

Lunchtime Gatherings

*Phoenix Academy
Fresno, California*

The staff at Phoenix Academy, an alternative education school for students who were not successful in other schools, wanted to strengthen the connection between home and school and to help the parents feel appreciated. To accomplish this, the teachers decided to help students throw a Valentine's Day party in honor of their parents. The activity was so popular that it evolved into quarterly Lunchtime Gatherings.

Each gathering began with a free lunch, typically a barbeque or pasta fest, held either in the cafeteria or outside, depending on the weather. Business partners donated, prepared and served the food so that the staff could spend time with the children and parents.

Once the parents, students and staff finished eating, a teacher or administrator led the program, offering general parenting tips and information about available services in the community. At the end of each event, a bicycle, donated by the Police Activities League, was raffled to a participating student.

The elementary-grade students took the lead on many aspects of the Lunchtime Gatherings. They decorated the tables and made a gift for their parents. Teachers noted that they could feel the students' sheer excitement as they prepared for the event. This excitement translated into positive teacher/student interactions in the classroom.

Before the first gathering, the Valentine's Day party, many teachers and administrators were concerned about low attendance. However, teachers and office staff made personal contact with every parent in each class to ensure that they were aware of the party. They also publicized the event (in English and Spanish) through newsletters, fliers, the automated Tele-Parent phone system and even home visits. Phoenix Academy also made transportation available to those parents who needed it.

The diligence and great effort of the faculty, staff and administration paid off! About 65 parents attended the first Lunchtime Gathering. This number jumped to 180 by the second event, held only a few months later. "This is like heaven," said a parent. "I can't believe you did all this for us," added another.

The cost of the luncheons, from \$150 to \$500 depending on the food and number of parents attending, was paid by the school's business partners. The school has, however, allocated money in next year's budget to help support these successful gatherings.

The school also plans to work with the parents' employers so that parents can attend without losing income or being penalized for the few hours at school. Phoenix Academy is setting a lofty goal for next year's Lunchtime Gatherings, hoping that all parents – 100% – will be able to attend one of these useful and enjoyable meetings.

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