

Preparing for Family Events

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PREPARING FOR FAMILY EVENTS

At times, conducting a family night is a lot of work. So why do it? All of us agree that the pay-off is well worth the extra effort. Much is made easier for the teacher for the rest of the year because of the positive relationships that are formed between parents and teachers at these events. Mutual trust is invaluable.

—Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, and Moore (2006, p. 152)

One of the themes throughout this textbook has been the importance of establishing respectful relationships with the families of your students. Trusting relationships do not happen without effort and require that teachers and families actually spend time together, getting to know one another and learning about each other's perspectives (Kyle et al., 2006). One way in which this can occur is through school-sponsored family events. In this chapter, you will learn some practical ways in which you can organize successful family events throughout the school year. As you think about the variety of family events that schools can offer, consider these questions:

- How can family events support students' success in school?
- What do I need to consider when preparing for, organizing, and hosting a school or classroom event involving families?
- How can back-to-school or transition events pave the way for teachers, students, and families to have a successful school year?
- How can you ensure that all families are comfortable attending a school cultural event? How do the roles of community collaborators facilitate inclusion of school cultures?

- How can you organize successful family events that focus on a specific content area, such as family literacy, math, science, and technology events?

FAMILY EVENTS THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS' SUCCESS AT SCHOOL

All families have the potential to contribute as mentors for their children in a productive home learning environment, but frequently families need ongoing support and continuing communication with the teacher to help their children be academically successful. School-based family events can provide the impetus for families to gain confidence in their ability to work with their children at home.

The extensive research supporting the inclusion of families as prime contributors in the education of their children is conclusive and overwhelming (Padak & Rasinski, 2006). For linguistically diverse families, **family-centered initiatives** (which focus on the authentic needs and goals of families when planning and enacting family events) focused on specific academic outcomes have yielded higher gains for children when their families participate in these experiences than when they do not (Garcia & Hasson, 2004). Some examples of family-centered initiatives include celebratory events, such as back-to-school events, transition events, or cultural events as well as events that focus on the content subjects, such as family literacy, math, science, and technology events.

Back-to-school events can be one way to welcome students and families to a new school year and can increase family involvement. For example, St. Bernard-Elmwood Place School in Cincinnati, Ohio, had only a handful of involved families in their PTO, but at their first back-to-school event, 75% of the school's families attended (Wheat, 2006). Similar to back-to-school events, a transition event can be held for specific students who are transitioning to a new grade or a new school, such as the preschool to kindergarten transition. A cultural event can be held to honor the different cultures represented in a school or to expose students and families to unfamiliar cultures.

Family literacy events hold the rich promise of linking family members through authentic reading and writing activities, with a potential for growth in literacy skills for family members as well as those of their children. Family math and science events spark an awareness of the importance of developing a lifelong interest in these critical subjects. A longitudinal study of 800 children and parents through the University of Michigan found that parents' attitudes and parents' valuing of math and science activities highly influenced their children's later life interest in these subjects and occupational pursuits ("How Dads," 2007). As teachers rely on technology for their contacts with families through classroom telephones, voice mail, video technology, radio or television announcements, and school Web sites, families are encouraged to "come on board" with technology (Graham-Clay, 2005). **Parent education** (specifically targeted at teaching adults, may provide strategies for at-home learning activities with their children, or may be job skill or language related) workshops using technology to support children's learning have been held in **family resource centers** (a room or area within a school or community setting set up as a place for families to use for various educational and social purposes) or individual classrooms. When

In the Classroom: Family Fun Online!

Susan Meyer, Kate Harrison, and Jan Russell, the second-grade teachers at Kennedy Elementary, surveyed the school's computer lab one last time. Tonight was their first family event night, a technology night. As part of their district's Family Involvement Plan, each grade level had hosted a family activity throughout the year, and April was the second grade's scheduled month. The teachers were excited about their plans, yet somewhat apprehensive about whether they would have good attendance. They had learned from the mistakes that some of the other teachers in different grades had made. For example, the third-grade teachers hadn't thought about providing child care for their Literacy Night, and there had been chaos during the story time with younger siblings crying, while other parents had chosen not to come because they couldn't afford a babysitter for their younger children. The fourth-grade Science Night also didn't have very good attendance, but it was because it was scheduled on the same night as the high school's basketball district championship game. None of the family events had strong involvement from the Latino families in the community, but the second-grade teachers were hopeful that that would not be the case with their technology event, "Family Fun Online!" They had made a special effort to invite the second-grade Latino families through the use of their parent facilitator who spoke Spanish and had made individual phone calls to all the families. Jan had also been able to get donations of appetizers from the Rodriguez's Mexican restaurant, since the family had a daughter in her classroom, in exchange for publicity for their restaurant. The Rodriguez's had also promoted the event in both English and Spanish on their store's sign on the town's main street.

The teachers went over their plans one last time.
Susan said,

First, we're going to meet in the school's library where we'll do a presentation using the Smart Board on Internet safety. We'll have the children go to the gym with the high school child development students to do some games, while we talk to the parents about the dangers for their children online.

"Do you think there will be enough supervision with the high school students? What if the games get out of hand? One of us better stay in there with them," said Jan.

"Good idea," said Susan,

Then we'll have the kids come back and join their parents. We'll divide them into groups to go to our classrooms, the computer lab, and the library to use the different software programs and try out the different family-friendly Web sites.

"I've got the Web site addresses copied to give as handouts," said Kate, "and I also copied that evaluation survey we wanted to give at the end of the session."

"I think we're all ready," said Susan. "Let's go get some supper and get back before the parents get here."

