

Family Math Night: “Get a Clue”

*Prairie Elementary School
Naperville, Illinois*

Who stole Mrs. Gorman’s Jolly Ranchers? That was the mystery facing 50 teams of sleuths at Family Math Night: Get A Clue. It took keen eyes and math skills to crack the arithmetic and geometry clues to find the culprit.

It was late in January when 51 students and 43 parents arrived at the school. The principal and a local police officer directed them to an area where staff members doled out pencils, gloves, badges, and problem sets. As soon as everyone had gathered in the lobby, the honors math teacher led them to the crime scene—Mrs. Gorman’s classroom.

Yellow crime scene tape cordoned off six empty Jolly Rancher bags. Student-parent detective teams worked through eight word problems to solve the mystery. The teams solved the first two problems in Mrs. Gorman’s classroom. Then they moved to the school’s library where they examined evidence set up on projector screens.

Students and parents ruled out suspects by completing sets of problems. Teachers, as the likely suspects, circled the room pleading with students not to finger them. The night ended well, with the apprehension of the candy thief (one teacher volunteered to be the bad guy), and the recovery of the candy.

All of the junior detectives enjoyed the Jolly Ranchers, and a few lucky students won prizes—various math and problem-solving board games, including Clue.

The School Family Community Partnership (SFCP) team at Prairie had not hosted a math event for some time. The idea for the mystery motif came from a book, *Solve a Mystery Using Real Life Math Skills*, which one of the team members recommended because she and her own third-grader had thoroughly enjoyed it. The group spied a novel approach to reinforcing math skills for students in Grades 3 to 5, and the event was underway.

The SFCP team recruited school staff

to participate, even asking a Naperville police officer, who works with the drug education program, if she would be willing to donate her time and some crime scene tape. Team members collected data, such as height, weight, and shoe sizes, from seven staff members who would become the likely suspects. Then the team set to work writing the mystery.

The staff promoted the event by setting the scene of the fictitious crime, giving a few details, and telling students and parents that the investigation would continue at the math night event.

The math mystery night was a great success, SFCP team members said. “Parents and children absolutely loved the evening. Many families personally complimented and thanked us for this program,” said one member. “Teachers really loved role-playing during this event, and thought that it was a very creative way to enhance math skills.”

With that kind of response, a math mystery night is sure to be repeated. Organizers would like to develop a three-year cycle of mystery scenarios so that students would solve different mysteries as they proceeded from grade 3 to grade 5. The SFCP team would also like to create a similar program for students in kindergarten through second grade.

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