

Girls Night Out AND Boys Night Out

*Merrimack Elementary School
Hampton, Virginia*

Students from Merrimack Elementary participated in a night of gender-bonding education during the annual Girls' Night Out and Boys' Night Out events. About 100 adults and children attended the two nights, which mix social and educational activities that help build relationships within and among families.

The school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP) built on an idea that was already in place. Rather than just having mother-daughter and father-son socials this year, the team opened the events to other family members and added an academic focus, emphasizing the school's improvement goal for the year — increasing language arts scores on state achievement tests.

The school has a highly transient population, which makes it difficult to get families involved in their children's education. ATP members thought a night of gender-based bonding activities and literacy games would help their school community grow academically and emotionally.

In April, girls and their female role models had a night out together, beginning with dinner. After about 35 minutes of socializing, the adults and students broke into four teams to play a series of games focused on reading. Girls analyzed texts on index cards to find the main idea of a piece, predict its outcome, and answer questions about it. At the end of the session, girls played a game-show version of hangman with their teammates.

A few weeks later, in May, a group of male students, their fathers and other role models shared a similar night out. The male-bonding evening ended outside with kick ball, T-ball, and ring toss. Every attendee at both nights received a small door prize.

The events seemed to reach their goals. "Parents had the opportunity to become acquainted with other parents . . . they also had the opportunity to speak with school staff

members, individually, if they had concerns," said the parent involvement facilitator.

"Teachers had the opportunity to meet family members of students and to spend time with students and their families, while helping to reinforce reading and literacy skills in a fun setting."

Students, parents, and the school staff all appreciated these opportunities. "It was a great turnout. Everybody had a good time," one person said.

"Can't wait until next year," commented another.

Both events cost about \$250, including food and materials. Title I money covered these expenses.

Merrimack will definitely continue the nights out, organizers noted. Next year, they would like to expand their literacy activities to include more reading-related exercises for younger children.

*Stephanie Taylor
Parent Involvement Facilitator
(757) 850-5029
srtaylor@sbo.hampton.va.us*