
Community Learning Center
Sunderland Elementary School
Sunderland, Maryland

In October, 1997, students and parents at Sunderland Elementary School in Calvert County, Maryland, came to the school's learning center in the evening. The purpose was to involve parents in their child's education. Both parents and children came to a computer lab to increase their skills in math and reading, to select educational, fun games to take home, and to select books to read. Often families read together, after which the child will take the challenge of an Accelerated Reader test on the computer.

One of Sunderland's favorite activities is story-telling. Our principal is a resident storyteller and numerous parents share their talents as well. Eyes light up as children hear stories by enthusiastic volunteers. During the holidays, volunteers may teach a craft or highlight a tradition involving that holiday. Local high school students volunteered time to read to students. Health and safety issues were addressed by community professional persons.

Before Christmas, one family gave their children the option of going shopping or coming to the learning center. The children chose to return to school!

In addition to the core of parental and community volunteers, Sunderland's staff also volunteers. Seven members of the staff are present most of the evenings the learning center is open. The spouse of one of Sunderland's staff volunteers often comes along to tutor a child who benefits both academically and socially.

Attendance varies according to schedules, interest, and weather, but the average attendance is twenty-five students and parents. Sunderland is a rural school, so this involves driving to the school to participate. Many of our parents commute long distances to work. This limits some participation, but also shows the desire for involvement on behalf of those who do attend.

A survey is being planned for the end of the program. One will be sent to the families who did participate, asking what they valued and asking for suggestions for next year's program. Another survey will likely be sent home in the school newsletter particularly designed to survey the families that did not participate so we can learn how to better serve them next year. Our intention is to send personal invitations to targeted families next year.

The learning center was funded by a Maryland Partnership Schools grant and another community-based grant, providing for the cost of one paid staff person and materials for the game center. Most of the support consisted of volunteer hours.

Sunderland has taken up the challenge to creatively bring together our school with its community and families. We believe we have built bridges for some families, but we have

before us the challenge of attracting more families, especially those whose children need both academic and social enrichment. We are partners, working together to educate families and to be educated by families. United, we shall continue to creatively connect our community!

Erma Morris, chair of the School-Family-Community Committee of Partnership Schools at Sunderland Elementary School. The report was prepared by Carolyn Lenz, parent representative, and by Carolyn Jones and Erma Morris, faculty representatives. (410) 257-1501