

Kindergarten Festivals

*Long Beach Unified School District
Long Beach, California*

Research shows that kindergarten students are more successful if they have had preschool experience and their families understand what to expect in kindergarten. Approximately 6,000 students enter kindergarten in the Long Beach Unified School District each year. Of these, about 45% are English Language Learners and 25% have not been to school before. The school district and the Long Beach Early Care and Education Committee decided that the best way to reach families and improve school readiness was to host a series of Kindergarten Festivals for incoming kindergartners and their families.

The goals of the festivals were to:

- * Increase parents' comfort level with school
- * Support the home as a primary learning environment
- * Provide hands-on, teacher-modeled learning activities
- * Provide an opportunity for free, family-focused learning experiences

The district held the festivals on four Saturday mornings at schools throughout the city. Brightly colored balloons, red-clad staff and teachers and decorated booths helped create a carnival-like atmosphere. During the festivals, families attended three classroom presentations. The first, "A Kindergarten Classroom Experience," let families meet a kindergarten teacher, visit a kindergarten classroom and discuss the registration process. The second and third presentations focused on reading and mathematics, respectively, dealt with ways parents can help their children with these subjects and included hands-on activities for parent and child.

Community agencies set up booths outside the classrooms to provide information for families. Participating agencies included: the district Head Start, Long Beach Public Library, the city health department, Volunteers in Public Schools (VIPS), a dental health association, the Children's Home Society, School Uniform

Information, and Family Literacy.

After attending the classes and visiting the booths, each prospective kindergartner received a free child-size backpack filled with school supplies and a book. Their siblings also received a free book. Every family had its photo taken as a memento of the event.

All of the supplies were donated. The John S. & James L. Knight Foundation awarded the district \$20,000 over two years, and The National Council of Jewish Women donated \$7,000 over two years to cover the cost of the backpacks. Other community organizations also contributed. Among them were the Long Beach Education Foundation, Molina Health Care Book Buddies, the Long Beach Chapter of Stand for Children and Children's Home Society of California, along with the public library and the city.

The event was publicized through local newspapers, including those published in Spanish and Cambodian. Fliers were distributed to schools, libraries, preschools, private and public family child care providers, grocery stores, churches, child care and Head Start centers and at a variety of other locations in the various communities where the festivals were held.

So far, the Kindergarten Festivals have enjoyed tremendous success. Attendance nearly doubled this year, with 400 families attending, compared to about 200 last year. More than three-fourths of the families answered surveys when the festivals were over. They were very positive, rating the events as "very helpful" and convenient. The sponsors are hoping to attract even more families next year.

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