

Pilot program allows teachers to visit parents of schoolchildren in their homes in Springfield, Mass.

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SPRINGFIELD - Teachers, families and school district officials gathered at the Samuel Bowles School yesterday to celebrate the success of a pilot program which enables teachers to visit parents at home.

Parent Maria R. Ocasio, whose daughter Lizmelly M. Ocasio, 10, is a fourth-grader, said visits from teacher Kristin L. Burns have resulted in Lizmelly getting better grades. "(Now) I know how my daughter is doing," said Ocasio, who also has a 14-year-old son and a 4-year-old daughter.

Burns, meanwhile, said she benefits from meeting families on their own turf. "My experience with this program was wonderful ... sometimes we don't realize the situations that a lot of parents are in at home," Burns said, adding that nonetheless, "I saw a lot of hope and dreams in their eyes for their children."

The program called "Parents: Stepping Up as Powerful Partners," was launched in 21 Springfield elementary and middle schools last year by School Department officials, the Springfield Education Association, and the faith-based Pioneer Valley Project.

At Bowles, according to principal Luisa Rivera, 11 teachers visited homes and built bridges to about 30 families. Yesterday, certificates were awarded to participating parents, who joined their children and teachers for a special lunch of sandwiches, fresh fruit and cake.

The home visitation program includes weekly phone calls from a parent facilitator, and at least three home visits during the school year. Goals include improving pupil attendance and behavior, and increasing parent involvement.

Mayor Domenic J. Sarno said the program help parents whose work schedules make it difficult to get to school meetings. "I know you want to participate ... 99 percent of parents or guardians want the best for their children," he said. Sarno added that parents sometimes hesitate to get involved in the schools because of language barriers.

However, Sarno said successful connections are being built which may benefit Springfield long-term. "This is how you start to take back the city, street by street, corner by corner," he said.

Participating schools are having celebrations like Bowles did yesterday, and a district-wide event is planned for Monday night at Trinity Church.

Spradley said about \$75,000 is available for the home visitation program next year, which will fund just six of the 21 schools involved, although program sites that continue will expand to include more families. The Pioneer Valley Project is seeking additional funds to continue the program at schools which stand to lose it.

Schools designated to receive funds next year include Bowles, William N. DeBerry, Lincoln, the Springfield Renaissance School, Sumner Avenue, and Mary M. Walsh.