As the teachers walked out the door, Kate hoped that they hadn't forgotten anything. The teachers had spent 2 months planning this event, and she couldn't believe that it was finally here. She wanted this first family event to be successful and one that was worth her students' families' time and effort.

teachers directly instruct families on effective usage of the Internet and basic computer functions, a joint venture in technology is formed. Each of these types of family events will be discussed further.

ORGANIZING, PREPARING, AND HOSTING FAMILY EVENTS

As a first-year teacher, Ms. Kelly was looking forward to connecting with the families of her students early in the school year. She decided to host a family barbecue at a local park mid-August, well before school, on a Sunday. In talking to colleagues, they encouraged her to organize the event pretty much on her own (since families are not reliable to hold up their end, according to a veteran teacher!). Being new to the growing town of Charlotte, North Carolina, Ms. Kelly was unfamiliar with local parks and regulations governing use of park facilities, so she drove around looking for a park that appeared to have enough picnic tables to seat 25 families. To save time, Ms. Kelly decided to purchase southern foods, including fried chicken and pork barbecue, with potato salad, rolls, and sweet tea at the grocery store. In the written invitation, she failed to mention the menu, assuming families would all like the choices and appreciate the meal. To her credit, she called each family during the work week and left reminder messages about the event, but failed to leave a contact number at which she could be reached should any families have questions.

On the Sunday of the event, scheduled for noon, Ms. Kelly arrived early at the designated park. Since the park that she chose was outside the school district parameters, she hoped families knew where it was located, having forgotten to supply directions on the invitation. As some families trickled in, she introduced herself and talked briefly to them about her hopes and goals for the upcoming school year. Only five families had arrived by noon, the time indicated for the picnic gathering. Sensing Ms. Kelly's frustration, one grandparent noted that this side of town was not familiar to many school families, and also that church had not yet let out by noon. As families started to eat, one mother pointed out that she was a vegetarian and would pass on the meal, while another Muslim family said they did not eat pork. As the sky started to darken with impending rain, Ms. Kelly, very flustered and apologetic, wished she had sought a park with a picnic shelter in case of rain. Staying until the rain came, Ms. Kelly left the park discouraged and wondering what she could have done differently, knowing she spent many hours planning for the gathering with limited attendance.

What went wrong in this scenario? How might better systematic planning and a deeper understanding of community cultural considerations have resulted in a more successful opening year family event for Ms. Kelly? While a situation such as this might lead a teacher to assume that the families of her new students were not interested in being involved in their child's education, and that her efforts were in vain, a closer look shows several errors on the teacher's part in planning and organizing this family event. With careful planning and organization, family events can yield positive results.



Source: iStockphoto.

Cultural events can offer students and their families a chance to spend time together doing activities that honor diverse cultures.

The first step in planning a successful family event can be to conduct a specific needs assessment of families concerning their demographic background, personal goals, and individual knowledge and experiences. Families might be surveyed concerning

- the needs for transportation and/or child care,
- convenient times and location for events,
- language or bilingual formats,
- knowledge or experiences with the technology being used, and
- questions or concerns that they may have about the topic of the event.

In addition, teachers should have specific objectives in mind for the events, followed by revisions for future events, based on family responses, with the goal of increasing family-centered learning (Garcia & Hasson, 2004). Family events can have various designations depending on their purposes or the goals that you decide to pursue. One-shot events whose purpose is to provide an evening of informal family fun, such as a family fun night, are much different from a more structured, monthly bilingual **family literacy night** where academic support through family literacy and language interactions is the goal and where literacy activities, such as games,

TABLE 14.1 Examples of Family Events

| Teacher/School Planning | Less Family Engagement ^a | Medium Family Engagement ^b | High Family Engagement ^c |
|--|--|---|---|
| <i>High:</i> A group of teachers/families or whole school involved for several weeks/month of planning | Family fun nights, Dr. Seuss celebrations | Literacy rally, community showcase, academic portfolio night, understanding standards night | Back-to-school night, family literacy nights/programs, bilingual family literacy nights, cultural nights, diversity celebration, or funds of knowledge events |
| <i>Medium:</i> Individual teachers or small group, several weeks of planning | Family socials or teas, meet and greet events | Family reading nights, literacy lunches, family math or science event, homework preparation night | Night at the museum, science family fun night, family technology night |
| <i>Low:</i> Social food event | Donuts for dads or muffins for moms, grandparents' day | Gym Night, field days | |

Sources: Based on Ferguson (2005) and Quezada (2003).

Notes:

- a. Generally fun, low-key family-child interactions, may be leisure-reading activities, family physical activities, or social events/food events.
- b. Based on understanding academic requirements, disseminating social service information, promoting family reading, or low-key academic activity with child.
- c. Family members acting as students, translated information vital (all types), academic standards and expectation demonstrated and explained, technical math, science, or reading information is hands-on and taken home for follow-up activities.

book reading, or dramatic activities are enacted to encourage further home literacy interactions. Table 14.1 lists a sampling of some different event categories with different levels of structure.

Preparing for a family event also means carefully selecting activities that have a clear cultural connection to the community and the participants; this may determine the ultimate success or failure of your event. Moreover, the inclusion of **school facilitators** who are familiar with the culture of the school and community is highly critical. School facilitators can act as guides to the various cultures found within a school setting. Make every attempt to include key stakeholders in the community, such as local religious representatives, elected officials, or community specialists, on your planning committee and as a part of the event. Activities that are reflective of community values will increase families' level of comfort and result in cultural cohesiveness between school and home.

