

MEMORY MAKERS

**T. H. WATKINS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
LAKE CHARLES, LOUISIANA**

Looking to increase parent involvement at school events, coordinators at T. H. Watkins Elementary figured the best way to get more families to the school was to make the event *about* what makes each family unique—their stories. Tasked to bring only their favorite memories and their willingness to be inspired by their kids, parents joined their children at the school one evening for the first-ever Memory Makers Family Book Writing Event.

Citing research that connects parent involvement to better grades and test scores, the school's Curriculum Coordinator explained that the school drew its inspiration from an item that had been sold at the previous year's book fair. With a grant from the Junior League of Lake Charles and some PTO funding from the school (totaling \$2,800), event organizers bought a book-making kit for every T. H. Watkins student. These kits contained everything that the children, from grades Pre-K–5, would need to “publish” their own book about their family—everything, of course, except for the memories.

Teachers integrated the kits into their class curriculum, assigning the early stages of the project as classwork and homework assignments. First, teachers presented books that were written by children in order to motivate them to participate in the event. Students were also encouraged to involve their families in the homework assignments, in which they created “flow maps” to sequence the ideas of the story they would tell, followed by preparing the text that would appear in their own Memory Makers book.

All that remained was to illustrate the pages, and that is what the Memory Makers evening was designed to do. Two different evenings in March were set aside to give family members an opportunity to schedule the best time to “make memories” with their children. On the night of the event, families collaborated with their child in finishing a creative product using student-

produced materials and the kits for illustration.

Turnout for the first night was too large for the space that had been reserved—the school library—and so the crowd spilled over into two classrooms. As a result, the second evening event was held in the larger “commons” area of the school.

By working together, students benefited from positive and creative contacts with their family members. At the end of the night, everyone brought home a tangible reminder of the fun they had, both at the event and in sharing their family's history.

The evening closed after the books were bound and each family group read its story together. The school combined the Memory Makers event with a Book Fair. After the book-making was finished, parents and children proceeded to the book-buying area.

Compared to previous events with lower family attendance, the Memory Makers event was a measurable success, both in terms of numbers of participants and their qualitative assessments. Many expressed a desire to participate in a similar creative/collaborative event with their families. One parent said it best: “I learned that using my imagination plus my child's imagination is dangerously funny!”

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