

TUPELO – A group of Northeast Mississippians could have taken a free weekend.

September 22, 2009

Instead, 28 people – parents, grandparents, former teachers and community leaders – were hunkered down Friday and Saturday at the Hancock Leadership Center learning how to help improve their schools.

They were participating in the first Northeast Mississippi Parent Leadership Institute, conducted by Jackson-based Parents for Public Schools.

It was the first weekend for the seminar, which will have two more weekend sessions in mid-October and mid-November.

Participants represented 21 schools from six school districts: Tupelo, Lee County, Houston, Okolona, West Point and Monroe County.

The free institute was open to anyone who expressed an interest in the improvement of Mississippi schools and willing to make the three-weekend commitment.

“It was phenomenal and was far above any expectations I had going into it,” said Vonda Burroughs, who represents Lawhon Elementary in Tupelo, where her twin daughters, Cate and Claire, are third-graders.

“I feel like I now have a firm grasp on what drives a school and how a curriculum is chosen at a school. It is just information that is valuable for any parent to have.”

Friday’s session lasted about 12 hours and Saturday’s for more than seven hours.

“It was grueling, but certainly rewarding,” said Sheryl Dilworth, a former teacher at Amory Middle School who was representing Shannon Elementary at the seminar. “There was so much great information.”

The Parent Leadership Institute is designed to train parents or community members in leadership and communication skills, to give them information like achievement data and to explain Mississippi’s public education system.

When they complete the seminar, participants will work with the schools they represent over two years to implement a project that meets a school need and involves other parents. The project must promote student achievement in a way that can be measured with data.

Participants also will be trained to be leaders at the schools and to show other parents how to get involved.

“It is directed at people working on improving student achievement and working on improving their schools,” said Sally Gray, director of the Northeast Mississippi Parent Leadership Institute.

Gray recruited participants for the program by traveling through several Northeast Mississippi counties and asking superintendents and then principals for recommendations. Those interested submitted applications and a class was selected.

Edie Myatt, who represented Houston Lower Elementary School and is PTO president, said she hopes to learn more about how to become better involved at the school.

“I want to learn more about the school system,” said Myatt, whose son, Auzie, is a first-grader at Houston Lower. “What can I do as a parent to help make the school a better place for our children?”

This weekend’s featured speaker was Kris Kaase, Mississippi Department of Education deputy superintendent for instructional programs and services. Kaase gave a data-filled report about testing and where the state needs to improve nationally.

Another session focused on the importance of teachers knowing their students’ individual learning styles.

The event also allowed for networking. Myatt said she’s already planned a trip to Tupelo to learn more about some ideas she got from people she met over the weekend.

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