



State program can help students weather a family breakup

By Liza Frenette - New York Teacher - June 16, 2009



Sixth-grade teacher Kerry Lyn Boettcher reads with her class in Schenectady. Photo by Jon Richard Fleming.

Think of them as information stops on the highway of life: In all but one of New York's 62 counties, classes and services are available to help parents going through conflict or divorce to lessen the impact on their children.

It's time for Parent Education 101.

Teachers and school health professionals see the impact of family discord on students every day in classrooms and office visits.

Help is available at the New York State Parent Education and Awareness Program, a network of court-certified providers across the state set up to help parents of children younger than 18 maintain healthy parent-child relationships while going through separation or divorce.

Teachers, along with school nurses, psychologists, counselors and social workers, can recommend this resource to families struggling with conflicts inherent in separation.

Schenectady sixth-grade teacher Kerry Lyn Boettcher has been promoting the program in her role as Mrs. New York.

Many parents forget and end up "arguing and bickering in front of their children," said Boettcher, a member of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers, led by Juliet Benaquisto. "Kids come to school upset. They have this stress."

The parent program is about putting children first; about not getting them involved.

Parents can help by letting teachers and school health professionals know there is change happening at home.

"Very often, the first people who hear about a family undergoing a painful divorce are the teachers, the guidance counselor, the school psychologist," said Susan Pollett, director of the Parent-Ed program.

Operating under the state Office of Court Administration, the program was created in 2005 — the recommendation of an advisory board formed by former Chief Justice Judith Kaye to study the issue of parental conflict affecting children.

The programs run six to eight hours and are offered evenings and weekends. They may be court-mandated or attended voluntarily. Fees are on a sliding scale.

More than 18,000 parents have attended the classes since the program began.

Boettcher took up the program's cause as part of her mission as the current Mrs. New York. Her platform has been addressing literacy in low socio-economic areas.

At Mont Pleasant Middle School, she serves this creed by providing after-school programs four days a week throughout the school year, preparing students for the state English language arts exam and reinforcing learning afterward.

Before becoming a teacher, Boettcher was a wedding planner in New York City. She also volunteered at a shelter, and while raising money to buy books for families there, she realized how low the literacy rate was among residents.

Insight took over, and she realized she'd rather walk students down the aisle at school than usher brides down the aisle at church.

For more information

The state Parent Education and Awareness Program has put together a brochure for parents.

Copies are available at www.nycourts.gov/parented or by calling, toll-free, 888-809-2798.

"We'd love it if all different schools would put it in their Web site," said Susan Pollett, program director.

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