
CHAT WITH THE PRINCIPAL OVER COFFEE AND DONUTS

Williamston Elementary School

Williamston, Michigan

The coffee was hot and the donuts were fresh! What a great way to start a new tradition at Williamston Elementary School -- the "Principal's Coffee." This informal gathering brought together parents; principal, Dr. Chris Jencka; assistant principal, Mrs. Jill Hilla; and parent & community involvement coordinator, Jean M. Smith. The "Principal's Coffee" provided parents with an opportunity to share compliments, comments, and concerns.

The idea stemmed from conversations with parents who were unable to attend regularly scheduled PTA meetings who wanted an opportunity to talk with the school's principal and assistant principal. Not only did this gathering open up a new communication link between school and home (Type II Involvement), but it also encouraged a feeling of partnership in education.

An important part of the program was to reach as many parents as possible. For that reason, two sessions were scheduled -- one in the morning before school started and the second in the afternoon before school was dismissed. An invitation was extended to all parents through the school newsletter. The agenda was left open to provide parents the opportunity to discuss the issues with which they were most concerned.

Because this was a new idea and no one was asked to R.S.V.P.; whether or not anyone would accept the invitation was a mystery. We were happy that parents did show up for both sessions! While the numbers in attendance were not huge, there was enough participation to decide to have another "Principal's Coffee" later in the spring.

One thing that we will do differently at the next session will be to have a place where parents can write down the topic or topics they would like to discuss. This will permit better management of time, and all issues will be identified and addressed.

Parents who attended were able to get immediate feedback on the topics raised, and if further action or discussion was needed, that was arranged. A bonus that arose from the first session was a parent's unsolicited offer to facilitate interaction and communication between a class or classes from our rural area school with a class or classes from a more urban area. This idea fits perfectly with the diversity theme in our school improvement plan.

Though we conducted no formal evaluation, parents were asked if they felt that the "Principal's Coffee" was helpful. The response was a resounding "YES." Parents were also asked if they felt that another coffee should be planned, and again the answer was "YES." Even though Dr. Jencka and Mrs. Hilla make themselves available for meetings with parents, sometimes a little extra effort is needed to bring everyone together.

A "Principal's Coffee" is very easy and inexpensive to implement. The only cost is for coffee, donuts, and time. The time commitment from the principal pays off by showing parents that their opinions are valued and that they are valued as partners in student success. The "Coffee" concept is not a gigantic undertaking, but quite often, little things have the greatest impact!

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