

Math Mardi Gras

*James McGee Elementary School
Pasco, Washington*

Last January, James McGee Elementary School's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) sponsored Math Mardi Gras, an evening of fun and games focused on math. The turnout was excellent – nearly 150 students signed in, many accompanied by several members of their family.

Attendance was many times better than the prior January, when the ATP sponsored a Family Math Night. Team members evaluated the 2006 event and decided it needed to be changed. The ATP brainstormed ideas of more effective ways to get families interested in helping their children with math in hopes of improving the school's math scores. The consensus was that a "party-like" atmosphere would make the event more attractive. The time of year brought them to the Mardi Gras theme.

The goal was to engage families in math games and activities that supported grade-level expectations set by the district and guided by the State of Washington. Specifically, one major school improvement goal is to increase math scores on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) from 54.7% to 59.2% in the next year. By getting families to use math activities with children at home, parental involvement could support and enhance the teachers' efforts to help students attain stronger math skills.

On the night of the event, the atmosphere was festive, with Mardi Gras-themed decorations and teachers and volunteers wearing Mardi Gras masks. After signing in, families went to grade-level stations that featured hands-on projects and take-home activities. Those staffing the stations often taught the families the math games so that they could play them later. Families moved among stations at their own pace.

Students got to show their math skills to their families, and everyone discovered new

ways to enjoy math. At one station, a deck of cards was used to practice addition and multiplication facts. "I never thought to use a deck of cards that way," said parents after learning this new technique.

The ATP used multiple avenues to publicize Mardi Gras Math: the reader board in front of the school; the parent newsletter; separate fliers; the school website, and daily announcements at school during the week of the program. Perhaps all of this publicity accounted for the great turnout -- 300 parents and other caregivers, 30 teachers and 100 community members in addition to 150 students. The ATP paid for the expenses from its budget.

"This is a great example of an Action Team evaluating a first attempt to conduct a math night and, then, improving it to become a winning practice the next year," said one of the organizers. With one successful math night to its credit, the ATP hopes to establish Math Mardi Gras as a tradition – one that the students, families, educators, and the community anticipates excitedly.

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