

Cultural Experience Night

*Highlands Elementary School
Naperville, Illinois*

If you don't have the time or money to go to different countries, why not bring the countries right to you? Highlands Elementary School did just that during its Cultural Experience Night. Sponsored by the School, Family and Community Partnership (SFCP) team, Cultural Experience Night provided an opportunity for students, families and the school staff to learn about many different cultures.

The SFCP's idea for Cultural Experience Night stemmed from student, parent and teacher surveys that indicated a need to build students' social-emotional skills. More specifically, the Highlands Elementary community desired greater understanding and communication among students from across the globe. The SFCP hoped that Cultural Experience Night, designed for all K-5 students and families, would provide an opportunity to learn about many different countries and embrace the similarities and the differences of diverse people. One practical goal was to improve student relationships and interactions in the classroom and during recess.

Each student participant received a "passport" at the door. As families visited exhibits about various countries, exhibitors stamped the passports. The event included many creative, interactive exhibits featuring native costumes, homemade foods, games and dance. Many students and parents also participated in special performances, such as a Swedish maypole dance and a Chinese yo-yo demonstration. At the end of the evening, children enjoyed comparing their passports to see who was the most-seasoned traveler. They also received a take-home coloring book containing an assortment of cultural illustrations.

More than 20 Highlands families and community organizations showcased different cultures and heritages for approximately 150 attendees. Participants were treated to imaginative displays highlighting Africa, China, India, Ireland, Lithuania, the Philippines, Scotland

and more. In addition, the school's hometown of Naperville, Illinois has a "sister city" in Nitra, Slovakia, which was represented by the community organization dedicated to that partnership.

SFCP members solicited and organized exhibitors, publicized the event, designed the passports and coloring books, provided refreshments and handled all other logistics. The team worked with the school's Diversity Club, which designed colorful cultural posters that decorated the school gym that evening.

The immediate responses of participants to Cultural Experience Night were overwhelmingly positive. SFCP team members heard parents and students say, "You should do this every year" and "We liked the performances and wanted more!"

The comments of participants attest to the success of the night, but the real proof of the value of the activity is in the numbers. On the end-of-year School Perceptions' Continuous Improvement Survey, 80% of students agreed that "Students at our school are tolerant of other students who look and act different from them." That percentage is a 2% increase over an earlier survey. Highlands Elementary School plans to continue building cultural awareness until 100% of its students agree with that statement.

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