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## EQUITY BOOK CLUB

### Nathan Hale Elementary School

### Meriden, Connecticut

The diversity of a school population provides a rich, cultural learning environment. It also can present challenges to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest achieving students. The Equity Book Club at Nathan Hale Elementary School was designed to bring together teachers, parents, and students to enjoy dinner, read quality literature that raises the issue of equity, and engage in literature circles to talk about the literature and how it might be connected to their lives. The purpose was to build on the Hale's diverse school community to challenge beliefs, increase understanding, and begin to make changes that improve teaching and learning for all students.

Three separate Equity Book Club events this year gave families of students in the same grades opportunities to participate in grade-appropriate literature dialogues. At each event, up to twenty families (no more than 100 people total) were randomly grouped with facilitators. Before dinner, the families enjoyed cheese and crackers while listening to their facilitator read aloud a book based on the selected diversity theme. During dinner, families were grouped with others who read the same book and were encouraged to engage in a discussion about their book. A designated book discussion facilitator sat at each table with a copy of the book and a book discussion helpful hints sheet. After dinner, families were regrouped to share their thoughts about the books read, issues raised, and the discussion held during dinner. The Book Club events usually began at 6:00 and ended by 8:00 p.m.

One of the evenings in the Equity Book Club series centered around the theme "Multi-cultural Cinderella." Participants read stories about Cinderella from different countries and compared the characteristics that made each culture special and unique. The Cinderella tales reflected the traditions of Mexico, African nations, Korea, the Caribbean, and other locations. Each participating family received a hardcover copy of a Cinderella book.

Each Equity Book Club dinner encouraged participants to attend as a whole family, including little ones and high school students. Families brought a potluck main course dish to feed ten people, while the school provided hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and desserts. Members of the Action Team for Partnerships and school faculty also attended with their families and helped facilitate the event.

The events were free of charge to participants. Grant money and community business donations supported each event. About \$100 was spent on plates, napkins, utensils, drinks, cheese, and crackers. Another \$400 covered the purchase of books for each participating family.

Overall, participants appreciated the relaxed atmosphere to converse with others about a book. According to one participant, “The book was excellent and getting to know the other families was great. It was a most enjoyable and stress-free evening.” Another expressed, “Our family mostly enjoyed the comfortable atmosphere and the time to sit and have conversation, brought back memories and brought out some feelings.” One participant summed up the evening, “Everyone loved it!”

Because the Equity Book Club was designed as a parent-teacher-student activity, students could see their teachers and parents learning together. The message to students was very powerful: students, teachers, and parents reading together and talking together about literature and equity communicated the value of reading, promoted personal empowerment, and generated mutual respect.

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