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## **POTLUCK PTO MEETINGS**

### **Aniwa Elementary School**

### **Aniwa, Wisconsin**

Question: How can a small, rural school boost attendance at parent meetings, keep parents up-to-date on what their children are learning, and get parent input on school goals and initiatives?

Answer: Hold Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) potlucks.

When the Antigo School District established a School Effectiveness Team, composed of parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff, it also asked each school to form its own building-level team. We struggled with the question of how we were going to get parents to come to these meetings, recognizing that most PTO meetings attracted only the PTO officers and a few school staff members.

The thought occurred to us that the meetings with the greatest attendance were our occasional school potluck dinners. The whole family was invited to attend and eat together. Then parents participated in a discussion or listened to a presentation while children played under the supervision of volunteers.

Why not incorporate school effectiveness team goals into parent-teacher organization meetings, and invite the whole family to come along? The 3-4 annual PTO Potlucks have been a great way to motivate parents to come to meetings, talk with teachers and other parents in a relaxed setting, and help all parents—especially those new to our school—feel as if they belong. Our school has only 63 students, but averages an attendance of 80 at each potluck. The kids are the great promoters of these events. We publicize the potlucks in our monthly school newsletter and in the school calendar, but the children really love to come and make sure their parents know it!

Sixth graders usually help set up the school gym before the meeting (we have no school cafeteria). School staff and families eat together from 6 to 7 p.m. At 7 p.m., children either play outside or in the gym under the supervision of a volunteer who receives a small stipend from the PTO.

Parents either stay in the gym or move to our small school library for the night's program and we wrap up the meeting no later than 8:30 p.m. Some of the topics we addressed included:

- Discussing district and school goals, including space needs. Many parents and staff want kindergarteners back in our building instead of at another elementary school.
- Watching a video and discussing ideas for age-appropriate learning activities at home.
- Listening to a presentation by the school counselor on child discipline.
- Sharing the results of the statewide Third Grade Reading Test and discussing what families and teachers could do together to improve student reading and writing—two of our school's goals.

We also try to make the meetings fun. Each spring, students receive a packet of seeds to plant at home. Some years it's pumpkin seeds, other years it has been zucchini or sunflower seeds. We kick off the first potluck of the school year by inviting students to bring their produce back to school and show off their gardening efforts. We award prizes for the most creative, biggest, roundest, etc. We also used one potluck to have students exhibit and demonstrate their science fair projects to parents, a learning experience for everyone.

The PTO officers usually pick a date and a "food theme" for each meeting. Whether it is spaghetti, barbecue, hot dogs, hamburgers and brats, or scalloped potatoes and ham, everyone brings something and there is usually a nice mix of side dishes and desserts.

The potlucks dinners cost virtually nothing. Occasionally, the PTO contributes funds for a special menu item in addition to the volunteer stipend. A local fast food restaurant has also donated juice for some potlucks.

We plan to continue the potlucks and look forward to sharing food, thoughts, and friendship next year!

*Mary Detterming, Principal*  
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