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## **FAMILY CENTER LEARNING NIGHTS**

### **Jefferson Elementary School**

#### **Stevens Point, Wisconsin**

Our school Family Center became a place of family learning this school year, especially during weekly Family Center Learning Nights. Learning Nights were designed to reinforce academic skills, inform parents about school goals, and strengthen family bonds. Learning Nights also were an opportunity to invite all families to the school, help them become comfortable in the building, and form positive relationships with school staff

VISTA volunteer Kristin Cisewski, Title I staff, the school librarian, and reading specialists worked together to offer a series of learning opportunities for families. Ms. Cisewski and Title I staff alternately facilitated learning nights. Most were held in the school Family Learning Center, located in the school library, and a few were held elsewhere in the school building, depending upon space needs.

We kicked off Family Center Learning Nights during the School Open House at the end of September 1999 with a storytelling night. A local storyteller told stories to families and then acted out parts of the stories with students and their families. The audience participation made the evening particularly enjoyable.

Family Learning Nights usually took place on Thursdays from 7 to 8:30 p.m. We usually provided snacks, and occasionally simple meals, to participating families. Family Movie Night with popcorn and Family Team Building Night with pizza turned out to be two of the most popular Learning Nights. Local Kwik Trip employees also volunteered to decorate cookies with families one night.

Other topics for Family Center Learning Nights included:

- Family Game Night – families played board games and simple learning games;
- Make Your Own Book Nights – families brought photographs or mementos to make a book about their family;
- How Children Learn to Read Night – families gained information about the reading process and ideas they could use for family reading;

- Testing and State Standards Night – families learned how this system works and how they could help prepare their children; and
- Author Nights – families read or listened to favorite children’s stories, including the *Curious George* and *Clifford* series, then participated in related projects and authored their own books.

The school year came to a close before we had time to do a Family Computer Night and several other nights. We had more ideas than time.

About 72 percent of students at Jefferson Elementary qualify for free and reduced school lunches; many live in single parent families, and 45% of students are Hmong. While all families were invited to Family Center Learning Nights, Hmong families were targeted for several specific events, including Family Math Night and Family Science Night. A Hmong community member translated the events.

We publicized the Learning Nights primarily in the Family Center newsletter sent home monthly with each student, but also in the school newsletter and on signs posted around the school and in classrooms. The Family Center newsletter included the schedule for upcoming Family Learning Nights and tips for parents to do literacy activities or other learning activities with children at home. The Hmong translator made many phone calls to the families of Hmong students to publicize nights targeted for Hmong families.

Funding for the events came from Title I and Goals 2000. The VISTA volunteer was supported by a federal Americorps grant to the school through Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction. Jefferson Elementary won a federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grant for the 2000-2001 school year. Hopefully, there will be funds enough to cover a few family excursions, such as a family bike trip or a family canoe trip.

In addition to making families aware of how and what children were learning, the other common element in each Family Center Learning Night was *fun!* We tried to encourage families to have fun together, whether they were doing an activity, sharing a snack, or listening to a story.

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