

VIP Families of the Year

*Office of Parental Involvement of Miami-Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida*

More than 1,300 parents of children in the Miami Dade County Public School System enjoyed a free day at the zoo with their families, were recognized for their involvement and rewarded for their good works in local schools. The 375-school district's Family Involvement Festival in April honored 142 Families of the Year, each from a different school, as well as awarding 1,300 VIP awards—short for “Very Involved Parents.”

The district's Office of Parental Involvement (OPI) developed the VIP and Families of the Year recognition program as part of its Action Plan for the 2007-08 school year. Spurred by the increased parental involvement demanded by No Child Left Behind, these officials introduced the initiative with four goals in mind: 1) define what parental involvement should look like in a diverse, urban district; 2) create a model that any parent can achieve; 3) allow schools to set their own criteria, without a burdensome application, for honoring families; and 4) celebrate these families publicly.

Past recognition events drew little participation because the applications were complicated or the criteria too elevated. But the VIP awards changed all that. To begin the process, members of the OPI sent a form home asking parents broad questions about their involvement in their children's education. The questionnaire focused on supporting learning at home, participating in a parent-teacher conference, assuring their children attended school regularly, and attending at least two school activities. By filling out the form, parents nominated themselves to be Very Involved Parents. Once the information was verified, parents were recognized as VIPs and invited to the family celebration at Jungle Island—a local zoo that usually charges at least \$25 admission.

Each school was then asked to choose from among its VIPs the one family it wanted to honor in a special way. These made up the 142 Families of the Year. “We allowed each

school to use its own criteria,” said one of the organizers. These families received a certificate, a copy of the program and a backpack stuffed with donated goodies.

About 3,000 students and parents turned out to enjoy their free day at the zoo. “This activity allowed my family to spend an afternoon together,” said one parent. The awards ceremony, held in the zoo's Parrot Bowl, was intentionally simple with parent leaders from throughout the community greeting the recognized families in a receiving line.

The event cost \$9,500, with corporate sponsors and other community donors covering the cost.

The response, measured by phone interviews after the event, was decidedly positive from all corners. One principal summed up the festival's success: “I loved having the opportunity to reward my parents who are hard working, care about their children, but don't often get any recognition.”

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