



Blended Learning Playing Major Role in Detroit Education Renaissance

Education model pairs in-person instruction with online learning

By: Jacquie Goetz Bluethmann

The daily routine for students at Brenda Scott Elementary-Middle School in Detroit is far from typical. After an approximately 15 minute morning kickoff with the entire class, students log on to their personal laptop to see what lessons await them. Each child's daily tasks will differ based on his or her individual mastery of a particular concept or topic, and students will move among their computer, small group discussions and large group instruction throughout the day. The approach is known as blended learning, and it's quickly gaining speed.

Blended learning, sometimes referred

to as hybrid learning or technology-mediated learning, is a model of education that blends face-to-face instruction with online learning. According to Kristen McDonald, vice president of Program and Policy for the Skillman Foundation, blended learning uses technology in a way that personalizes learning by making it more accessible.

"The blended learning space offers a good quality solution to a lot of challenges Detroit students are struggling with," notes McDonald who previously served as chief of staff to State Superintendent of Schools Mike Flanagan. "It meets kids where they are."

This type of model is thus ideal for stu-

dents who come in several grade levels behind in one or more subjects, McDonald maintains.

"Many students in Detroit have family concerns that have affected their attendance at school," McDonald explains. "Blended learning provides full-time access to what's happening in the classroom and allows kids to move at a pace that works for them."

The concept of blended learning typically involves an emphasis on small group interaction where students can work together on a very specific assignment or challenging concept before returning to their computer to finish their individual

lessons.

"If you were to walk into one of our classrooms, you wouldn't see rows of desks," says Marques Stewart, principal at Brenda Scott. "You'd see a non-traditional classroom where kids are immersed in technology, gathered in small groups with their teacher or creating evidence of mastery on a particular concept. One hundred percent of students are learning and engaged at all times."

The role of the classroom teacher in blended learning is integral in making sure all the components of blended learning coalesce, McDonald says.

"Teachers may lecture on a core concept or conduct a science experiment with the class as a whole, but then based on students' level of interest and curiosity, they can then interact with a computer program taking the concept to a personalized level," she says.

For teachers, blended learning can provide real time data on each child calling out particular areas in which students may be struggling so the teacher can give individualized instruction as appropriate.

"Technology enables a ninth grader at a fifth-grade math level to overcome that gap," she explains. "Because that student may have missed big chunks of school, he may have missed core concepts that build on one another. It doesn't mean that there's a four-year learning gap. It means there may be four key concepts that he needs to grasp.

"Blended learning helps isolate those key concepts that are missing and then puts students through an age appropriate program. You may then see one-and-a-half to two years of growth in one year's time."

Blended learning can take many forms including games, tutorials, video and online discussion boards. At Brenda Scott, the school's youngest kids are using their computers to play interactive math games

A new approach to learning

A recent study by the Pew Research Center revealed that 78 percent of children ages 12-to-17 have a cell phone, and three quarters of teens access the Internet using a mobile device.

"Kids today have had technology in their hands as toddlers," McDonald says. "To then go into a classroom where they have to put it all away doesn't make sense. Their brains are wired differently as a result of early exposure to technology."

Leveraging this familiarity with technology is thus only natural and appropriate, McDonald says. Yet where a gap exists, McDonald acknowledges, is access to technology when children return home from school.

"It's true that a majority of Detroit school students don't have a laptop or desktop computer at home," she says. "But to address this, schools are extending their hours and opening on weekends to allow students to use computers at different times."

Students at Brenda Scott can check out a laptop to take home with them, Stewart says. "This is helpful because we are on a 210-day school year," he explains. "We don't break for summer vacation until

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teaching them how to count, to add and to subtract, says Stewart. To help older students expand their vocabulary, Stewart cites the example of a blended learning tool being used called Flocabulary.

"Known as educational hip hop, this program tasks kids with creating an original song, rap or poem using new vocabulary words," he explains. "Once they've finished, they upload their song to the technology platform that the teachers can access to ensure they've mastered the words."

