

## STATEWIDE DISTANCE LEARNING OF PARTNERSHIPS

### Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Madison, Wisconsin

**H**ow can information about strong and lasting partnership practices be delivered interactively, cost-effectively, and conveniently to local school leaders statewide? The staff at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has found a friend in WisLine Web, a recently developed technology that allows live, interactive meetings, courses, and programs using a web browser and a telephone. The WisLine Web technology allowed us to offer useful, content-focused information from the nation's leading partnerships researcher to critical players involved in successful partnerships—school principals—in a timely, cost-effective manner.

In May, members of the Department's Bright Beginnings/Family-School-Community Partnerships Team invited Dr. Joyce Epstein to present a 90-minute PowerPoint overview of the Six Types of Involvement and the creation of Action Teams for Partnerships. The goal of this presentation was to inform about 25 local school leaders, mostly principals, who were in the process of implementing a VISTA program about the benefits of using a VISTA volunteer to introduce or expand partnership efforts in their schools in 2003-2004. The interactive format allowed participants to ask questions of the presenter, chat with each other (similar to instant messenger), and view the results of a

live, on-line poll of participants. Everyone—presenter, participants, and meeting sponsors—joined in the session from the comfort of their desk chairs via the Internet and a telephone.

Team members worked together to make this interactive technology-based workshop a success. First, team members scheduled a time for a WisLine Web presentation through UW Extension and received training to use the technology. Then, the team organized the content for an online PowerPoint presentation, which was based on the PowerPoint presentation available from the National Network of Partnership Schools. We met with Dr. Epstein via phone and email to plan the session, and taught presenters how to use the technology. Most importantly, the team practiced by doing a run-through with everyone before the actual presentation.

For the presentation itself, presenters convened online shortly before the start to answer any last-minute questions, review the agenda, and get comfortable with using the features. Presenters and participants were asked to log onto two separate website addresses; the presenters' site showed which pre-registered participants and walk-ons had signed in. The moderator welcomed everyone, gave everyone a chance to introduce themselves, and advised participants on ways to prevent background noises at individual sites that could be heard by everyone. As presenters

conducted their PowerPoint presentations, the moderator monitored changes in presentations, occasionally made sure everyone was on the same screen, and enlivened the screen with simple marks (checkmarks, underlining, etc.). The moderator also facilitated the flow of conversation and provided smooth transitions to other features such as participant poll results and write-in audience questions.

One challenge for this practice was a technical constraint. Participants were advised to call in to a technical assistance/training center available at least 30 minutes before the presentation began to be sure they knew what to expect, how to sign-in, and how to use the technology. Unfortunately, a handful of participants could not interact optimally due to technical issues (e.g., some used old computer software). These issues were noted.

There were a number of ways in which parents, teachers, and other school and community leaders who did not attend the presentation could gain access to it. Within 24 hours, the UW Extension service provider posted the presentation online so that participants could review it or show it to others for the next two weeks. Sponsors could also make a PDF file of the presentation and post it on their website. Finally, a CD-Rom of the presentation is available to anyone for \$15.

A federal VISTA grant to DPI covered the expenditures for this practice, which totaled approximately \$400. The cost for operating one phone line over WisLine Web was \$16.30 an hour. Some sites receiving the presentation had several individuals using one computer and/or phone line.

Project administrators and implementers benefited directly from this practice by learning precisely their roles in the VISTA Project, and how to lead and conduct effective partnership practices. It was implicit that by learning their VISTA Project roles in the context of partnerships, school leaders would administer and implement an effective program at their schools, and students would benefit relative to the goals they set. According to the participants, the thorough, yet concise, content of the presentation led the prospective supervisors, school principals, to a greater understanding of the project and its partnership framework and mission. More importantly, they clearly understood the roles that they would have to engage themselves in, and shortly proceeded with next steps.

The success of this first online presentation has led us to plan to offer a series of such presentations to update and to upscale the 100 Wisconsin members of the National Network of Partnership Schools, beginning in Fall 2003. We would like to emphasize the interactive nature of this type of presentation by increasing the use of interactive features. Also, we will try to minimize technical frustrations of participants by communicating preventive measures and sources of assistance ahead of time. This use of technology for school, family, and community partnerships has been an inspiration.

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