

## Family Dinner Nights

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*Howe Neighborhood Family Resource Center and Howe Elementary School  
Green Bay, Wisconsin*

**H**ome cooking brings together students, families, community members, teachers and other school staff at the monthly Family Dinner Nights at Howe Elementary. What could be better than a nutritious free meal served in a friendly atmosphere and followed by a school or community event? “Not much,” 300 people seem to say, as that is the usual attendance for these dinners, sponsored by the Howe Neighborhood Family Resources Center.

The center looks for opportunities to partner with the elementary school on events that reach out to families. So, it developed Family Dinner Nights for Howe, where 90 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The center staff knew that a free meal would be a huge help to many families. They also knew it was a great way to strengthen neighborhood and community ties.

On the last Monday of each month approximately 200 students and 100 of their family members gathered in the school’s cafeteria to enjoy home-style cooking, prepared and served by area business leaders and other volunteers, some of them students. From September through June, local supermarkets, doctors’ offices, and churches served up delicious plates of pizza, salads, and casseroles.

To make the meals both nutritious and informative, school officials often scheduled important school events to coincide with these dinners. Depending on the evening, parents could round off their meal with a blood pressure screening at the school’s health fair, or with a good children’s story at Family Literacy Night. In the spring, the school sponsored a taco night in conjunction with its science fair.

“Students benefit by having an opportunity to be in their school with their parents, in a relaxed environment,” said one of the organizers. “This helps to make parents more comfortable in the school.”

The center develops a meal schedule,

listing the kinds of food being served and the names of volunteers to staff each dinner. The school publicizes the dinners in fliers sent home each month and with signs posted around the school.

The dinner costs about \$350 per month. Most months, local businesses and organizations prepare the meal and/or donate the food. When there is not an outside sponsor, the resource center provides the meal.

Having local businesses, offices and organizations sponsor meals and participate in the dinners and follow-up educational activities makes this practice truly a community event. Family Dinner Nights provide a bridge between the school and its surrounding neighborhoods.

*Shanna Hammond  
AmeriCorps VISTA Member  
(920) 448-7340  
srussell@greenbay.k12.wi.us*