

Back to School Night

*Northstar Middle School
Eau Claire, Wisconsin*

To strengthen partnerships with its Hmong families, Northstar Middle School expanded its annual Back to School Night to include a special session for new sixth-graders and their families. Scheduled a half hour before the regular meeting, this information session enabled parents—with the help of interpreters, bilingual parents, and staff members—to meet the teachers and staff, and learn about school routines and policies.

The practice also opened the door to parent involvement at Northstar for these new families, many of whom did not fully understand the school system or how they might participate because of cultural and language differences.

The orientation session was the brainchild of the English Language Learners Parent Involvement Action Team, a subcommittee of the Action Team for Partnership (ATP), formed in 2005 to address the needs of the school's large Hmong population. This subcommittee works throughout the year to help families understand the school system. It schedules interpreters to help families with paperwork and has bilingual members who phone families about school events and policies.

The ATP sub committee promoted the orientation session through e-mails, phone calls, and announcements made at important end-of-year meetings. Staff members called Hmong families who were new to the school to remind them about the orientation.

On an evening late last August, about 17 students and 30 of their family members attended the special session. Staff members introduced themselves and explained school services and parent volunteer programs. Translators were on hand to help out. All guests watched a video, created by former sixth-grade Hmong students, which showcased daily activities and explained school policies, such as dress code, lunch times, discipline procedures, and the school schedule. Each family received

a “welcome bag,” containing two books from the school's language arts curriculum, a pocket dictionary, and a magnet containing the school's contact information. At the end of the session, parents and students joined the Back to School Night activities for all parents and students.

“We found talking directly with the student to be highly effective, too. The kids were excited to attend in hopes of learning more about sixth grade and alleviating nervous feelings,” said the school psychologist, who was a key player in the activity.

Teachers and administrators are quite pleased with the program. Between 2005 and 2008, the orientation sessions have been attended by 80 to 100 percent of the Hmong families with sixth-graders.

The welcome bags are the only expense. Although the school spends between \$300 and \$400 every year to buy the bags and their contents, a local church often supports these costs.

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