Aug. 6. If a student misses school for a family vacation, he can login and access the curriculum from wherever he is."

But perhaps the biggest benefit of the blended learning approach is individualized instruction.

"When you have a child who is many grade levels behind in reading, you can use blended learning to diagnose that and increase the child's proficiency without embarrassing him or her," McDonald says. "The traditional model of learning doesn't work for all kids in Detroit. They need something fundamentally different. They need personalized learning."

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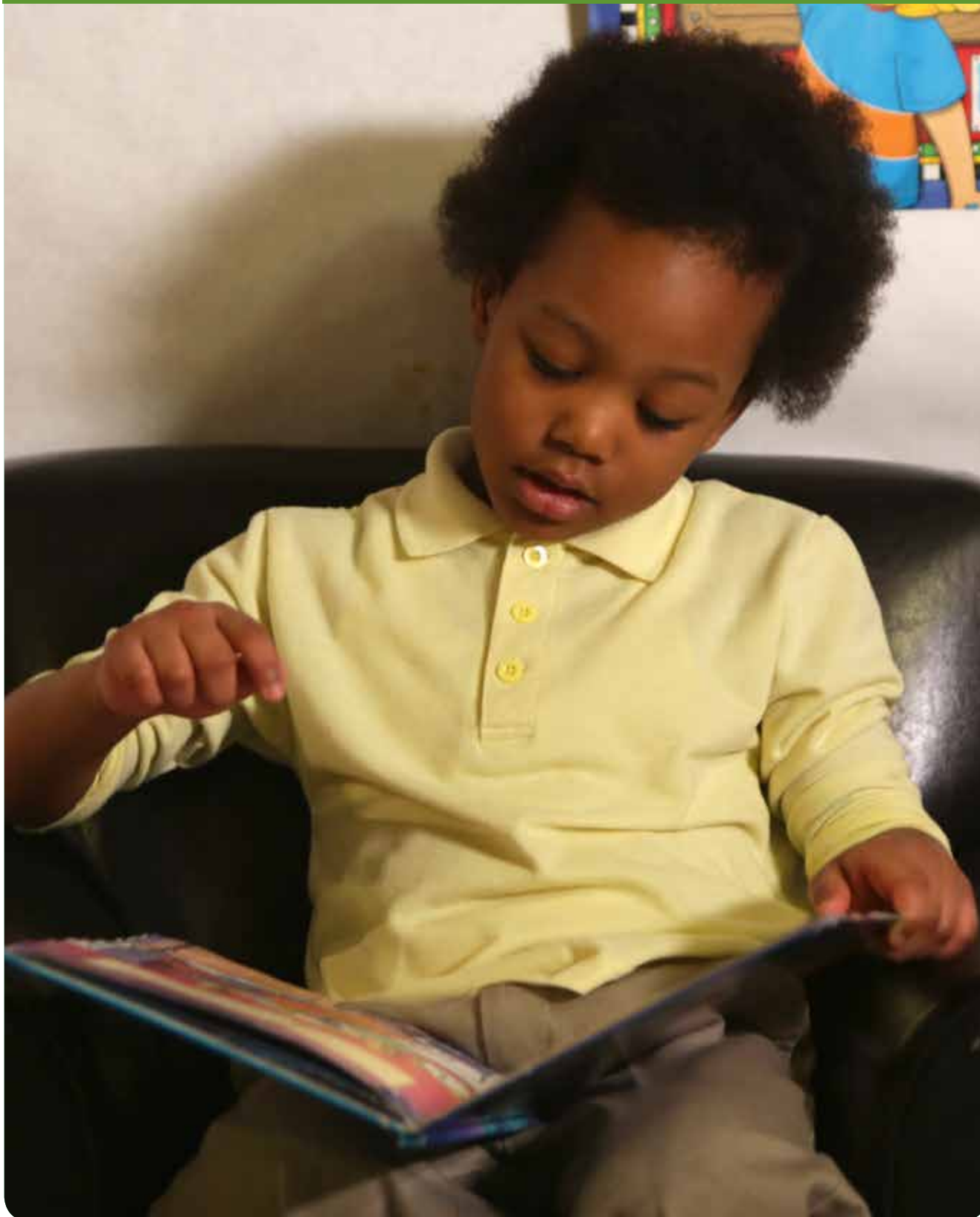


