

EXTENDING THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

BALTIMORE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS TOWSON, MARYLAND

When parents queue up to talk to teachers about their sons and daughters' performance in the classroom, parent-teacher conferences can have their limitations. On one hand, this kind of direct communication is at the core of school and family partnerships. On the other hand, these appointments are often time-bound and, by necessity, conversations end after 15 or 20 minutes. How could these collaborations be extended, wondered the Parent Support Services (PSS) office of Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS), while continuing to ensure that teachers had enough time to meet with all parents?

The PSS stepped in at one BCPS school, Berkshire Elementary, to provide parents with resources the group had developed that showed how to reinforce concepts and skills of the Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC) at home. If these resources could be distributed to parents in such a way that the information they received was tailored specifically to their children, and given to them with enough explanation to be properly applied at home, the PSS reasoned that students' individual needs could be more successfully addressed.

The extended sessions proceeded, at first, in the traditional way. During a parent-teacher conference, the teacher, parent, and student developed an action plan that identified skills or concepts that needed enrichment, the next steps needed, and who would be responsible for those steps. Teachers also shared samples of the student's work to illustrate some of these points. Then, near the end of the appointment, the teacher, who had been familiarized in advance with the available take-home resources, provided the parent with a checklist of documents to pick up at a centrally located resource table.

At Berkshire, the school administration resolved to set this table up in the gym, and agreed to staff the table with the school principal,

resource teacher, counselor, and several special educators. These professionals gave parents the materials that the teachers had prescribed on the checklists. Next, the staffers reviewed the materials with the parents, discussing the best ways to use them at home.

Before leaving the resource area, parents were also encouraged to visit another table, where PSS partnered with school officials to provide a mini-workshop called Games for Gaining. There, parents were shown several games promoting student achievement that could be played at home using household items. At the last stop, parents completed an evaluation sheet.

By the end of the evening, more than 100 parents met with 30 teachers, administrators, and staff with multiple points of interaction. The resources enriched and extended the usual parent-teacher conference. In addition to discussing the child's strengths and needs, each parent left the conference night with tools and materials to support and help their child in specific ways.

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