

Partners in Testing

*Cherokee Heights West Side School of Excellence
St. Paul, Minnesota*

Families awarded school administrators at Cherokee Heights West Side School of Excellence high scores for a new test preparation program developed for parents and students. Their Partners in Testing program united 90 parents and 40 school teachers in their quest for higher math and reading results on the Minnesota state assessment.

Members of the school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP) brainstormed the idea to increase parental awareness of testing requirements for grades 3-6. Many students in those grades were either just below or just above meeting state standards. ATP members hoped that a few extra-help sessions for students and their families would help increase test preparation at home and students' success on the tests.

ATP members promoted the events through the school's own morning news network and through a series of fliers sent home with students. They also publicized the sessions in classroom newsletters and with personalized phone calls home to parents. Though the event targeted students in grades 3-6, the school invited families from all grade levels to attend the sessions.

Teachers appointed to lead the sessions took time to develop lesson plans that emphasized math and literacy skills. The lessons included hands-on activities and taught test-related skills using common household items such as newspapers, dominoes, and playing cards to motivate and teach students.

The ATP scheduled sessions for five nights between January and March. About 75 students and 90 parents participated at one or more events. At the beginning of every session, each parent received a folder at the door, full of materials relevant to the evening's presentation, including vocabulary lists and multiplication tables. The folders' contents varied by grade level, and volunteers distributed the folders to parent-child pairs.

The ATP divided the evening into three 45 minute activities. Parents and students spent the night alternating between math and reading activities, such as Basic Skills with Dice Games, Phonics with Everyday Products, and Learning from Dominoes and Flashcards. At the end of each session, instructors distributed free materials from each game so that families could continue the fun and learning at home.

School administrators recruited several bilingual education assistants to translate the sessions for Hispanic and Hmong families. Perhaps the biggest challenge for the ATP was making sure that all families understood the contents of their folders. Although some teachers had translated their activities into Spanish beforehand, Hmong translations were not always available. For that reason, translators worked very hard to explain the lessons and activities during the sessions, resulting in quite animated conversations throughout the evening.

The event cost the school \$400 to conduct. Administrators used Title I funds to cover expenses. The ATP plans to host the event again next year. They will begin the sessions earlier in the year so that students will have more opportunities to practice their skills prior to the state tests that are administered in the spring.

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