

Letters from the Heart

*Horace Mann Elementary School
West Allis, Wisconsin*

The idea came from the “Absolutely Incredible Kid Day,” a day set aside for parents, teachers and community members to write a letter telling a child how wonderful he or she is. Horace Mann Elementary, a school in suburban Milwaukee, gave the national day a new twist, creating the Letters from the Heart event – a letter exchange that turned into a very special evening.

Letters from the Heart involved not only teachers and parents writing letters to children, but also students writing letters to their teachers and parents. In this way, the project helped students work on their writing skills. This related closely to one of the goals of the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP): Help all students write proficiently on grade level.

The event also addressed the challenge of increasing parental leadership and involvement at the school. The school has a diverse population and more than three-quarters of its students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The ATP hoped that a good experience would make parents more willing to be involved. Writing letters allowed parents to interact positively with the school.

The activity proved good for everyone. The adults and students expressed feelings in their letters that they might not say in person. People were not shy about participating – more than 400 students and 400 adults wrote letters.

Letters from the Heart was also a learning experience. Beginning in February, teachers worked with their students on letter-writing skills, and gave them the opportunity to finish their letters in class. Parents, too, got help with their writing. For two weeks before the event, several ATP and staff members, including the librarian, held letter-writing workshops for parents, both before and after school. These workshops offered writing tips, computer access and a quiet space to work.

On the evening of the March PTA meeting, Letters from the Heart began with a pizza dinner sponsored by the PTA. After dinner, each family had its picture taken. Parents and students worked together to make a frame or card to hold the photo. The school also set up a reading room and encouraged families to enjoy reading a book together. These activities paled, however, to the evening’s big event – the letter exchange in the cafeteria.

“It felt as if time stopped and the world slowed down during this exchange,” said one organizer. “Seeing the smiles on each person’s face as they read their letter was a humbling and joyful experience. Hearts opened wide that night and the letters will stay with each child and parent forever.”

The event’s success was due in part to good publicity. Several letters were sent home to parents introducing the project, welcoming them to attend letter-writing workshops and the exchange. The PTA paid for the food and the Family Resource Center provided materials for the art project and the camera for family pictures. The cost was less than \$400.

Overall, the practice was a resounding success, according to everyone involved. Parents were positive about the practice and expressed their hopes that the school would repeat the event. The principal was thrilled. The teachers were proud to be a part of helping adults and children connect so meaningfully.

*Jessica Weber
Volunteer in Service to America
(VISTA) member
(414) 604-3900, ext. 2892
weberj@wawm.k12.wi.us*