



October PIC Spotlight

Donna Power

*Parent Instructional Coordinator – Harris Elementary School
Gwinnett County*

Ten years ago, Parent Instructional Coordinator Donna Power started the Parent Leadership Academy in Gwinnett County to build the capacity of parents. Her passion for developing and supporting parent leaders was at the heart of this academy. Building relationships and trust were her compass in moving forward.

Although Donna was an elementary school teacher for many years, being a parent of three children with the oldest child in high school and learning disabled, she soon realized that she didn't know whom to talk with or ask the right questions in order to advocate for her son. When she became a PIC in 2004 and began working with parents, she could empathize with their situation in trying to navigate the school and its culture.

The first event she coordinated as a PIC at a middle school of 1,200 students, there were five parents who attended. What could have been a discouraging event became the impetus for reflection and in turn, action. She reached out to 13 parents and invited them to talk with her about their needs. As she met with them as a focus group, they became her guide in developing a Parent Leadership Academy for middle school parents including four parents who spoke Spanish.

For 1.5 hours once a week during a six week period, the 13 parents met with her and discussed topics such as getting to know your school, understanding the education system from the state and local perspectives, identifying learning styles as well as strengths and weaknesses, role-playing parent-child circumstances, learning educational jargon, and finding resources at a bookstore. After the six weeks, the parents wanted to continue meeting. The parents helped Donna reflect on what worked and what needed to improve. She continued to write the curriculum and refine it. They invited all parents of the middle school and limited it to 30 parents. The 13 parents challenged themselves to co-present the sessions with Donna for the next group of parents. In addition, the original 13 parents continued to meet with Donna for an advanced, second-level class that covered topics such as critical thinking skills, socio-economic issues, and becoming a model for your child. They also visited a student detention center and an alternative school.

Although Donna transitioned as a PIC from a middle school to an elementary school, she embraced the new school culture and interacted with many parents who spoke Korean. With help from interpreters, she continued to offer the academy in Spanish and added a new class in Korean. Building on the momentum, Donna and the parents of the Parent Leadership Academy created an even more advanced third level that addressed educational topics such as special education, gifted and talented, graduation criteria, discipline, and behavior. They invited a local police detective to explain the mission of the task force on gangs. The parents in the third level chose a project and presented on a selected hot topic.

The parents in the academy began taking leadership roles by co-presenting with Donna, speaking at workshops, and facilitating small groups. They spoke on how to collaborate and build relationships. When they first attended the academy, many parents had negative experiences in school and did not think they had the ability to learn. As they participated in the academy and became leaders, several parents felt empowered to help other parents at the school. They volunteered in the Parent Center to answer phone calls, assist visitors, and invite other parents to participate in the academy. They were nominated to the governor's taskforce and the State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council. Some went back to school to get their bachelor's degree and became the first college graduates in their family.

The model of the Parent Leadership Academy is offered to PICs at each Title I school in Gwinnett County for implementation. Currently, two clusters in the county are coordinating an academy. Other counties have inquired about the program and asked for Donna's assistance. The most notable outcome about the parents involved in the academy is the strong relationships and trust fostered with each other and the school.