

Every Minute Counts

*Whittier Elementary School
Pasco, Washington*

Proving that Every Minute Counts at Whittier Elementary School, the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) sponsored a parent involvement activity that counted every minute—25,534 of them—spent by parents in the school in just 17 days in January.

Parents were invited to attend school anytime during the day. The school kept track of how long parents visited, rewarding the class that accumulated the most parent minutes with a pizza party. Those thousands of minutes totaled 425 hours and 34 minutes.

During those minutes, parents attended many classes, where they signed in, noting the time of their arrival and departure. Though they would briefly greet parents who entered their classrooms, the teachers continued with normal classroom instruction. Parents and other family members were also able to join students for lunch, recess, and other activities.

Whittier's ATP worked to create a welcoming environment. Team and staff members met families at the school entrance, presenting them with buttons that said, "I am helping to make every minute count at Whittier Elementary School." Staff members would locate a visitor's name on a set of mailing labels and tape the appropriate label to a thank-you postcard that was sent to the child's home the following day. Parents responded positively to these thank-you cards, saying they showed that the school really valued its families.

Students enjoyed learning with their parents and were proud to demonstrate their knowledge in the classroom. Parents were able

to gauge firsthand how their children were doing and became more familiar with the school's academic expectations. "I had parents participating in my lessons and learning right along with the children," said one teacher. "It was great!" In the library, the clerk took pictures of each parent with his or her child; these pictures were displayed on a bulletin board in front of the main office.

Before this program, Whittier struggled to involve parents in the school, where 91 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The school has also been striving to fulfill its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements for Washington state. Whittier has generally seen limited parent involvement.

Whittier chose January for this initiative because many of its parents, who are agricultural workers, do not work in winter, making it an ideal time for them to come to school during the day. During the first week of the month, teachers distributed invitations to the children for their families. The left side of the invitation included a typed description of the program. Some teachers specified the best times for parents to visit, such as breakfast, lunch, recess, regular classes, or during special classes such as art or music. The right side of the invitation was left blank, allowing students to write a personal invitation to their parents or guardians. The program began on second Monday of January. More than 125 parents and guardians attended. There were special moments on the playground, in art rooms, on recess fields, and in classes, as parents played and worked alongside their children.

“Today, parent involvement at Whit-
tier is greater than ever before,” concluded one
teacher. “Every Minute Counts” was, obviously,
time well spent.

*Christy McEachen, ATP Chair and
Fourth-Grade Teacher
(509) 543-6750
cmceachen@psd1.org*