

Family Literacy Night Kickoff

*Riverview Elementary West Side School of Excellence
St. Paul, Minnesota*

The flier for Family Literacy Night at Riverview Elementary School proclaims, “Today a reader, tomorrow a leader!” The school is trying hard to create those future leaders, if its annual celebration of reading is any indication. This year, Riverview launched a school-wide literacy program in October, kicking off the year with an evening that included dinner, guest readers, clowns, hands-on activities, a sing-a-story and a chance to win a book bag full of goodies.

For three years, Riverview has conducted literacy nights to generate excitement and support for the school’s reading program. With more than half its students speaking a language other than English at home, Riverview has some extra challenges in tailoring activities to the needs of its families. For literacy night, liaisons from the Hmong and Spanish communities worked as interpreters for families who speak little or no English. To be sure that transportation was not a problem, the school counselor and social worker arranged cab rides for families who needed them.

This year’s theme, “Reading . . . Anytime, Anywhere,” produced some interesting reading stations. Three different areas were decorated as good places to read – one was a cozy living room with a fireplace; another was a bus stop and the third was a campsite. There, families could listen to stories read by local actors who volunteered through an organization called Book Pals. They not only shared good stories, but also modeled for parents how to read to children and how to build literacy skills. The stations also had a variety of children’s books for families who preferred to read on their own.

The event offered many other activities. A free lasagna dinner was served throughout the two-hour event. There were ten make-and-take activity tables where children could do literacy-related projects. For example, they could make a puppet of a favorite book

character such as Clifford, The Big Red Dog, create bookmarks, use letters to design name necklaces or bracelets and make buttons that advertise reading. All families who stopped at their children’s homerooms received a ticket for the bookbag drawing. All students received a free book of their choice and parents got a Tip Sheet of home activities that promote literacy.

Saving the best for last, the night’s final activity was the performance of family sing-along stories, featuring favorites such as “Bingo” and “Baby Beluga.” Then came the drawing and five lucky families went home with a bag full of wonderful children’s books and activities.

The Action Team for Partnerships and school staff joined forces for the event – planning, making materials and carrying out the many activities. Students participated, too, by making posters, bringing home fliers and making announcements on the Morning Message video program. AmeriCorps volunteers and a local clown club were among the community groups lending helping hands.

The timing of this event is a challenge because it needs to be early in the year – an extremely busy time for the staff. The school has met this challenge by forming committees at the end of the previous school year for staff members to choose the projects on which to work. The date is announced well in advance, at Meet Your Teacher night in August.

Over 127 students and more than 100 parents and caregivers attended, getting the school off to another year of good reading.

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