

Caterpillar Connections: Parent Get-Together

*Francis Howell School District Early Childhood Family Education Center at Central School Road
St. Charles, Missouri*

They were scribbled and shaded, colored in every hue of the rainbow by wobbly, five-year-old hands. And when the little paper cards arrived in home mailboxes last winter, asking recipients to attend a school event, many parents couldn't resist their charms. Student-decorated invitations and the desire to connect with teachers drew 71 parents to a series of open house meetings at the Francis Howell School District Early Childhood Family Education Center. The sessions, dubbed Parent Get-Together events by school administrators, were held four times between February 26th and 27th to accommodate the four sections of half-day preschool classes held at the center.

Teachers used this opportunity to increase parents' awareness of an issue that is central to the school's Site Improvement Plan: social development of the preschoolers. The district set a goal to increase children's proficiency in social skills by 2% in the 07-08 school year. Teachers were determined to use the Parent Get-Together as a tool to offer parents a friendly and systematic method for teaching social development skills at home.

Parents received brochures showing them how to engage their children in sharing activities, play, and pretend games. One brochure, designed by the school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), focused on increasing preschooler's knowledge of and interactions with others. Filled with colorful and encouraging photographs of smiling preschoolers, it also complied with Missouri state standards for the social skills curriculum. Other brochures promoted interactive parent-child reading, cooking activities, and the school's annual end of year carnival.

In addition to discussing the brochures, parents at the Get-Together watched a 20 minute video about volunteering in public schools. The film detailed district policies and requirements for any parent interested in volunteering in the school. Over 65 parents watched

the video and completed preliminary volunteer paperwork!

The event received rave reviews. One parent, an ATP member, noted: "I was able to meet other parents and had a great time building a 'caterpillar' by talking about connections we each had with each other. It was nice hearing the similarities and differences we had with each other."

A teacher commented that one "single mother took the day off from work to attend. She just began sending her son to school and had never been in the building, met any of us, or seen her son in the classroom. We were all touched that she came. Her comfort level simply soared!"

The real challenge for administrators was finding a free building in which to hold the event. So many activities were scheduled for the 07-08 school year it was hard for the ATP to find a date and available venue. Next year the Center plans to host the event twice – in October and February.

The ATP's hard work did not go unrecognized. Students, teachers and staff celebrated the group's success at the school's end of year carnival.

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