

## **HOW CAN WE BETTER COMMUNICATE WITH OUR ALLIED DRIVE FAMILIES?**

*Karen Myers  
Crestwood Elementary School*

Researchers and educators have long agreed that when parents get involved in education, children try harder and achieve more at school (e.g., Epstein, 1995). Parents who help and encourage their children to learn at home, and who help develop positive attitudes toward school, contribute to the personal growth and academic success of their children.<sup>1</sup>

Crestwood Elementary School is located on the far west side of Madison. I have had the opportunity to be a physical education teacher at Crestwood for the past sixteen years. Nine years ago the Allied Drive neighborhood was divided up and sent to three different elementary schools. Allied Drive is located about eight miles from Crestwood. It is a high crime and low income area. The majority of the population is Afro-American families. The Allied Drive students sent to Crestwood added diversity to our population. This diversity brought new opportunities and challenges. One challenge was to make this community feel part of our existing school. These students were bussed further than any of our existing students. Dividing the neighborhood among three different schools meant that a student with a friend living across the street might not necessarily go to the same elementary school.

During the last nine years, to help unify the communities, our school has tried providing busses for different events, providing cabs, holding parent meetings at the Allied Drive Community Center and conferences at the Allied Drive Community Center. Our principal and some staff worked at the Allied Drive Summer School Program, assigned families to bring them to school events, staff helped with the Saturday Soccer Program at Allied, attended the neighborhood annual picnic and invited some of these students to do special outings on weekends with staff. Some of these outreach activities are still being done but I conclude that lack of communication continues to be a very important piece of the puzzle. To help assess the issue I surveyed the staff at the beginning of the year to see how many of our Allied families attended the following events:

- Registration Day
- Ready Set Goal
- Go To School Night
- Book Fair
- Hoedown
- CAPT meetings

The results of my informal survey confirmed my suspicion that we do not have much participation from our Allied Drive families. After talking with many staff, I decided to see how we might improve communication with all of our families on Allied

Drive. I first thought I might send a survey to our families to get feedback from as many families as possible. However, that didn't seem like the best choice, as communication appears to be the problem. I was concerned as to how many survey responses I would get back. Besides that, I questioned how many families would feel comfortable filling it out. I decided to look for a strong leader in the Allied community and someone who would remain a member of our community for at least 5 years. I picked the mother of a current first grader. She also has a child who is now a sophomore who attended Crestwood, so I feel she will stay at our school. I feel it is important to have someone who knows our school, is comfortable in our building, will more than likely stay at Crestwood until her child graduates and someone who is comfortable speaking her mind. I have personally asked this mom if she would be interested in meeting with me and talking about how we can improve communications. I couldn't have asked for a better reaction than she gave me. She was very excited and interested in talking with me. I wanted her to think about the idea so we met for the first time in January.

I have also had an opportunity to see first hand how important it is for our Allied students to see their parents in our school. I have a fifth grader who saw me first thing in the morning. She was very excited that morning. She told me her mom was coming to school that day. She wanted me to meet her mom and she was just so pleased that her mom coming. Her mom was coming that morning to attend her daughter's IEP meeting. I saw the child at the end of the day. With a very sad face she told me her mom didn't make it because she was ill. It made me realize just how important our communication with families is as seen through the eyes of this one child.

I have also looked at Allied attendance during the first semester of school. The district goal is 94% for elementary schools. The average for elementary schools is 96-97%. Out of our current thirty-seven Allied students, seventeen of our students are below the district goal. Twenty-eight of our students are below the elementary average using 97%. Two of our students are considered truant.

I will also be sending out a survey to our staff to find out what they are currently doing in their classroom to build relationships with our Allied community, I will ask what they feel has worked, what hasn't worked and if they feel that it enhances their child's learning when parents are involved in their child's education. When I have the results I will ask the staff to prioritize the results for the top three classroom actions they feel can be done in the classroom and the top three the school could be doing.