It is vital that the schools provide facilitators who have been trained to promote adult learning of particular activities. Family events have turned chaotic when volunteers or

unprepared facilitators simply monitored **learning stations** (typically used in family math, literacy, or science activities, learning stations function as stopping off points to engage in learning activities with specific directions for completion) or activities with little knowledge of their purpose. Always supply a set of directions for the activities in family responsive languages; also consider videotaping a simulation of the steps necessary to complete the center or activity.

Make sure to prepare a brief anonymous exit survey slip to solicit family responses after the gathering. This will provide important feedback that can guide planning for future family events. Two or three brief questions with an open space for suggestions, as shown in Table 14.2, works well.

In addition, **community liaisons** (individuals who act as agents for outreach in particular community settings) can provide follow-up after the event by conducting home visits and maintaining contact with families to assess the success of the event through follow-up learning activities. The community liaison can be a family volunteer who lives in the community and speaks the language of the community.

A checklist to assist in your planning and organization of a family event that is culturally responsive to your students and their families is provided in Table 14.3.

TABLE 14.2 Family Event Exit Questionnaire

Please complete this evaluation. Your honest input will help plan future family events. Thank you in advance!

1. Share at least one important thing you learned tonight that will benefit your child at home:

2. What was your most and least favorite family event activity?
 - a. Most favorite:

 - b. Least favorite:

3. What suggestions do you have for upcoming family events?

TABLE 14.3 Checklist for Culturally Responsive Family Events

Directions: Consider the following checklist as you prepare for your family event responsive to the needs of families in your school community. Keep referring back to this checklist as your planning group prepares for the event. Remember, thoughtful planning and collaborative decision making can mean the difference between a successful event and the one in which families are disengaged.

- Yes, I have considered this and included it in planning the event
 - No, I have yet to include this in planning the event
1. _____ *Funds of knowledge of families:* Skills, hobbies, and occupations of family members and relatives surveyed to formulate ideas for responsive family events.
 2. _____ *Community focus:* Conversations with families focusing on “What is important to the community at this time?” and “What activities or significant events create a sense of pride for community members should occur?”
 3. _____ *Parent guides:* Family participants from the community help increase teacher understanding of community goals, challenges, and their commitment to school engagement.
 4. _____ *Planning group:* Establish a planning group early in the process. This should include family members, community liaisons, resource personnel (counselors, school social worker, nurse, and librarian), teachers (foreign language, media, and social studies), staff (custodians, secretary, and teacher’s aides), administrators (curriculum coordinator, principal, and ESL coordinator), and students.
 5. _____ *Outreach efforts:* Effective means for outreach to families investigated through ongoing parent-teacher dialogues and planning group input.
 6. _____ *Language considerations:* The primary spoken languages of families are identified and factored into presentations. Are translators available on event dates?
 7. _____ *Detailed invitations:* Invitations give explicit and clearly written information about the event in families’ primary language (purpose of event, time, location, rain date (if outside), child care provided, who is invited, sponsoring organizations).
 8. _____ *Contact information:* Translated notices include contact information (through phone, e-mail, or personal contact) for the event.
 9. _____ *Healthy food choices:* Consider meals or snacks, including healthy choices that families would like for their children instead of high-calorie choices.
 10. _____ *Ethnic food choices:* Make sure whether serving ethnic food is authentic to the particular culture; also, method of serving and portions should be considered.
 11. _____ *Anticipated agenda:* Brainstorm activities, learning stations, experiments, presentations, or lessons to be included. Check with parent guides to address adults’ comfort levels with activities. Also, make sure activities are age appropriate for student involvement.
 12. _____ *Event format:* Think about the format you want to use to engage families—more or less structured, collaborative learning, presentations, workshops, large group activities, or learning stations or modules.
 13. _____ *Event sessions:* Decide early on if your event will be a one-shot offering or held multiple times throughout the year. Strongly consider the times families can allocate for attendance.
 14. _____ *Backup activities:* Consider backup activities if agenda fails to engage families or confusion ensues.
 15. _____ *Exit survey:* Develop a short survey based on what you hope families have learned after attending the event. Also query families whether the event was scheduled at a good time or ask them to propose other times more convenient.
 16. _____ *Reflection sessions:* Debriefing sessions with planning group. What went right? What changes would be instituted the next time the event was hosted?

BACK-TO-SCHOOL EVENTS

Contrast this back-to-school event with the earlier scenario.

Mr. Jamison, a first-year teacher, was anxious to meet his third-grade students and their families and decided to host a classroom party in mid-August before school started. He had gone through the files of his students and noted that there were a high number of single parents, and that most family members were employed full time; therefore, a weekday event might be more difficult for the families to attend. Being new to the community, he wasn't sure what type of event might lead to a high attendance, so he sought the advice of his school's parent liaison, and together they decided that a Sunday afternoon ice cream party in the classroom would create the best interest among families. She also recommended two parents, who had been actively involved at school the previous year, to help him in the planning. When he contacted them, they were pleased to be asked and made several suggestions he hadn't considered, including the importance of having enough ice cream for little brothers and sisters. They also told him that several of the students would be involved in the youth softball league tournament that night, and it would be important that the event lasted no longer than an hour and a half. Even though Mr. Jamison had sent out welcoming postcards to his students with an invitation to the event, they offered to help contact all the families with a reminder phone call the week prior to the party.