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Essentials for identifying a quality Early Learning Center

Questions every parent should ask in seeking high quality care for their child



By: Jacquie Goetz Bluethmann

In his most recent State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama cited research underscoring the importance of quality early childhood education to long-term outcomes, including improved high school graduation rates and employment opportunities.

President Obama shined the spotlight on an area close to the heart of Denise Smith, vice president of Early Education at Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD). It has been Smith's life's work to advocate for quality early learning.

"Learning starts from day one of a child's life," says Smith, who previously served as director of Great Start to Quality, Michigan's statewide and tiered quality rating and improvement systems. "Birth to age 3 provides a huge learning opportunity. The fundamental architecture of a child's brain is formed by age 3. Thus the foundation laid during those earliest years is crucially important when it comes to intellectual and emotional development."

To nurture a child's learning during this critical time, Smith encourages parents to seek out the highest quality care they can. An initial step in doing so, she advises, would be to visit www.GreatStarttoQuality.org to select the criteria parents are looking for in an early learning center. They will then be presented with a list of options in their area. Centers included in the Great Start to Quality database have opted to participate in this voluntary program and are given a star quality rating from one to five based on parameters such as credentials of staff, cleanliness of the facility and more.

Once parents have identified one or more potential early learning centers, Smith insists a site visit is a must.

"Schedule a visit to a prospective care and learning center and come ready with a comprehensive list of questions," she advises.

Those questions, Smith maintains, should include inquiries into credentials of the staff, the number of children in care there and the types of learning opportunities provided. She encourages parents or caregivers to observe whether the children they see look engaged in a regular routine or are doing something new—potentially for the visitors' benefit.

"Use the children as your pulse," she says. "They'll tell you if this is something new or part of the daily routine."

She advises parents to observe whether materials and activities are at a child's eye level. She recommends looking at the images on walls and throughout the facility to see if they are culturally diverse, even if the enrollment isn't. She encourages parents to take note of whether these images avoid stereotypes like boys conducting science experiments and girls playing with dolls.

In settings that provide infant care, Smith recommends parents observe whether there is a safe place with plenty of room for babies to crawl, whether infants are getting tummy time and whether the room is self-contained so that all activities and even routine diaper changes happen in the same space. She also advises parents to observe whether adults are down on the floor interacting with the

infants.

"Observe whether the care providers are talking to the babies," she says. "They should be talking to them all the time, describing what they're doing and what's going on around them."

Regardless of their child's age, Smith recommends parents ask the care providers to describe a typical day and to inquire how they accommodate individualized instruction for a child who needs more.

"If you don't get a response or you don't get one that you're comfortable with, know that that's not the place for you," Smith says. Smith also recommends parents inquire about whether learning is child-directed.

"Do educators nurture by following the child's lead?" Smith recommends parents ask. "Are they flexible, for example, to allow for a child to leave group story time to pursue another activity more interesting to him?"

Smith notes that the best early learning centers are those whose staff consider themselves educators and continually work with children to help them advance to the next level of learning.

"There's a term in our field known as scaffolding," Smith explains. "The idea is that educators observe what a child is interested in, acknowledge that and add on to that interest with a next step."

Smith gives the example of a child who is engaged with building blocks.

"The educator should ask him or herself 'what can I do to move the child forward using these blocks?'" she says. "That could mean adding a figure or other toy to the block tower that the child can incorporate into the activity. Children can learn so much through play but especially so when it's framed appropriately."



Beyond the classroom

Questions for early learning center management need to extend beyond developmental inquiries to health and safety concerns as well, Smith says.

