

## Parent-Child Book Discussion Group

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*Washington Junior High School  
Naperville, Illinois*

Spending an evening with my kids is always good,” said one parent from Washington Junior High School. The Parent-Child Book Discussion Group granted this parent and many others the opportunity to do just that.

“We have tried to develop activities that would not take parents away from their families in the evening, but bring them together to share an experience,” said one of the organizers from the School Family Community Partnership (SFCP) team.

The school sponsored two parent-child book discussions. For the first one, parents and children read the novel *Petey* by Ben Mikaelson, discussing the story, enjoying refreshments, and actually talking with the author, via conference call, from his home in Montana. *Petey* tells the fictionalized story of a real person who was born with cerebral palsy, misdiagnosed as mentally retarded, and confined for decades to an asylum. In a half-hour phone conversation with the discussion group, Mikaelson talked about his relationship with the man who inspired this story. “It was a powerful discussion,” said one participant.

The second discussion, in the spring, focused on *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinnelli, a book with peer pressure, loyalty, and nonconformity. “Both parents and students were able to relate to the characters in the story on many levels,” said one of the organizers.

The school staff approached the SFCP chair with the book discussion idea. A teacher, the reading specialist, and the librarian chose

the books, planned the discussion, and arranged the phone call with the author of the first book.

About 20 students and 15 parents took part in the inaugural discussion. The turnout for the second evening was slightly smaller because it conflicted with several athletic events late in the school year. The feedback, however, was positive, and the school is planning at least two book evenings next year. Students seemed to enjoy being able to talk about a book with not only their peers, but also with parents and teachers. In the first discussion, the topic of disabilities and how they affect different people made for a lively exchange across generations.

All in all, “it was a tremendous success,” said the school’s reading specialist.

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