On the day of the event, curious families and students showed up to meet the "new teacher." Mr. Jamison introduced himself by telling about an incident that happened to him in elementary school, which had led him to decide to be a teacher. He then had the families and students do a "family scavenger hunt" where they had to find others with different characteristics, such as "Find someone who has a pet" or "Find someone who is new to this school." At first, the group seemed reluctant to leave their seats, but the parent volunteers and the school's parent liaison provided the model, and soon everyone was chattering with each other. With the help of his parent volunteers, ice cream was passed out, and he informally talked to the group, asking them to tell him about the school and community. He made mental notes of which family members were more talkative and which seemed reserved, with the goal to make an extra effort to reach those who did not participate in the discussion in future communication. As the party drew to a close, he asked the families to write down suggestions for future events. Several of the families and their children invited him to attend the softball tournament that night and seemed pleased when he took them up on the offer. As he collected their responses, he realized that he had met the majority of his students and their families before the school year had even started.

Celebratory back-to-school events, such as the one described in the scenario, send the message that families are vital ingredients in the recipe for a healthy classroom community. It is common for whole school events to be offered; however, a classroom-based event can also be a teacher-family bonding experience. These informal events recognize the beginning of school as a benchmark event for building a learning community as well as connecting with families. Outreach attempts through phone calls, post cards, e-mails, and letters should be initiated far in advance of the planned gathering to allow families the opportunity to adjust their schedules; be sure to follow up with contact to encourage atten-

dance. This may be the opportune time to recruit family members to contact others via a **telephone tree**, which “branches” out family contacts by asking them to contact a specific number of other families, thereby spreading out the outreach tasks.

A back-to-school celebratory event can also provide an opportunity to connect families with each other, their children, and school staff. Therefore, the importance of introducing family members should be emphasized. For example, families can do a fun icebreaker activity that requires them to learn each other’s names, such as finding people who have the same number of letters in their first name as their name. You can also develop a brief video to welcome families, including an introduction, tour of the school, a lesson demonstration, and an invitation to become involved (Aronson, 1995). Back-to-school events can be based in the community, the school, or an individual classroom. Ideas for a variety of back-to-school nights are given in Table 14.4.

In addition to helping families connect with one another, back-to-school events can also give teachers the opportunity to learn about their new students and families. This can be a good time to get to know families and demonstrate your desire to collaborate with them on educating their child. This may be an unfamiliar concept to families, as one teacher described.

TABLE 14.4 Back-to-School Programs

| Community-Based Back-to-School Events | School-Based Back-to-School Events | Classroom-Based Back-to-School Events |
|--|---|--|
| Picnic in the park—dinner (barbecue) or dessert (ice cream sundaes) | Family meal event—takes place in cafeteria for welcoming meal/dessert | Family welcoming event—classroom pot-luck supper or dessert, families provide picture for classroom bulletin board |
| Service Organizations, YMCA, Boy and Girls Club, athletic activities involving parents, teachers, and children | Take a family member to School Day, camp out on the playground with community speakers | Saturday event with families constructing birdhouses in the classroom with ice cream sundaes provided |
| Community Read-In Families and Students are provided with books, oversized pillows, and refreshments to enjoy an evening of book sharing | What do you remember? Collect stories from family members about their experiences in school. Stories placed on school Web site (Ferguson, 2005) | A summer orientation for ELL students and their families, guided tour of the school and classroom, introduction to routines/materials. Glossary/pictionary of important words and phrases (Davis & Yang, 2005) |
| Getting to know your community and school night, chamber of commerce, community organizations | Musical performances by teachers and principal to welcome families to school | Morning meeting format—a greeting, a sharing, a group activity, and news and announcements (Davis & Yang, 2005) |

On Open School Night, I asked mothers and fathers to write down anything they knew about their children that might help me: how they learned, their talents, skills, interests. Much to my surprise, I got very little information back. Now I understand those parents couldn't believe that their everyday knowledge, their own experience, would be valuable to me, the expert. (Markova, 2002, p. 153)

A well-planned back-to-school event can be the beginning of a partnership relationship with your students' families.

TRANSITION EVENTS

The cafeteria tables were covered with platters of hot dogs and buns, bags of chips, bowls of potato salad, and slices of watermelon from a local farmer's fields. The white paper tablecloths were decorated with crayon drawings, letters, and numbers that children drew when they arrived. As children, families, and teachers ate and visited, high school volunteers circulated pouring drinks and clearing the tables. With the meal winding down, the principal addressed the group, welcoming them. She invited a group of 6-year-olds, who completed kindergarten a few months earlier, to the front, and they performed, with gusto, songs from their spring music concert. The preschool children in the audience were then invited to go into the kindergarten classrooms where they were paired up with the former kindergartners to do learning center activities together, under the supervision of the local community college's child development students. The principal showed a short video clip to parents of a typical day in kindergarten, and then a panel of six adults: two mothers, a father, and a grandmother of former kindergarten students, along with two kindergarten teachers, answered questions raised by the families of the preschool children about kindergarten such as if children liked the school lunches and how long they had to ride the school buses. The principal then gave the audience a handout about the developmental characteristics of typical kindergarten students, the curriculum standards for kindergarten, a school supplies list, and information about the first parent-teacher organization meeting in September. The children were invited to return to the cafeteria, where the preschool children along with their new kindergarten friends, performed a fingerplay they learned, to the delight of their families. As a souvenir of the meeting, the incoming kindergartners were given a school folder and a small box of crayons, which were donated by the local bank. As the crowd left the meeting, one 5-year old was overheard saying, "This was fun! Can we come back here tomorrow?"

For children and families, transitions from one setting to another, whether it is from a prekindergarten program to kindergarten, elementary school to middle school, or even moving from one school to another, can be difficult. Family events for students and families going through a transition can be one way to ease some of the stress of the transition. While back-to-school events can often help children transition to a new classroom and teacher, transition events are focused solely on issues relating to the transition and are often targeted for a specific group of families and children transitioning to a new school.