"Observe the overall cleanliness of the building," Smith says. "Ask what the center's regular routines of cleanli-

ness are and what cleaning solutions they use. In the infant area, observe whether they use gloves to change diapers. Are they wiping the changing table down after each use? How do they sanitize toys that have been mouthed by a baby? Do they wear gloves to serve food?"

Smith also advises parents to look outside the physical building itself to the playground and to observe whether there is proper ground cover around play structures to cushion children who may fall and whether slides and other playground equipment are at the appropriate height. Similarly, she suggests they observe whether there is a separate fenced-in play area for infants and young toddlers.

"If you're visiting a home-based setting," she says, "notice the safety and cleanliness of the environment there. Are emergency routes and numbers posted? Ask to see the first aid kit and inquire how medications are distributed."

While many of a parent's questions or concerns are likely to be addressed by an initial visit, Smith encourages parents to conduct a pop-up visit in addition to their scheduled one.

"If you're turned away, that should be a red flag," she says. "There is no rule saying you can't go back for repeat visits, so go again and go at different times. This is your child and his or her future."

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Detroit School of Choice Graduate Benefits Again in Role as Mom

“ Having personal experience thriving in a Detroit school of choice, I’m very pleased that we have been able to select a quality school for our son.”



By: *Jacquie Goetz Bluethmann*

A product of Detroit schools, Allia J. Miller now wears the hat that her own mother wore more than 25 years ago. Mother to 6-year-old Jordan, Miller is in the position faced by thousands of Detroit parents—where, in a city many outsiders have given up for lost, should she send her own child to school? Thanks to school of choice, she has options.

Born and raised on the city’s East side, Miller spent much of her childhood the daughter of a single working parent—one who was determined that her child would learn in an environment of excellence. It is for this reason that Miller attended Bates Academy for 10 years completing preschool through eighth grade at a school across town, not the one more conveniently located just down the road. Miller went on to graduate from Cass Technical High School before earning a scholarship to Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio from which she graduated in 2005.

A master’s degree from Wayne State University followed, and Miller now enjoys a successful career in public relations at Weber Shandwick, a global communications agency in Birmingham.

She attributes her drive to excel to a quality education that started at Bates and that was enriched at Cass Tech. In fact, Miller still credits her love of words to Bates third grade teacher Ms. Gibson who, through games and contests, challenged her young charges to learn as many words as possible. Miller also recalls numerous field trips and other hands-on learning opportunities that brought classroom learning to life in a meaningful way. And her ensuing Cass Tech studies prepared her so well for college that she regularly referred to her high school notes in her freshman BGSU math class.

“I felt extremely prepared to take on college,” Miller recalls. “That’s why I’m so adamant that Jordan be enrolled in a quality education center as I was.”

Most of Jordan’s early years were spent in an in-home daycare setting in Detroit under the care of a certified preschool teacher who provided both a safe and stimulating environment for the infant turned toddler to learn, Miller notes. With her son’s first grade year on the horizon, Miller turned to Excellent Schools Detroit’s (ESD) list of top K-8 schools for initial guidance on where to enroll him.

After completing additional research and school visits, she and her husband determined University Prep Science + Math (UPSM), a Detroit charter school, could be a great fit for their young son. The couple used the 2012 ESD Scorecard, an annual assessment of school quality, to confirm their initial instincts, and Jordan is now enrolled at UPSM for the 2013-14 school year.

“Having personal experience thriving in a Detroit school of choice, I’m very pleased that we have been able to select a quality school for our son,” Miller said.

But Miller acknowledges that attending

a school of choice is not always the most convenient option for families.

“My mother had to drop me off and pick me up from school every day for more than 12 years,” Miller says. “Either that or arrange for a carpool.”

Miller recalls neighbors often inquiring as to why the young girl didn’t attend the local neighborhood high school.

“They’d ask, ‘why does your mom send you so far away to school?’” she recalls. “My mother was willing to make that effort for a quality education.”

And now so is Miller.

