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Irvington opens doors to local dads Event in schools hopes to increase fathers' influence

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BY REGINALD ROBERTS
Star-Ledger Staff

In the spring, companies sponsor "Take Our Daughters and Sons To Work Day."

Yesterday, the Irvington School District debuted its fall counterpart, "Bring Your Fathers To School Day."

Dozens of fathers streamed into four of the district's elementary schools to show support for their children and get a look inside their classrooms, said Kenneth Waller, a member of the Irvington School Board who spearheaded the project.

"Research shows that when fathers are more involved in the academic settings of their children, the academic outcomes are better," Waller said as he stood in the cafeteria/gymnasium of the Berkeley Terrace School.

Fathers starting showing up at the school around 7:30 a.m. to eat breakfast with their children. Then they went into their classrooms to get a glimpse of their children's educational instruction.

Maurice Williams, who came to be with his son Isaiah, a third-grader, commended Wells and her staff for bringing the fathers to the school.

"I strongly believe if more fathers were involved with their children in school, there would be less gang activity in streets," Williams said.

The turnout was good, with more than 90 fathers attending the Chancellor Avenue School and 80 at the Berkeley Terrace School. Dozens of fathers also came to the Chancellor Avenue South and the Mount Vernon Avenue School, located next door.

Getting more fathers involved in the schools was a community initiative of the Irvington Block Association Coalition.

"With all the stuff going on in town, we felt we needed something to protect our children," said Waller, who is also a member of the coalition.

Waller said the board of education formed a partnership with the coalition to make the project happen.

"Forming partnerships is pretty much the theme of public education in New Jersey," Waller said. "You share the values and interests of the community with the educational institutions. This is a good first step in trying to that."

Elouise McDaniel, coalition president, said the organization wants to do more.

"We hope we can have tutoring programs," she said. "With all these cuts in funding, we need it."

Waller said he first presented the idea of "Bring Your Fathers To School" during a retreat for the board of education and its administrators in the summer.

A PowerPoint presentation had them hooked, he said. Immediately four schools signed. "They were excited. Principals made strong commitments to the project."

Among those won over by "Bring Your Fathers To School Day" was Margaret Wells, Berkeley Terrace School principal.

During her three-year tenure at the school, she has seen it go from failing to being one of Irvington's most improved schools. Besides passing the all the federal No Child Left Behind standards, it has showed marked in improvement in both language arts and math scores.

Wells credits the success to giving her students access to extracurricular activities and getting involved in programs like Brings Your Fathers to School Day.

Victor Velez, an Irvington firefighter, was among the fathers who came to Berkeley Terrace. After eating breakfast with his son, Gabriel Henderson, a fifth-grader, he toured the school.

Velez said he comes to the school periodically, but doesn't see a lot of parents until events like yesterday. "Parents should be a little more involved," he said.

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