When planning a transition event, it is important to include teachers and family representatives from both sides of the transition on a planning committee. For example, the Altoona Middle School Partnership Committee at Altoona, Wisconsin, included family and teacher representatives from different grade levels. When planning for how to help students transition from elementary to middle school, fourth-grade families shared the concerns they had about the difficulties their children might face when they went to fifth grade in the middle school. Fourth- and fifth-grade teachers reviewed this input and brainstormed activities to address the families' concerns (Kaiser, 2000). The planning committee can also include community representatives, who may provide funding support for events in trade for publicity for their businesses. This is particularly effective for a transition event at the beginning of a school year for new students and families who have moved into the district over the summer and are unfamiliar with the community and its businesses.

One of the biggest needs of families going through a transition is information—information about what to expect with the new school and resources available for support, which may include school personnel, other families, or community resources, and area agencies. One way to find out what information families need is to send out a survey to families of students registered to attend the new school in the upcoming year, asking what questions or concerns they have about the new school. Surveys are more likely to be returned if a postage-paid return envelope is included. This survey can be included in a mailing with an invitation to the transition event. Survey information can then be used by the planning committee to address those questions and concerns. Examples of materials that can be given to families at a transition event include a tip sheet of what to expect—developed with suggestions from families and teachers, a map of the school and classrooms faculty directory and school contact information, curriculum standards for the new grade level, and information about the parent-teachers organization. It is important to remember, though, that a transition event is not just a way to impart information to families. It can also be an important communication tool for teachers, as a way to learn about their prospective students and families.

Often families of children who are new to a school district or a building are wary of the unfamiliar and may be hesitant to participate in a formal family education event. This is especially true of families who are non-English speaking. One way to ease their discomfort is to serve food prior to a meeting. At the Montgomery County, Maryland, Public School Family Night Out, designed to help families of children transition from Head Start to kindergarten, parents, grandparents, and other relatives, along with teachers and principal, enjoyed a meal together before children left for activities and families gathered for discussions. The mealtime was an important part of the event. As one principal stated, "Of course, people are of differing backgrounds, but at Family Night Out, everyone is equal. The very act of eating together unites people." Another said, "Parents have to feel comfortable in the school. So many of our parents are recent immigrants, totally unfamiliar with the culture of our schools. Family Night Out helps them feel a measure of comfort and security in the school" (Seefeldt, 1998, p. 60).

It is important to be aware of the dietary customs and restrictions of all families. For example, the hot dogs served in the scenario at the beginning of this section may have been customary for the rural families of that community but would not be appropriate to serve in a community with several Muslim families or to individuals with dietary restrictions. Offering alternative foods and being sensitive to families' cultural practices relating to food demonstrates respect for incoming families. Finally, funding for meals can come from donations of money or food from local businesses, school funds, grants, or funds raised by parent-teacher organizations.

Transition family events can have benefits that go beyond helping ease students' and families' first-day jitters at a new school. A family event that helps students transition to a new school can help families learn to trust teachers, and teachers learn to respect and understand families. This foundation can be a good beginning of a partnership relationship between home and school (Seefeldt, 1998).

COLLABORATION ON CULTURAL EVENTS

The Bulldog Beat class, a percussion ensemble of students from C.M. Eppes Middle School in Greenville, North Carolina, celebrated an evening of drumming for significant adults in their lives. The Bulldog Beat class used a curriculum based on World Drumming Music (www.worldmusicdrumming.com). During class, students had learned the songs, as well as their deeper cultural significance and origins before they performed them in concert. Students had learned the techniques of echo drumming to mimic drumming patterns, as well as basic drumming forms, such as question and answer, call-and-response, and rhythm complements. During the evening event, Bulldog Beat students served as mentors and assistant teachers to family members, helping them learn drumming techniques. By building a sense of pride and accomplishment for these students, "music class was no longer a place to memorize facts about dead composers" (p. 49). The event presented an opportunity for students and their families to be engaged in a multigenerational activity with everyone performing together (Feller & Gibbs-Griffith, 2007).

Planning cultural events to honor the diversity of student cultures is a powerful undertaking requiring collaboration between staff and school families. Recruiting *parent guides* to explain and demonstrate customs and traditions that are pivotal in the daily life of community members can lead to an openness, awareness, and acceptance on the part of educators and school participants. However, while planning and scheduling a school or a classroom cultural event, beware of what Derman-Sparks (1989) terms the **tourist curriculum**—a focus on superficial contact with cultural artifacts, such as food, clothing, folktales, or celebrations. For example, an "Around the World" celebration that features Mexican, Chinese, Mediterranean, Russian, and Native American food, with music and dances from the different cultures, may be entertaining to families but will do little to lead to a deeper understanding of families from these cultures. Event attendees may simply view the cultural showcase as foreign, yet interesting, without recognizing the cultural dynamics that affect

the lives of its people. To avoid planning a one-dimensional family event, consider these suggestions from Longwell-Grice and McIntyre (2006):

1. *Recruit a planning team:* Hold consecutive planning meetings with parent guides early in the school year. Seek to have different cultural groups represented on the planning committee, and provide translators if needed. Collaboratively decide on meeting dates and offer child care for families who attend the planning meetings.

2. *Consider the constituency of your planning committee:* Don't have staff, administrators, or educators outnumber family representatives. Plan meetings in a nonthreatening location that is convenient for families; consider off-school sites that reflect different cultures represented in the community (restaurants, community centers, or parks).

