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Parental involvement still the best teacher of all

Bill would allow leave for school activities

By JENNIFER PRICE
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Budget-strapped lawmakers and educators say increasing parental involvement is the best way to improve Delaware public schools.

Rep. Darryl Scott, D-Dover, wants to give working parents up to 16 hours of unpaid leave each school year so they can participate in parent-teacher conferences, volunteer in their child's school and attend after-school activities.

"More and more families have both parents working, and they aren't able to get away from work to attend school conferences and be directly involved in their kids' education," said Scott, who served on the Capital School Board from 2005 to 2008.

Longtime educator Maurice Pritchett hopes the bill will become law.

"Increasing parent involvement is a critical component to improving inner-city public schools," said Pritchett, who was the 30-year principal at Christina's Bancroft Elementary before taking a district community engagement post in 2005. He retired last year. "They're more inclined to look in their child's backpack and check to see what they have for homework or help them prepare for a quiz or test."

Pritchett also worked with the Vision 2015 steering committee, which helped create a wide-ranging reform plan to revamp Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015.

The group's plan called for a better statewide assessment system, recruiting and retaining more highly qualified teachers, a greater investment in preschool education and increasing family involvement and community partnerships, among other reforms.

"Parent involvement should be a part of every school's improvement plan," he said.

But schools can't expect all parents to be able to volunteer during the day or make an afternoon parent meeting, said Pritchett, who runs his own educational consulting firm, Pritchett Associates, which sends retired teachers and administrators into schools to train staff in areas such as classroom management, lesson planning and parent involvement.

"Schools need to be flexible with parents' schedules," he said. "They need to figure out the best times for all parents."

Scott's bill, introduced in June, would require parents to provide their employers with at least 48 hours' notice before taking the leave, which could be taken in four-hour increments. Several other states -- including Massachusetts and Rhode Island, as well as the District of Columbia -- give parents leave to attend school activities. Scott hopes to get his bill passed next legislative session, which begins in January.

At Kuumba, parents pledge hours

At Kuumba Academy in Wilmington, parents can't get their child's report card without having a face-to-face meeting with their child's teacher. Teachers will meet with parents early in the morning, late in the evening or come to their home if they can't get to school.

"Parents are the key educator for their children. We tell our parents that unless we are working with you, your child will not succeed," said Sondra Shippen, head of the kindergarten-through-fifth-grade charter school.

When parents enroll their children at Kuumba, they're required to sign a parent contract, pledging to volunteer at least 30 hours during the school year. Parents can go on a field trip, attend a parent meeting, work in the library and cafeteria or attend the school's "Take Your Parent To School Day." Parents who can't volunteer during the school day can cut things out for a teacher's bulletin board or staple worksheets together from home.

"We want to engage everyone," Shippen said.

The school also holds parent academies, which provide parents with information on the school's curriculum, state assessments and choosing a middle school.

While there's a lot of buzz around school reform both at the state and national level, parent involvement hasn't been a significant part of the dialogue, Lt. Gov. Matt Denn said.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to award a portion of the \$4 million federal Race to the Top stimulus grant to states committed to changing the way schools run. Delaware is one of the states vying for the money.

Duncan is looking for states to adopt rigorous international standards and high-quality assessments, create data systems that track students throughout their schooling, improve teacher effectiveness and intervene at the lowest-performing schools. But parent involvement is not a requirement.

"We can change laws and regulations that govern how teachers and administrators do their jobs ... and what happens to students during the school day," Denn said. "But it's a lot harder -- as it should be -- for the government to tell parents what to do."

Denn still hopes Delaware can become a national leader in fostering parental participation in schools.

As part of the State Chamber of Commerce's Superstars in Education competition, he plans to honor two schools a year that have expanded their parental involvement through innovative programs. Schools that win the Excellence in Parent Involvement award will be recognized at the annual Superstars program, receive a banner for their schools and have their programs publicized throughout the state so that other schools can emulate their success.

"We recognize that not all parents are going to be engaged at the same level, but we think it's absolutely critical that they are a part of what's happening in their child's life at school," Shippen said.
