Case Study

Lincoln Park Middle School, Duluth, MN
October 2016

Brenda Vatthauer, Principal of Lincoln Park Middle School in Duluth, MN, has over 30 years of experience in education, including twenty two years of teaching. She has served in multiple statewide and regional leadership positions, from the Minnesota Association of Curriculum and Development Board of Directors to the Minnesota Principal Academy/NISL cohort, where she became a certified trainer. Mrs. Vatthauer has contributed technical assistance to numerous schools and districts, on issues including AYP, Title 1 and MSTA grants, literacy, and a Math and Science Teacher Academy grant, and has published articles in Today's Catholic Teacher, ASCD Inservice, and the Minnesota ASCD Minnesota Report. She is known for building relationships, empowering her staff, and creating a culture of "all students can reach high achievement."

Yet Principal Vatthauer had to reach beyond her considerable knowledge and experience to find an effective strategy for connecting with the families of her students. She was looking for “outside the box” ways to meet parents outside of the school in order for them to have more investment in their child’s education. This was a literal need, as her new school was “built on a hill” and inaccessible to the significant percentage of families without transportation (21%). And she needed a model that would be responsive to the needs of low-income families, as the majority of her students qualify for free/reduced lunch (65%).

Principal Vatthauer found home visits by attending the Parent Teacher Home Visits national conference in St. Paul two years ago. Her first step was to convene a committee of teachers to brainstorm how to move forward with home visits. Follow up discussions were held at a staff meeting, and all teachers received the article by Nick Faber in the American Federation of Teachers magazine. Mrs. Vatthauer organized the support of the local teachers’ union and district administration.

Teacher leaders invested in the home visit idea and started a pilot group last spring, when they were trained by the PTHV Minnesota HUB. The number of educators who participated in the pilot project, 14, was 23% of the staff, and 18 visits were made in the first round.
Lincoln Park aims to fully implement the program within a year. The goal is to have 95% of teachers trained by May 2017, with 200 visits made by August 2017.

Principal Vatthauer already sees indicators of the impact of the home visits. She sees an increase in students initiating conversations with a caring adult, referring to things they talked about on the home visit and a stronger connection to the school overall. She also reports fewer referrals for behavior.

Parents are reaching out more to teachers, says Principal Vatthauer. And due to a home visit, a parent is now a leader among other parents in our Community School Leadership Team.

Anecdotes already abound, but Year 1 project success will be measured and reported. Teacher leaders Katie Oliver, a reading specialist, and John Nachtsheim, a social worker, successful approached Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation for a $50,000 grant for 1 year of PTHV implementation. The grant includes technical support this year to measure project success.

In addition to expanding the home visit program, Principal Vatthauer continues to participate in relational family engagement efforts. She has developed a Personal Learning Network through her involvement with the "Beyond the Bake Sale" book study group, which reaches across nine time zones. She attended the Family and Community Engagement conference last summer in Chicago where members of her PLC co-presented a conference session. Vatthauer, Oliver, Nachtsheim and other educators will form a delegation to the PTHV annual National Gathering this year in Washington, DC.