“I’m so excited about where Jordan will be attending school,” she says. “And he is too. And that’s exactly what I was hoping for.”

Allia currently works for Weber Shandwick, a public relations agency that works for Excellent Schools Detroit.

Seeds to School Success Planted at Home

How to help your child have a successful school year



By: *Jacquie Goetz Bluethmann*

Success in school starts at home. So says pediatrician Dr. Elliott Attisha, D.O., Medical Director of the Children's Health Project of Detroit. For it's such things as sleep habits, proper nutrition and parental support that are critical to school success, he notes. In fact, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), higher test scores have been observed among students who live in homes where healthy habits, regular routines and good communication are strong.

So what do those healthy habits look like?

"My advice to parents is that they establish and keep a routine," says Dr. Attisha,

who is a member of the AAP's Council on School Health. "Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep, brushes teeth and has a healthy breakfast each morning. After school, give your child a snack and have him sit down to do homework in a dedicated space before having some relaxation time. Establish a bed time that is the same every night. Kids thrive on routine."

As the new school year approaches, Dr. Attisha advises parents to assess the safety of their child's route to school.

"Become familiar with the path they take," he says. "Travel it yourself. Never let them walk alone. Find another child or two with

whom your child can walk."

Dr. Attisha acknowledges that for kids summer often means staying up late and sleeping in, a habit he advises parents help their children kick in the weeks leading up to the first day of school.

"Likewise, parents should curb their children's habit of sleeping in on weekends," Dr. Attisha says. "If they sleep in on the weekends, come Sunday night, they may not be able to fall asleep. Then they're tired the next day and the whole week is thrown off."

He also points out the merits of a balanced diet including at least five servings of fruits and vegetables and three servings of dairy each day. He also advises parents to limit TV time noting that the recommendation is that children over age two view less than two hours of television per day.

"For every hour of TV they watch, their attention level decreases an average of 10 percent," he notes.

As parents contemplate their child's extracurricular activities, Dr. Attisha wants them to consider the benefits of team sports, school clubs and the like.

"Having your child involved in an after school activity decreases the likelihood that they will use drugs, engage in sexual activity and drop out of school," he says. "Likewise, involvement in group activities teaches kids to work as a team."

Ultimately, Dr. Attisha encourages parents to model the behavior they want their children to emulate.

"Parents should show excitement about school," he says. "If kids see their parents are excited about the coming school year, they will be too."

Attendance as key to success

It's this enthusiasm for school that also is a desire of Kirk Mayes, executive director of the Brightmoor Alliance, a coalition of 50 organizations dedicated to serving northwest Detroit's Brightmoor community. Before kids can put their 10-12 of hours of sleep to good use in the classroom, they have to be in the classroom, he says.

"If there was one thing I could get every household in the community to commit to when it comes to moving outcomes on education it would be attendance," Mayes says. "It's essential."

To that end the Brightmoor Alliance, working with Excellent Schools Detroit

(ESD), approached the Neighborhood Pastors Alliance to begin crafting a vision for a campaign targeted at driving attendance in Detroit schools. Still in its early stages, the campaign is being called "Present in Brightmoor."

"If a child isn't present, it doesn't matter what happens in school," says Reverend Larry L. Simmons, Sr., pastor of Baber Memorial A.M.E. Church in the Brightmoor neighborhood. "Two out of three kids miss more than 10 days of school per year."

Rev. Simmons points to ESD data indicating that kids who miss more than five days of school per year see their chances of graduating on time drop by 20 percent.

"The single most important thing parents can do is get their child to school," Rev. Simmons says. "There are programs in the school to feed your child and programs to clothe your child if that is a hindrance. But the child has to get to school for this to happen."

Through door-to-door outreach and small and large group meetings attended by community members, the Present in Brightmoor campaign is taking hold.

"Families need to get addicted to attendance," Rev. Simmons says. "Kids need to be in school on time all the time."

