

The Press of Atlantic City

Teachers making house calls / Galloway charter school faculty visit students' homes before classes begin

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Published: Tuesday, August 19, 2008



GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP - Mary Alice Ritchie is spending a lot of this week on Mapquest.

The seventh-grade teacher at the Galloway Township Community School and her colleagues are on their annual mission to visit the home of every one of their students before school starts.

"First I have to find the house," she said Monday morning, as she cruises a Galloway Township street in a red SUV, trying to figure out the street's quirky numbering system. Finally she pulls out her cell phone, and Angela Hubbard says she'll come outside to guide her. Inside, her son Maurice is already waiting.

They sit at the dining room table, and Ritchie explains

the year's highlights in the folder of sheets she will leave behind.

"There will be homework every night to reinforce that day's lessons," she says. "The Friday folder goes home every week, and you sign it," she tells Hubbard.

She reviews the new school dress code (no hoodies, shirts must be tucked in) and the list of supplies needed for the year, including a portable flash drive.

"If you have one from last year, it probably has enough room for this year," she says.

They talk a bit about the school lunch plan, math tutoring and Ritchie's weekly newsletter.

Maurice said he liked having Ritchie visit, even if it is a sign that summer will soon be over.

"She's telling me everything I need to know about what we're going to do," he said. "There won't be any surprises the first day."

The charter school has required annual August home visits since it opened, first as an all-day kindergarten, and now as a K-8 school with about 300 students.

"Our mission statement included involving parents as much as possible," school founder and lead administrator Deborah Nataloni said. "This sets the foundation and symbolizes the home-school connection. We're saying, instead of making you come to us, we're going to come to you."

The teachers get an hourly stipend for the visits. The maximum class size at the school is 15, so the visits are not

too time consuming. A few get scheduled in the evenings when both parents can be home.

Ritchie said she likes meeting the parents before school begins and seeing the students in their home environment. "They're more comfortable," she said. "It's on their turf." Her next stop is the Marcus family in Pleasantville. All four Marcus children attend the charter school, so Ritchie and first grade teacher Michelle Foell meet there together to save some time. Foell, who taught Solomon Marcus last year, is greeted with a big hug. This year she will teach his sister, Imallah.

Both Jennifer and Aladine Marcus participate in the meeting. Since Jennifer works during the day and Aladine works evenings, he will be the parent attending to most school-day needs.

"You'll see me all year," Aladine Marcus promises.

"We want the teachers to know our work schedule," Jennifer Marcus said. "Here we can do it one on one and not with all the other parents. And now everyone knows what to expect."

"This really makes the younger children more comfortable on the first day of school," Foell said. She talks about books they are going to read, and Imallah mentions a favorite, "Little Red Riding Hood."

"She's a quiet little ladybug," Jennifer Marcus says of her daughter, "so we're trying to encourage her more to express herself."

Jennifer Marcus said she looks forward to the home

visits. She tells Ritchie that her son Zakar is a vegetarian and that the school's daily agenda will be the family bible because Zakar can be a little forgetful sometimes.

Both Hubbard and Marcus say the visits reinforce the feeling that the school is an extended family.

"These are your parents away from home," Aladine Marcus told his children.

Foell said sometimes teachers at other schools will view home visits in a negative way, because they do take time, but they have proven their worth to her.

"You do get to know more about the children," Foell said. And they get to know a little about their new teachers.

"It takes away that feeling that the teacher is just this inhuman person who gives out homework," Jennifer Marcus said, laughing.

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