The survey results from our staff showed that staff felt Ready-Set-Goal conferences were very important both at Crestwood and the Allied Community Center and persistent phone conversations were the top three goals the staff felt they could do to help with communication. The top school-wide goals were to provide transportation and community resources for our Allied Community.

I have tried unsuccessfully to meet with my parent. She has been given a few questions to think about and I will be calling her to talk about them. Meanwhile, I will be meeting with my principal to talk with her about the direction she feels our school should

pursue.

I have met with my principal to get a better understanding of what has been working at Crestwood and what direction she feels we should be going. One of our biggest challenges is the mobility of our student population from Allied Drive. We started the year with sixty-eight students and we now have thirty-seven. We need to empower our parents in their child's education. When we meet with families we need to listen to them and have them tell us what their needs are and how we can best educate their child. Our parents need to know that we are listening and that we do care about their children. Busses have worked for our Crestwood Caper (fun fair held in March) but otherwise cabs work to get our families to other events. It would also be nice to have an African American counselor or social worker come with families to school to help with building relationships. In the past we had a minister come with a family that was very helpful. I have contacted that minister and hope to use some of his ideas.

I did have an opportunity to talk with my Allied parent and she shared some of her thoughts and also the thoughts of other parents that she knows. She told me that a lot of families don't feel comfortable because they don't feel that they are being listened to. She told me that the black family is different than the white family in regard to respect of teachers. The black family teaches their children to respect teachers, however, if the teacher is telling their child something different than their mother has told them then they are told to respect their mothers. The teacher is then expected to take up the problem with the parent and not the child. An example might be if the child asked to go to the bathroom and the teacher said "no." The child has been told by the mom to walk out of class and go to the bathroom. Currently she feels that Crestwood should make a greater effort to let the parents know that they are welcome anytime to come to school. We need to give special invitations to them so they know they are welcome. A parent liaison would be very helpful to the Allied community. The school liaison should be employed by the school district and be someone from the Allied community. Besides sending home notices via the backpacks and phone calls, she would like to see more sent through the mail. A bus to the Caper is great, but for other events, cabs are best. She also thinks it would be nice if we went to the center and explained school basics. An example would be the Ready-Set-Goal conferences and with an explanation of why they are so important. These are just basic things that parents need to know about the every day events at school.

I have had opportunities to talk with some of our staff through our book club. They feel very strongly that Crestwood should go to the Allied Community Center in early August and talk with parents about school basics and be available to them to answer any questions they might have about our schools. We also have decided that a buddy program would benefit our students. I will be asking staff in May to give me a list of current students in their classroom that they feel could benefit from someone who would touch base with them everyday to let them know someone does care about them. When school starts in September I will have the list available for staff to pick someone with whom they would like to buddy up. We also thought we could brainstorm a list of different things the staff person might want to do with their buddy.

I have talked with my principal about our ideas. I will be asking staff in May to give me a list of current students in their classroom that they feel could benefit from someone who would touch base with them every day to let them know someone does care about them. In August we will be going to the Allied Drive Community Center and talk with parents about school basics. We will ask the other principals from the other schools involved to see if they would be interested in joining us.

I'm very excited about the direction my research is taking. I'm looking forward to next year and I'm hopeful that each year our learning community will be a more comfortable place for all our families to learn and grow together. With the current plan for the school year 2005-6, I'm hopeful that by helping families know what is going on in our schools it will increase our communication and, with that increased communication, I am hopeful that students and families will want to be in the schools and students' attendance will increase along with academic performance. I'm also hopeful that when students feel more connected via our buddy program they will feel more comfortable in our community and want to come back to after-school events with their families. This is a small start but I'm confident it is a positive start in the right direction to increasing communication with our Allied families.

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<sup>i</sup> Maynard, Stan and Howley, Aimee, Parent and Community Involvement in Rural Schools, Internet Article (June 1997)