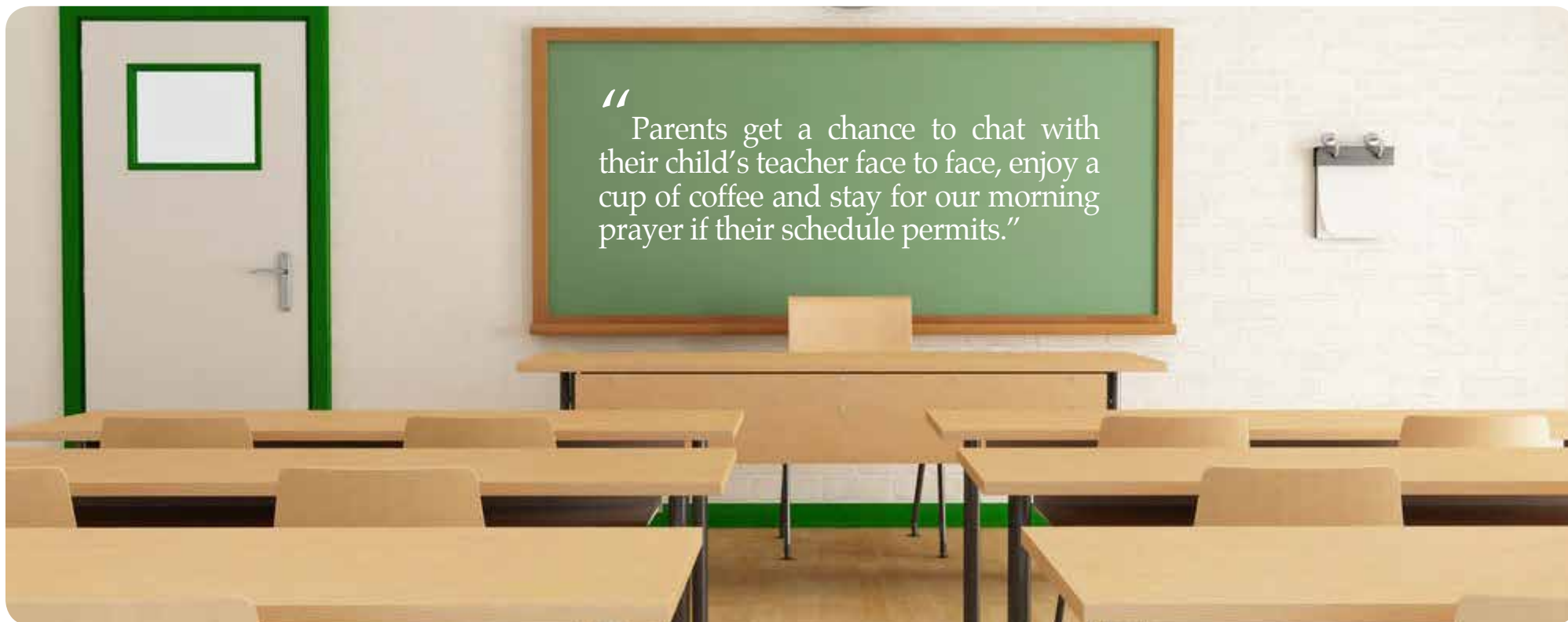
Rev. Simmons notes that much of the feedback he's hearing from parents concerns the safety of their children walking to and from school. Because they lack transportation to get their children to school, parents opt to keep them home. To begin addressing this concern, Rev. Simmons recently initiated a group effort to board up and pull up weeds at 36 abandoned homes on Burt Rd. between Finkle and Schoolcraft.

To address another major concern of parents—school bullying—Rev. Simmons and other campaign organizers are initiating discussions around how church volunteers may be able to lend a hand as hall monitors in the schools. Seventeen churches have signed on to help lead this effort, and Rev. Simmons hopes to create a movement that spreads from one family to the next—all with the goal of getting kids inside the classroom.

