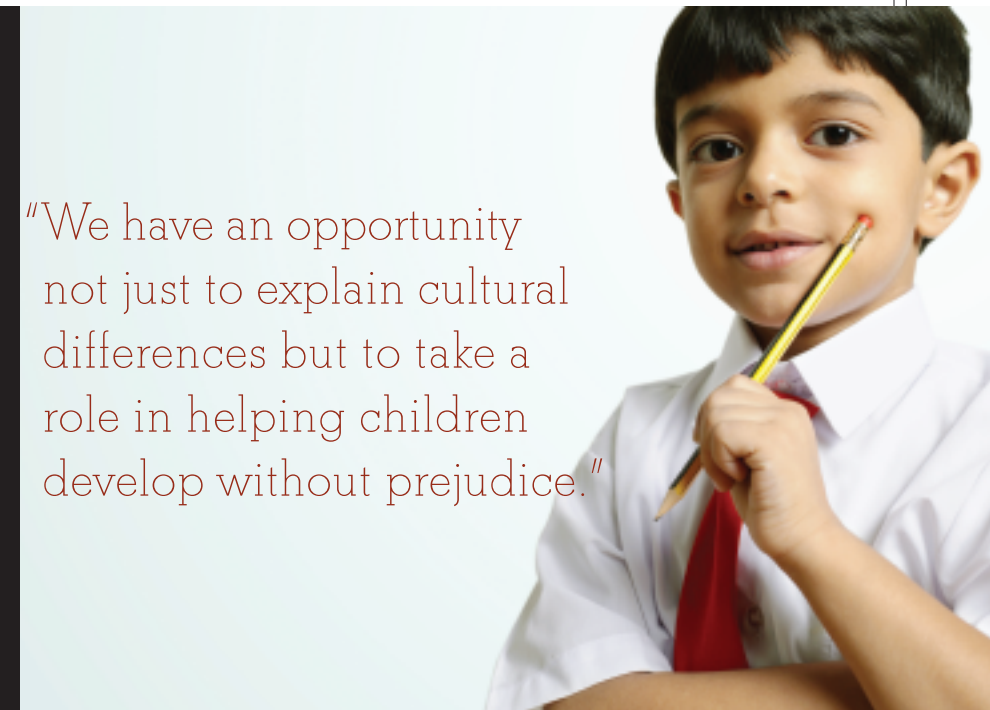
Advocacy is another important part of PAT's work. Currently, both houses of Congress are considering legislation to fund early childhood home visitation. Stepleton is optimistic about the Education Begins at Home Act because it has bipartisan support in both houses and many advocacy organizations are supporting it, ranging from the American Academy of Pediatrics to the Child Welfare League of America. Though various organizations involved in home visitation would participate, Stepleton says, "we believe strongly that Parents as Teachers will be a major backbone of this program."

U.S. Sen. Christopher ("Kit") Bond, R-Mo., the bill's sponsor, has worked closely with Stepleton in developing the legislation. He appreciates her skills, expertise, and commitment. "She is a passionate, energetic, and well-respected advocate on behalf of children and families," Bond says. "She brings a powerful voice and wealth of experience to the table when she says that reaching parents at or before a child is born is the best and most cost-effective way to promote positive parenting and positive outcomes for children and families."

Karabelle Pizzigati, a policy consultant on children and family issues in Washington, D.C., affirms Stepleton's major contributions in the policy arena. "She's very interested in policy issues and how policy can make a difference," Pizzigati says. "She has knowledge that is both broad, across systems and a range of issues, and deep — that is, she knows the practice."

Zigler agrees. "She has an ability to deal with both the inside and the outside worlds," he observes. "She's not only responsible for the functioning of a very large organization, but she's also the person who makes appearances before Congress, deals with policy makers at the state and federal level, and works with foundations."

The growth, the international expansion, and the exciting prospects for federal engagement all give Stepleton satisfaction as she considers her four years heading up Parents as Teachers National Center. She is also pleased with yet another accomplishment. "We have made a very intentional movement to become culturally competent," she says. "We have such an opportunity not just to explain cultural differences but to take a role in helping children develop without prejudice."



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A strong emphasis on the richness of diverse cultures permeates Born to Learn's latest edition. She believes PAT is uniquely positioned to combat bias. "It is really a stewardship responsibility in my own mind — and a dynamite opportunity," she adds.

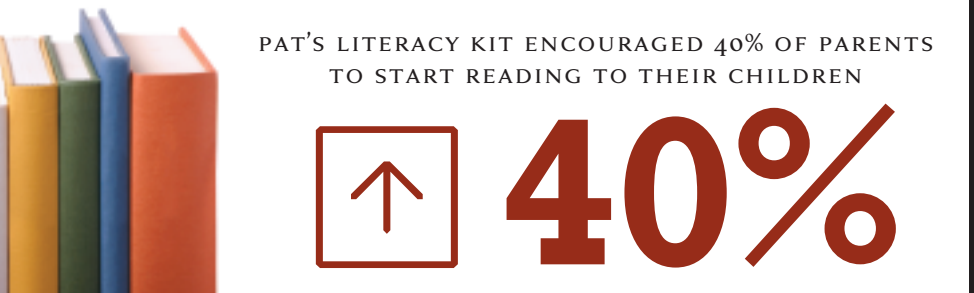
Stepleton holds four graduate degrees. In addition to her MSW, she earned a master's in German studies from Washington University, an MBA from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and a PhD in public policy analysis from Saint Louis University. Her MSW, she says, gave her essential content about working with individuals, group dynamics, and approaches to social issues. "That theoretical framework has helped me, whether it's been with personnel issues or figuring out how to organize to impact public policy." Perhaps even more importantly, though, "it helped provide a value base for the way I go about work and think about the impact of my work, which by definition affects children and families. A social work

degree helps one remember that you can't make decisions without thinking about the ethics of your actions."

A Bright Future

Stepleton's vision of the future is bright with promise. Five years from now, she says, "we will have passed Education Begins at Home. Our work will have quadrupled in size and scope. We'll be serving millions of children, bringing them all the things that we know from our research we can do to help them and their parents. We will continue to stay on the cutting edge of research. And we will have more presence in Latin America."

Zigler agrees. "There will be a lot of challenges in the future," he concedes. "That's just the nature of the business we're in. But I will predict that Parents as Teachers is going to blossom and grow under her leadership." ☞



experiences — reading labels in the grocery store, singing, talking in the car — to expand vocabulary and foster language competence. Follow-up studies showed that the kit encouraged 40 percent of participating parents to begin reading to their children.

about cultural issues," Stepleton says. "There are many, many commonalities of child development and physical development," but there are also key differences. "In China, for instance, it is typical to toilet train children much earlier than we do," she observes.