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Getting Families Involved Through Family Nights

he primary purpose of holding the Family Nights described in this book is ultimately to improve students' academic achievement. The more parents and families understand and take part in their child's school work and activities, the more likely that child will succeed academically. And the more deeply teachers get to know their students and their' families, the better they can teach to their students' individual needs.

Yet, as our student population becomes increasingly diverse, we face a daunting challenge in establishing close connections with their families. Many teachers work with students unlike themselves in race, culture, class, language, and religion. Our democratic ideal of educating all students well and increasing their potential to be productive, contributing, and successful citizens requires that we make every effort to do whatever is needed. Working in partnership with families is a critical component of that effort, and the Family Nights described in this book offer a good place to start. However, developing partnerships means paying attention to what we know about how to build relationships.

Joyce Epstein, one of the leading voices on family involvement, and her colleagues (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon, 1997) outlined 2

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six different ways family involvement occurs: (1) parenting education; (2) communicating better between home and school; (3) volunteering in schools; (4) learning at home; (5) decision making; and 6) collaborating with the community. The Family Nights we offer encompass some aspects of three of these ways of involving families: communicating volunteering, and learning at home. They can also extend to collaboration with the community.

The work that we recommend is research based. Indeed, much recent research has shown the positive effects of family involvement (Clark, 2002; Marcon, 1999; Sanders and Herting, 2000; Shaver and Walls, 1998). Studies have also shown that, while parents care about their children's education and want them to be successful (Epstein, 1987; 1995; Sanders and Epstein, 2000), some are uncertain about how to be involved and some feel unwelcome or misunderstood when they visit schools. Further, it is often families from poor or working-class groups or cultural minorities that are least understood by schools.

In one recent review of the research literature on diverse families and their involvement with schools (Cooper, Chavira, and Mena, 2004), researchers looked at why, across grades K–12, our schools lose more and more students from ethnic and racial minority groups. The studies in the review illustrated that families are a key factor—and possibly the most important one—for developing and sustaining students' educational and career aspirations. Although expected among college-educated parents, low-income, minority, and immigrant families often inspire and help their children to set and maintain these aspirations as well. Many minority and low-income parents have goals of college and work long hours to support dreams of a better life for their children. However, parents who have not attended college in the United States may not know specific steps for realizing these dreams.

This review also showed that families remain crucial to student success through middle and high school, a period that many teachers consider to be a time when youth want autonomy. Peers were shown to be important, but they were not always challenges; they often served as resources for keeping children in school. One of the studies included in the review (Chang, 2004) involved middle-school students doing Family Nights much like the ones we propose in this book.

With the goal to improve students' education through a home-school collaboration, Chang (2004) and her school partners targeted low-performing, language minority sixth graders for a project called "Family Literacy Nights." The teachers held two 2-hour literacy nights three weeks apart (for two different groups) with the goals of building support and learning specific instructional strategies that were emphasized in school. The project began with professional development for the teachers, and it was the commitment of the teachers and the leadership of a few that contributed to the project's success. The teachers taught the families of their targeted population the same strategies they used in school that could be transferred to home learning contexts.

Another study reviewed by Cooper, Chavira, and Mena (2004) was conducted by the authors of this book. In that study (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, and Moore, 2002) teachers and researchers collaborated to understand children's development in and out of school. We knew we needed to get to know the students deeply; thus, our work took us into the homes

and communities of the students we taught, and we began to look for ways to build strong relationships with the parents, guardians, or families. A pattern across all the families we studied was that they all faced challenges in their personal lives that (for some) seemed to affect their performance in school. Yet, like all the studies in the review conducted by Cooper, Chavira, and Mena (2004), the families in our study cared deeply about education.

Among the major findings from our study was that effective relationships build from a sense of trust, no matter whether they are personal or professional relationships. Parents and school personnel must trust that each has the best interests of the children at heart and a desire to work together for those children. How does that trust develop in the first place? Only by spending time together, getting to know one another, and understanding each other's perspectives and experiences. This may not mean everyone agrees or shares the same view, but trust happens when people feel known and respected in spite of their differences.

The Family Nights we propose offer a way to both convey and nurture trust with families and to build respectful and effective relationships. This is done in several ways across all events:

- Opportunities for families to share from their own experiences and knowledge
- A focus on learning *from* as well as *with* families
- Activities that engage participants, not merely talk to them
- A range of topics to capture families' diverse interests
- Food provided to accommodate families' busy schedules
- Attention paid to the needs of those who struggle with reading and writing
- Attention paid to the needs of those who are learning English
- Attention paid to the needs of those with physical disabilities
- Adaptations for children with special gifts and talents
- Follow-up for those unable to attend
- Products that can be used at home and/or be displayed in the school
- Scheduling flexibility to maximize involvement of all families

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As you begin to use this book, you might want to take a look at all of the topics and think about your curricular goals for the year, your school's emphasis and needs, your own personal interests and strengths, and other resources that might already be available to you. Select a Family Night topic to begin with that fits well with these considerations and also is likely to spark interest in your students and their families.

Then, use the "Planning Guide" (see Resource A) provided and add anything you might need to take into account that is specific to your own setting. Involve the students! When they help to plan and get excited about the event, they are more likely to urge their families to attend.

Although you will find a wealth of ideas in each chapter, enough to implement each Family Night, you can add to or modify any of the reproducible materials or activities. In this way you can make the Family Night

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more reflective of the ongoing work in your particular school or classroom. For example, let's say your school has a schoolwide focus on environmental issues one year because of a local "Clean Up Our Community" campaign. This theme could easily be adapted in the activities of many of the suggested Family Nights, not only the obvious ones such as science, math, and health and wellness, but also those less immediately obvious, such as those on poetry and famous people. It just would take a little extra planning time and creativity.