"Parents want more for their kids than they had for themselves," Rev. Simmons says. "I've never met a parent who says they don't care about their child's education, and I've been in some wretched households. All parents recognize that education is the path to a better life."

What Detroit's Most Welcoming Schools Do Differently

Focus on Safety and Outreach to Parents Essential to School Success



“Parents get a chance to chat with their child’s teacher face to face, enjoy a cup of coffee and stay for our morning prayer if their schedule permits.”

By: Jacquie Goetz Bluethmann

Each of the 165 students at Most Holy Trinity School in Detroit’s historic Corktown neighborhood begins his or her day in the school’s cafeteria. It is here where parents drop their child off to the waiting and welcoming hands of their teacher during what Carla Iafrate calls an informal meet and greet.

“There’s an interaction that happens that’s pretty special,” says Iafrate, Most Holy Trinity School’s director of marketing and development. “Parents get a chance to chat with their child’s teacher face to face, enjoy a cup of coffee and stay for our morning prayer if their schedule permits.”

It is practices such as this one that has earned Most Holy Trinity high scores on the Detroit 5Essentials School Effectiveness Survey in the areas of school safety and outreach to parents, two important components of a welcoming school, says Armen Hratchian, vice president of school systems at Excellent Schools Detroit.

Early results from the Detroit 5Essentials School Effectiveness Survey, administered by 176 Detroit schools in conjunction with Excellent Schools Detroit, are in. And this data, coupled with data from five-hour site observations conducted by trained parents and community members,

reveals that students, their parents and the community at-large have reason to be encouraged by the positive direction many Detroit schools are headed.

“Of the 154 schools that participated in the survey and site visits in both 2012 and 2013, 57 improved,” says Hratchian. “While we certainly want to see every school improve year over year, we want to recognize the accomplishments of those schools that have already moved the needle on essential areas of school success.”

The Detroit 5Essentials School Effectiveness Survey is the product of more than 20 years of research conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research into what makes schools successful. Researchers there have found that schools that are organized, safe and supportive are poised for greater success.

The survey asks specific questions centered around five areas: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment and ambitious instruction. Schools deemed strong on at least three of these five essential areas are 10 times more likely to improve student learning, say researchers at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

When it comes to a supportive environ-

ment, safety has to be a crucial part of the discussion, says Hratchian.

Schools that ranked highest in safety on the Detroit 5Essentials survey earned their status through a focus on making students feel safe not only in the classroom but in hallways and bathrooms, outside around the school and traveling between home and school.

At Most Holy Trinity, safety is continually being revisited, says Iafrate. A sophisticated camera system continually monitors what is happening outside of the building. Two large monitors inside the school’s offices display nine quadrants of camera activity at all times. All school visitors must be buzzed in after staff has observed them on camera. And when kids are dismissed at the school day’s end, they are handed off by a teacher to a parent.

“Our students are never left without supervision,” Iafrate notes. “It’s never, ‘have a nice day, see you later.’ Teachers are always in control of the students.”

Another crucial piece to a supportive and welcoming environment has to be outreach to parents, says Hratchian.

Thirty-three schools scored “very strong” in the area of outreach to parents on the Detroit 5Essentials survey. These schools make a point to greet parents

warmly when they call or visit the school, and their teachers really try to understand parents’ problems and concerns. Their teachers work closely with parents to meet students’ needs, and they work at communicating with parents about support needed to advance the school mission and how they can help their children learn.

Both the Detroit 5Essentials survey and the school site visits assessed whether parents were regularly invited into the classrooms to observe class instruction, whether feedback from parents and the community was encouraged and whether the principals pushed teachers to communicate regularly with parents.

When it comes to parental outreach, Iafrate cites Most Holy Trinity’s active PTA as an important feedback and communication mechanism. But it is also the everyday opportunities for parents to be involved through school sports, fundraisers and volunteering that are equally important, she says.

“When parents and others want to learn more about what we’re all about, we welcome them to visit,” Iafrate notes. “We want to express to the world what we’re all about. We consider it an honor that people are interested.”