3. *Practice **facilitative communication**:* This type of communication with parents is not one way but reciprocal. Teachers encourage parent input by supportive comments, focused questions, and reiterating key points of the conversation. The purpose of facilitative communication is a shared dialogue between parent and teacher. Seek advice and genuinely listen to families; allow them to voice their ideas and bounce them around as you would with educators. Make sure to take notes on all ideas after the initial brainstorming session; review these for all attendees. You will need to return to those suggestions in future meetings.

4. *Be sensitive to cultural misconceptions:* For schools represented by students from multiple cultures, consider hosting a cultural fair in a larger setting. Be especially attuned to cultural nuances that can be taken for granted by those outside their cultural environment. For example, a family event that featured competition was not successful when done with Hmong students and families, a cultural group that does not emphasize competition or drawing attention to themselves. The teacher found that the students and families hung back and did not participate in the competitive activities. However, she found that group activities, such as a Readers' Theatre done in a small group setting, was more successful and students enjoyed getting into the different characters' roles (J. Goddard, personal communication, July 31, 2007).

SETTING UP A FAMILY LITERACY EVENT

Juan, a first grader, was looking forward to his parents attending a Saturday afternoon Reading Achievement Award event, celebrating his completion of a successful year in Reading Recovery, an intensive one-on-one program for first-grade students experiencing reading difficulties. As Juan and his parents entered the media center, he could see it was sure different than it usually looked, with tables decorated with white tablecloths, a delicious looking cake, and little candies in cups. When Juan's name was called, he went up to the podium to receive his Reading Achievement Certificate for completing the Reading Recovery Program. As he left the stage, he received activity books and writing materials (in a beach pail with a shovel) to continue his summer reading. He beamed as his principal and teacher applauded for both him and his parents and thanked his parents for their help with his reading.

This wasn't the first time Juan's parents had come to school for a literacy event. They had come earlier in the school year after Juan's teacher had invited them to observe a Reading Recovery lesson. She had given them a handout explaining the different parts of the lesson and why each was beneficial to Juan. During the lesson, she made sure to use prompts or questions when he didn't know a word, so he would use problem-solving strategies. Juan's parents shared that this helped them more than anything else in knowing how to assist him at home. Before that, they didn't know what else to do except either "tell him the word" or say, "sound it out," neither of which seemed to help him much. Because of the support from Juan's teacher, they felt comfortable attending their first family literacy night, where children and their parents enjoyed a pizza dinner while volunteers set up more than 12 stations around the school. At each station, Juan and his parents played a literacy-related game such as a word search puzzle, Concentration (a memory game), Word Bingo, and at one station, his parents read a book to him that was provided. Juan was given a card that listed each station so he could keep track of how many stations he had visited. At the end of the night, Juan turned in his card and got to pick out a free book that was written in both English and Spanish. Juan's parents got a take-home bag of materials and instructions so they could recreate the games at home. Due to the family events provided by his school, Juan was well on his way to being a successful reader, and his parents were no longer fearful of coming to school to meet with his teachers.



Source: © Photodisc.

Family literacy events can be held in a variety of settings, including a school or public library.

The developmental literacy needs of students in the early-childhood or elementary grades offer a starting point to develop plans for a family literacy event in the classroom. A literacy event can focus on one or two foundational reading skills that families can easily practice at home with materials at hand or provided by the school. Darling (2005) noted the strategies in the area of literacy instruction that teachers can share with parents in the five key areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. These strategies can form the basis for family literacy activities of an ongoing nature; however, without reciprocal knowledge of what happens in the home and in the classroom, families and teachers are hampered in working together to promote literacy skills. There are distinct differences between school and community literacy activities, and both should be valued. School literacy focuses on traditional reading practices (assignments, oral reading, homework, skills set, etc.), while community literacy serves as an information-gathering function for the family (grocery list writing, newspaper reading, checking bus schedules, etc.). Literacy events that emphasize “everyday uses of literacy” can encourage family replication of developmental reading skills (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). Table 14.5 has suggestions of home literacy activities that can be modeled and practiced at a literacy event.

Locations for family literacy events can vary from the intimate setting of a classroom, the school library or media center, or the gymnasium or cafeteria. Consider carefully the setting of the event; remember a smaller setting offers the opportunity for stronger family engagement. Also, think about involving a smaller number of families in literacy sessions on a rotating basis. A corner of your classroom with adult-sized chairs at a small, round table with an overhead, chart paper, or a computer station can be a simple location for the literacy activities. It is also important to include refreshments and/or meals and build breaks into the workshops.

A well-attended **literacy lunch** event (informal lunchtime activity where parents and their children are engaged in some type of reading or writing activity as supervised by a teacher, family outreach personnel, or an aide), held at the Emma Dickinson Elementary School Family Resource Center in Missoula, Montana, coupled parents and relatives (many aunts and grandmothers attended) with primary children for a brief 30 minute lunch time literacy activity. Employing *Ed Emberley's Drawing Book of Faces* (Emberley, 1992) to thumbprint and draw family or holiday scenes, children either wrote a caption to explain the picture or dictated their story to families. Teachers and family outreach specialists (teachers' aides) had the opportunity to talk one-on-one with attendees and also read books aloud at the end of the session to model fluent reading to children.

