

Community Outreach: Forum at the Mosque

*North Penn School District
Lansdale, Pennsylvania*

Visiting a community mosque helped officials from the North Penn School District encourage more involvement from Muslim parents. During a forum at the religious center, school staff reached out to more than 50 members of Lansdale's Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, and Islamic communities.

The school district wanted to increase the involvement of its Muslim families, many of whom were unfamiliar with the educational system in the United States. District and school officials wanted to communicate school policy and welcome families to the schools. The officials met with leaders of the mosque to understand the families' cultures, arrange a meeting in their building, and to outline the expectations of such a meeting.

"The goals of the outreach activity were to offer information about the district and schools, including attendance, transportation, guidance, health, and other guidelines ...and to encourage more families from culturally diverse backgrounds to be more involved in their child's education and school," said the parent and community involvement specialist.

The family engagement team translated fliers and community signs to advertise the meeting. The district helped by sending out a news release and listing the event on its web site and in its newsletter. A local newspaper covered the event.

On a Saturday in September just after the prayer session, district leaders conducted a one-hour information session, followed by a question-and-answer period. Being careful to honor all customs, district leaders and members of the school's engagement team removed their shoes before entering the mosque, and men and women used separate doors. With the help of a translator, administrators talked about the district's expectations and policies, such as attendance on religious holidays, early dismissal procedures and phone chains. Principals from three elementary schools conducted the

presentation. Teachers, guidance counselors, a nurse, and parents from the schools attended to answer families' questions. Muslim students also attended.

After the presentation, school officials saw a significant increase in the number of Muslim families attending school events and volunteering at the schools during the day. Needless to say, district and community officials were enthusiastic about the results.

"North Penn, in reaching out in such a way, was a leader in the community and in the world!" a mosque leader said.

"Language will not be a barrier to engaging all families," promised one principal.

The overwhelming support from school staffs and community and religious leaders is likely to prompt another such event next year. District leaders have discussed adding representatives from the middle and high schools to future meetings.

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