

Building Bridges

By Matt Jewell, ELL Madison

“You are part of the Madison Elementary School family,” emphasized Mr. Tim Callahan, principal of Madison Elementary. And so began our ELL Family Night on Tuesday, September 22.

The evening provided an opportunity for families who attend Madison, but speak a language other than English at home, to see the school and gain a better understanding of their child’s school day. “Our goal was to provide a comfortable atmosphere for families and to address issues more relevant to families whose cultural background may vary significantly from ours here in Wheaton,” said Ms. Courtenay Cook, an ELL teacher at Madison.

It is true; a key to building bridges between our school and ELL families is a greater understanding of the cultural context from which these families operate. The reality is that our Madison family draws many students who practice Islam. During the course of the ELL Family Night, one staff member enjoyed learning more of the tradition surrounding the month of fasting called Ramadan and the major holiday following Ramadan – Eid, from one of the parents.

These conversations between Madison staff and ELL parents, often with the assistance of translators, took place while having dinner that included fried chicken and dishes from around the globe supplied by the ELL families. “I enjoyed just sitting and talking with parents and then seeing how much they appreciated understanding more of how school works,” said Mrs. Erin Gatlin, a fifth grade teacher.

Some staff members remarked of their growing interest in different cultures and their desire to learn more. One staff member reflected, “I always envisioned serving in a different country, and although it didn’t turn out that way, I still feel thankful.” She added, “I may not be in China or Africa, but they are here...the nations have been brought to me here at Madison and I feel incredibly blessed.”

Building bridges of understanding was instructive for both the staff and our ELL families. Staff members shared with families the importance of parents and teachers working together in the educational process and the necessity of parent/teacher communication. It was an evening that strengthened our bond and commitment to function as a team – home & school - in the development of each child.

Finally, the evening provided a respite from the busyness of life, where we could take time to talk, eat, laugh and learn together. Just like one big, happy and diverse family!



Mrs. Lois Voss, ELL teacher, sharing at Madison's ELL Family Night