Some other examples of family literacy events include the following:

- Southwest Elementary School, in Hickory, North Carolina, a school with significant populations of Latino and Hmong students, held a family literacy night in the cafeteria, hosting three rotating, translated presentations (in Hmong and Spanish) on reading nonfiction texts, employing literacy games, and promoting family spelling activities. Cultural booths highlighted Mexican and Hmong cultural artifacts and dress (with cultural presentations), and families left the event with a children's book. A pizza supper was provided.
- Bryn Mawr Elementary School, in Loma Linda, California, a school with 27 different languages spoken, hosted a **family literacy rally** (promoting family reading, writing,

TABLE 14.5 Strategies for Engaging Families in Home Support of Reading Acquisition

| Phonemic Awareness/Print Concepts | Phonics | Fluency | Vocabulary | Text Comprehension |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Read stories that their child chooses. Make a book with their child, using large print and illustrations | Talk with the teacher about their child's phonic progress | Read aloud often, encouraging their child to read aloud | Talk with their child about daily events and about books they read together | Ask their child to predict what might happen next in the story |
| Point out letters, especially letters in their child's name | Encourage children to point to words and say them out loud when writing | Model reading for fun and pleasure | Use word lists provided by their child's teacher in natural conversation | Ask who, what, where, when, and why questions about a book |
| Talk about where reading begins on the page and show how the words flow left to right | Help children sort words by long- and short-vowel sounds | Act out a book or a story | Search for new words in texts with their child and look them up in the dictionary | Ask their child questions about the topic of a book before reading it |
| Play games to match lowercase and uppercase letters | | Read aloud a sentence and then invite their child to read the same sentence (i.e., echo reading) | Help their child learn new vocabulary based on hobbies or interests | Ask their child about books being read at school and be familiar with them to extend conversation |

Source: Darling (2005).

and communicative activities, the rally sparks family interest while providing necessary materials such as books, pamphlets, or games, as well as family service information). Held in an economically challenged apartment complex, the Rally provided free books, promoted adult literacy, and distributed Healthy Family insurance forms (Quezada, 2003).

Keep in mind that teacher demonstrations and **reading role play activities** (teachers model reading skills for parents to undertake) are essential to help families absorb the literacy activities you wish them to replicate at home with their children. Do not assume that all families feel at ease with the extent of their literacy knowledge; what you might consider the simple act of reading stories together may prove anxiety provoking for families with emerging English language skills. An open forum providing opportunities for discussion and

questions is also recommended. Take the time to develop a PowerPoint presentation with questions families might pose to initiate the discussion if they appear reticent or embarrassed to ask questions.

Another important resource to provide families at a literacy event is information about books appropriate for their child's developmental reading levels. Giving families a concise list of children's books with reading levels and information about where they can be found can be helpful. However, locating children's books through libraries or book sales can prove prohibitive for some families. Allington (2001) noted that "paperback book sales are largely a middle-class phenomenon;" therefore, lower-income schools may consider a free book distribution program (p. 63). A lending library of classroom books available for family checkout encourages continued home literacy activities. Follow-up phone calls or home visits can offer debriefing opportunities with families as a way of encouraging continued home literacy activities and checking on access to reading materials.

A lack of funding for family events can be perceived as a barrier and cited as a justification for not hosting family literacy events. However, with foresight and making good use of business connections, schools can obtain seed money, food, or actual book donations. It is important to begin planning well in advance of the event (6 months at least) and seek donations early; many larger businesses (such as Wal-Mart or Target), allocate donations on a monthly first-come-first-serve basis. Private organizations, such as the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy or Reading is Fundamental (RIF) (see Web sites at end of chapter), offer monetary awards and book donations for ongoing family literacy programs.

FAMILY MATH AS A CULTURAL EVENT

James and Terry were fifth-grade students and athletes who loved math and hands-on activities. Their school sent out flyers to their families and spoke at their church to invite the congregation to the family math night that would be held on the local university's campus. They found out that the Mathematics Education Program at the university was partnering with a local middle school and an African Methodist Episcopal Zion church located in the school district to host a family math night.

University professors and college students, congregation members from the church, and middle school teachers and families decided on a theme that would grab the interest of the community. The theme used for the family math night was "March Madness: On the Championship Road." The culture of the school's North Carolina community strongly supported sporting events. In addition, this piqued the interest of James and Terry because basketball reigns supreme in North Carolina, and one of the local high schools was on the road to win the state basketball championship.

All the family math night activities were related to basketball. The activities covered the mathematics topic of data analysis and used game statistics of the high school basketball team. From the game data, groups calculated things such as field goal and free throw percentages of certain players, the three point percentage of the team, average number of

rebounds per game for the team, and the average number of points scored per game by the team. One mathematics activity had everyone in the group to shoot five free throws, and the participants had to find the mode for the number of free throws made, the average number of free throws made by each player, and the team free throw percentage.

All the participants were actively involved in a topic that was important to their community's sense of pride and accomplishment. At the end of the night, James and Terry asked the college students when they would be back to hold another family math night!

In 1981, the Family Math Program was created by the Lawrence Hall of Science, a public science center and research and development unit in science and math at the University of California, Berkeley (Carlson, 1991). The program's objectives included having families participate in mathematics activities together with their children, developing problem-solving techniques and self-confidence in the use of mathematics, and sharing information about equity issues concerning mathematics (Carlson, 1991). Since the creation of the Family Math Program, the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California, Berkeley, has published several activity books for families with children aged 5 to 13 years (Coates & Stenmark, 1997; Coates & Thompson, 2003; Stenmark, Thompson, & Cossey, 1986; Thompson & Mayfield-Ingram, 1998). Family math events can provide a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere for families where understanding mathematics can be made simpler (Kelly et al., 1998; Schussheim, 2004). They can also provide an opportunity for interesting challenges to be presented for mathematics to be learned, shared, and made fun (Schussheim, 2004).

