

W.T. COOKE'S POLAR EXPRESS

**W.T. COOKE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA**

Families in the Virginia Beach community around W. T. Cooke Elementary were treated to the opportunity of a lifetime this past Christmas—a free ride on the Polar Express.

Yes—that *Polar Express*.

The ever-popular holiday children's book by Chris van Allsburg inspired a festive evening at Cooke, pulling together school and community resources to bring the story alive for more than 300 students and their families. Some of these families, reports one teacher, might not have been able to enjoy such a holiday celebration without the help of Cooke's "elves."

"A large part of our population at Cooke is homeless or live on small incomes . . . The event gave all families a stress-free evening of fellowship and food," she writes.

Families found the school transformed, as if by magic. Life-sized holiday figures decorated the building and soft lighting made the dining area seem less like the cafeteria and more like a fancy restaurant. Volunteers greeted the families. Once they were seated, other helpers served dinner.

The night was only beginning. The evening's Conductor—the school's reading specialist, in disguise—arrived to read *The Polar Express* to the assembled guests. Because the look and feel of the book are such integral parts of the experience, the illustrations were projected onto a screen so that everyone could enjoy them. At the point in the story when Santa gives the first gift to the book's young protagonist, Cooke's own Conductor added a special touch by producing a silver bell for all the children to see.

Anticipation mounted as, after the story, volunteers began handing out "train tickets." Outside, the Polar Express—in this case, school buses decorated with lights and garland—waited to take the guests to Virginia Beach's Lights at the Beach event, an annual holiday display at the ocean. As everybody hopped on the "train," other conductors punched their tickets while holiday

songs and carols played.

The school chose a date and bought the Lights at the Beach tickets in advance to avoid congestion at the event. Cooke's neediest families were contacted first. Response was enormous, requiring organizers to split the evening into two seatings.

Support was tremendous as administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and community volunteers assisted everyone before, during, and after the event. With school partners providing reduced prices on essentials, expenses totaled \$2,000, paid with Title I and Parent Involvement funds, as well as a donation from the Virginia Beach Jaycees.

The generosity paid off in many ways. Before leaving, every child received a gift bag, containing a candy cane, hot chocolate mix, and—straight from the North Pole—one tiny silver bell.

Type 6

CLIMATE OF PARTNERSHIPS

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