



KELLY KULTYS / STAFF

Elizabeth Dowling, 3, and her mom, Dawn Dowling, both of Pemberton Township, talk with Jamillah Parker, a preschool district social worker, Tuesday as part of the Early Childhood Education Center's outreach efforts.

## Pemberton early childhood staff connects with parents

By KELLY KULTYS  
STAFF WRITER

**PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP** — Armed with umbrellas and boxes of goody bags, five members of the administrative team from the school district's Early Childhood Education Center began a new outreach project last week, leaving the school behind to visit families in their homes.

The school wants to connect with families to encourage their involvement from the start of their children's education, according to the center's principal, Deborah Ceplo. The center, which teaches over 530 3- and 4-year-olds, is usually the first time parents have contact with the district, Ceplo said.

Officials also want to impress upon parents the importance of having their children attend school, which they hope will improve the district's chronic absenteeism rate.

Ceplo and her team, which included Michelle Walker, community parent involvement specialist; Jamillah Parker, preschool district social worker; Cordalia Sullivan, assistant principal; and Danielle Liebold, supervisor of early childhood education, selected about 10 percent of the families for their first round of outreach.

Some families were chosen because of challenging circumstances, such as having a child with severe disabilities or having a difficult home situation. Others were selected because they are new to the district. The remaining families were chosen at random.

"We're targeting 10 percent of our population, which is between 500 and 600 kids, so 50-60 (families)," Ceplo said.

Preschooler Elizabeth Dowling, 3, received the first visit from the outreach team last Tuesday. She and her mom, Dawn, were given a bagful of information about back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences as well as a few gifts for the toddler, like a new book.

With a shy smile, Elizabeth met some of the adults whom she'll see in the hallways when she starts school in September.

Ceplo said the outreach program is intended to "increase the parent connection piece," build trust, and explain the importance of early childhood education.

Parker said she wants parents to be able to put a face to some of the names to make them less intimidated about asking for help.

"Sometimes the size of this building can be so intimidating, especially to brand-new parents sending their kids out for the first time," she said.

"They can come in the building and say, 'Well, so-and-so came out to my house and I really want to talk to them.'"

Tuesday was the first round of visits, with more coming Monday and, if needed, the week of Aug. 28. The visits are expected to continue throughout the school year with teachers involved, Ceplo said.

"Conference time is a wonderful time to get out there, which is November, so that could be a strong round two for those folks that don't have cars and can't get here. So they could actually go out and perhaps have home visits and parent-teacher conferences in the house," she said.

The teachers would be paired up to make sure they aren't sent out randomly to places they don't know, Ceplo said.

"I want them to come up with their ideas and solutions on how we can increase that parent connection piece," she said.

The program will also help staff, Sullivan said, because some of them don't know the neighborhoods where their students live.

Ceplo and her staff hope the program grows throughout the school year.

"It's new territory," she said. "We haven't done this yet."

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Video online

Pemberton School District administrators attempt to create a bond of trust with students' families.