

Family Surveys and Disney on Ice

Parents Plus
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

With an armload of free tickets to a popular ice-skating show, Parents Plus helped a small Milwaukee elementary school launch its Action Team for Partnerships (ATP). Parents who completed a survey on school needs and volunteer potential received a free ticket and transportation for every family member to the touring ice show. In return, the school got almost a 100 percent response to its surveys, giving it a strong foundation for its parent involvement program.

The tickets were donated to a Parents Plus staff member for use at the school. Parents Plus is Wisconsin's Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Its mission is to support positive parenting skills and increase parent involvement in schools to improve student achievement.

The parent surveys were an end and a beginning for the citywide special education school that serves about 100 students. It was a successful end to the school's attempts—previously unsuccessful—to get parents to complete surveys that would provide information for a parent involvement program. And it was the beginning of that parent involvement program—through an ATP.

The successful project began when two Parents Plus staff members spoke with the elementary school's principal and social worker about the lack of parent involvement. Because the students come from a wide geographic area, parents have little direct contact with the school. Administrators wanted to start a Parent Teach-

er Organization (PTO), but the group decided to get an ATP going first. They decided the parent survey was a great way to find out how the parents felt about the school. But the survey was a hurdle. How would administrators get the parents to the school? And how would they convince them to fill out the surveys?

Working together, school staff and Parents Plus representatives planned a Holiday Party, provided transportation, and offered the tickets and free rides to families who completed the surveys. The group sweetened the pot a little more by adding student performances to the party program.

The Parents Plus representatives and school administrators wrote the survey questions so that they required more than yes or no answers. They really wanted parents to say how they felt about the school, what their needs were, and how willing they were to volunteer their time and talents.

It worked. About 50 parents and 100 children attended the party and filled out the surveys. Even parents who could not attend completed the questionnaires and received free tickets. One parent, who went home with tickets for all eight members of her family, said she now understood how important the surveys must be.

“We used the surveys to assess the school needs and find volunteers for both the action team and other school needs,” said the Parents Plus representatives, who chose two parents to be ATP members. In addition, they opened lines of communication between the

school and its families. Parents asked for materials and tools to help their children at home and for other groups that would help them be better parents and teachers to their children. Working on a team with school and community members empowers parents and “having a voice will make advocating an easier thing for parents to do,” they said.

“This was only the first time doing this, but our parent survey and attendance percentage was nearly 100 percent, so it was extremely exciting,” said the organizers. “We are confident that because there has already begun to be more parent involvement, we will begin seeing academic results.”

Kristin Danielson, AmeriCorps VISTA
(414) 449-4767
k.danielson@parentspluswi.org