You could consider any number of "road maps" in using the Family Night chapters in this book. For example, you could select the reading, writing, poetry, and pajama party Family Nights for a focus on literacy. Or, you could select just one of those and then ones on math, science, and social studies for a focus across the curriculum. Depending on your community, you might begin with a family traditions or scrapbook event. The idea is to use the Family Night plans in ways that best meet the needs in your context.

We call these events "Family Nights" because most of the teachers we know schedule them in the late afternoons and evenings. However, depending on when the families in your school might be most likely to attend, you could just as easily have a "Family Saturday Morning" event, similar to our suggested "Math Morning." Furthermore, if you are planning these in collaboration with other colleagues in your school, you could plan several of the topics for one evening. This would allow the families to sign up for the one they are most interested in attending.

Although the book will help you implement Family Nights on your own with the children and families in your classroom, involving others from your school and resource people from your community can help to develop more ideas and materials for activities and provide assistance during the event. Keep in mind, too, that the families themselves can be this kind of resource. Once you have provided a few Family Nights and generated enthusiasm among the families, think about inviting them to nominate other topics or help in the planning process. Remember that the larger goal is the involvement of the families in more than just Family Night events. Family Nights can be a start, an important entry point for many who have not been involved in more traditional ways.

Some might wonder whether these Family Night ideas would work in schools of high poverty, where getting families involved is sometimes a challenge. We have implemented most of these plans in schools with just those characteristics and found the response to be overwhelmingly positive. Why? We think it is because the approach is respectful of families and very invitational, the topics are meaningful and interesting, and the activities are engaging. We feel sure you will have similar experiences.

In Resource A we provide some overall tips to keep in mind as you plan your Family Nights. However, four topics in particular should be mentioned now. First are the adaptations that can be made for special populations.

ADAPTATIONS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

For families with members with physical disabilities, be sure your school is handicap accessible. A phone call home asking the parents what they might need in order to attend would be a welcoming gesture.

For family members with adults who struggle with reading and writing, recognize that the Family Night/Morning invitations and other home-school correspondence might not be read. We therefore recommend that teachers teach their children to read the invitations to the adults as extra reading practice.

For those families with members with reading or other learning disabilities, some of the Family Nights may seem daunting and unwelcoming. Be sure to communicate to the adults that they will *not* have to read or write themselves but all family members will be asked to help out during the activities.

For families with members who are learning English, an extra invitation may be needed. The Internet provides multiple sources for translating English into other languages. For example, at www.paralink.com, you can type in a message, select a language, and—voilà!—the program translates your invitations. For families who may have very low literacy skills in their first language, you may want to find a way to meet with them with an interpreter. If this is not possible, be sure to include gestures and visuals and speak slowly. This effort can go a long way toward helping families comprehend and participate. During the Family Nights, if possible, greet the family in their first language. Use gestures, visual aids, and speak slowly and distinctly using everyday words. The families will probably understand more than you think (without being able to produce the words to let you know), or they may find someone who can further explain (often their own children). The key is to not make the families feel left out; you want to communicate to them that you want them there.

BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT FOOD PROVIDED

Another issue has to do with food. For each Family Night we have suggested having food for the participants as either meals or snacks. We urge you to have as many healthy options as possible. The Health and Wellness Family Night focuses on this importance specifically, but we think it is desirable to demonstrate the same commitment to making healthy choices at all Family Nights. Remember to have choices for vegetarians who might attend, and be considerate of participants' religious beliefs. Also, follow any school policies that address concerns about food allergies and know enough about the ingredients in what is served to answer questions from those attending.

BE CAREFUL ABOUT INCENTIVES

One of the overall tips for planning Family Nights mentions the use of door prizes. We know this is a common practice and can provide an incentive for some families to attend. Keep in mind, though, that young children have not learned the concept of "chance" and always expect to win. Door prizes at the end of the evening can result in some children leaving unhappy.

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COST- AND TIME-SAVING IDEAS

Teachers always seem to find creative ways to save money and get resources for their classrooms. No doubt you can think of many ways to save costs and time in putting on Family Nights at your school. A few ideas to consider are: ask families for contributions, especially after you have had a couple of Family Nights and they are eager for more; look for yard sale treasures; do not be shy about asking for help—seek donations from businesses (restaurants might provide plates, napkins, and cups, or grocery stores might provide day-old food items) and ask your principal about any available school resources (often money set aside for after-school programs or other funds can be used for such purposes); write a proposal for available grants from foundations or other sources in your area; and be on the lookout for materials that could be used in a creative way for a Family Night activity.

In addition, perhaps you could set aside some of your classroom instruction money to use throughout the year and design class projects that could help raise money for Family Nights. For example, have students design and make stationery to sell, open a floral shop and sell flowers throughout the school (handmade flowers), ask for soft drink machine money, ask your PTO or PTA organization for help, or ask your students to donate money that they have earned by, say, doing chores at home.

Also remember that you can actually do these events with almost no cost at all, except in time. If you hold the event at a nonmeal hour, you do not have to provide food. Just let the families know ahead of time. Also, materials can be those you regularly use in the classroom.

Above all else, just get started. Our own experiences and those of the many teachers we have worked with convince us that you, too, will find Family Nights an enjoyable and beneficial way to get to know your students and their families in deeper and better ways. From these positive experiences together we believe that you will have increased parent participation, stronger partnerships in meeting your students' needs, and better teaching and learning in the classroom.