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Stay in touch by carpooling

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BLOOMINGTON -- April Kinzinger smiles when she drives past a billboard proclaiming that bus drivers often know more about what's going on in the lives of children than their parents do. As director of development for Cornerstone Christian Academy, she likes carpools because the parents are the ones doing the driving -- and the listening.

The school, which serves 451 children in kindergarten to 12th grade, has no bus service. That means vehicles often laden with four or five students each pull up in front of the school every day.

"We think it's a good thing," Kinzinger said. "It's time in the morning that parents can find out what's happening."

Parents driving their children to and from school get to hear about who did what in class, school projects and other things kids talk about, she said. They get beyond the chatter, too, and often share children's hopes, fears and spiritual needs.

The school is three miles east of Towanda Barnes Road. The length of the drive gives parents and their passengers a lot of time together.

For Diane Clarke, the school's director of admissions, driving a carpool lets her keep in touch with children of different ages.

She generally hears about school from the teenage perspective through her two children: Allison, a senior, and Taylor a freshman. Carpooling lets her enjoy hearing from kindergartners, she said.

They tell her stories about their "busy bee" days of art and other activities. "Some come with food," Clarke said of the youngest riders.

Morning conversations may even lead to prayer requests, she said. "Sometimes it's for someone's grandma or for someone having a test that day," she said.

Driving to school provides more than the passing moments. "We get past the -- 'How was your day? Fine,'" said Beth Beauford, school secretary and mother to second-grader Blaise and kindergartner Lacey.

Sometimes the children learn their spelling words or sing songs during the ride. At Christmas, she pops in a compact disc and they practice choir songs, she said.

The informality of a carpool even extends to dress for the drivers, Beauford said. It's not unheard of to see parents in pajamas, she said, admitting with a laugh that she has been one of them.