Family math night events are beneficial to schools, teachers, families, and especially students. Family math activities are a wonderful tool for schools in building school-home-community partnerships. Teachers benefit by gaining another resource in families to help them in their efforts to teach mathematical skills and concepts, and families can learn mathematics strategies so that they can help their children with mathematics homework and gain a feeling of support from the school. Students also benefit with improved feelings of self-confidence, an increase in positive academic experiences, and family involvement in their education. Therefore, all parties involved in family math night activities can benefit from this event.

Although family math events can be beneficial to participants, there are also possible obstacles that can hinder the success of the event. Teachers may be uncomfortable interacting with families from diverse backgrounds, or depending on the age level of the students, they may question the families' abilities to be successful with the mathematics activities. They may also feel that they do not have the time required for planning and organizing such an event. Some parents may be hesitant to participate in a family math activity due to mathematics anxiety. Additionally, some may feel intimidated coming to a school because of their lack of school success in mathematics. For these reasons, a family math event may have a better turnout at a church or community center.

As with family literacy events, a family math event can help students and their families see that mathematics is a part of their everyday life and can decrease the possible fear that families may have about helping their children with their math homework. When students and families have an enjoyable experience at a family math event, they are more likely to return for future events and also approach working with their students on mathematics activities in a positive way. Some ideas for family math events are located in Table 14.6.

TABLE 14.6 Examples of Family Math Events

1. Sports team theme nights

Use professional baseball, basketball, or football teams that the community supports as a theme, such as St. Louis Cardinals night, and have a variety of activities that require mathematical calculations of the team's statistics.

2. Family game nights

Have a variety of board games appropriate for the age level of the students that require mathematics computations. Games can be commercially bought, such as Trouble that requires problem-solving skills, Monopoly that focuses on counting money and making change, or homemade such as a blank board game with problems provided to determine the number of spaces moved. Families can also check out games to play at home ("Promote Literacy," 2004).

3. Adults only "Math Academies"

While students are doing separate math enrichment activities in another room, teachers conduct short seminars, full of hands-on activities, to refresh their families on key math concepts and problem-solving exercises ("Boost Student Achievement," 2005).

4. Math or literacy events

Events that use children's literature as a basis for math activities can integrate the learning of literacy and mathematics. For example, *The Doorbell Rang*, by Pat Hutchins (1986), *Eating Fractions*, by Bruce McMillan (1992), and *Apple Fractions* by Jerry Pallotta (2003) all deal with dividing food into fractions, and they can be used as the basis for a Family Math Night on fractions that combines stories, food, and math activities for students and families.

FAMILY SCIENCE NIGHT

Damion, Latisha, and Katie were excited. They were going back to school tonight with their parents, grandparents, and siblings. Tonight was family science night at Park View Elementary School. When they arrived at the school at 6:30 p.m., they were warmly welcomed by the school counselor, who registered them and assigned them a group number. All family members received the same group number. Damion, his sister, and their grandmother went to Room 3; Latisha, her mother, and aunt went to Room 4; and Katie, her brother, and father headed to Room 5. Each room had about six students, the family members, and a science facilitator. The science facilitators included three teachers and one teacher assistant at Park View, the two student teachers from second-grade classrooms, a local chemist whose daughter attended Park View, and two high school science teachers—one of whom had a spouse who taught at the school and the other who coached some of the Park View students on a basketball team. Before the first activity time period began, each of the nine facilitators welcomed the students and their families to the family science night at Park View. After brief introductions, everyone got to work. All the nine classrooms had a 20-minute science activity

for students and families to try. In Room 3, Damion and his family first guessed how many drops of water fit on a dime and then tried to get as many drops as they could on the dime. In Room 4, Latisha and her family predicted how water would flow out of a gallon jug that had three vertical holes that were covered with masking tape. Then, they removed the tape and watched the water flow. Katie and her family attempted to pour water down a string. After spending most of the time doing the activity, repeating the activity, and discussing results of repeated trials, the facilitator led the group in a discussion about a science concept that they had just experienced; the concept of water pressure in Room 4 and the concepts of adhesion and cohesion in Rooms 3 and 5. Tonight, facilitators in all the rooms were doing science activities, which focused on various properties of water.

Family science night participants moved to the next room and the facilitator in the new room began their activity again. Volunteers made sure that facilitators had everything they needed, that families could find the rooms where they needed to be, and that everyone stayed on schedule. Everyone got to do three different activities in three different rooms and they then reported to the cafeteria, where a chemist talked briefly about her work and did a series of demonstrations with water. As families left the school, they were each given a handout with four simple science investigations to try at home. All needed materials were included in a gallon Ziploc bag. Damion, Latisha, and Katie hurried home to try one of the activities before bedtime.

Evidence has certainly shown that family and community involvement improves the quality of the educational experience, including student achievement, for children, and that can be true for science, as well as literacy and math (McDonald, 1996). Family science events allow students and their family members to collaboratively participate in simple science activities. Family science nights most likely started as an outgrowth of family math nights, but many family science nights sprung up as an extension of outreach efforts to draw more families into PTA organizations or to create more interest in traditional school science fairs. With the exception of science fairs or the occasional home science project, science has not been a strong focus of home-school collaboration (Lundeen, 2005). While some schools offer family science nights, they are certainly not an established institution or as prevalent as family literacy or mathematics events. However, family science events can be a way to further involve families in their children's learning and create excitement about science.

Family science night is a way for families and children to talk and work together in a non-threatening environment while developing their scientific thinking. It provides a time and place where communication can take place between the classroom teacher and the family. Often, additional science activity ideas are sent home with families to encourage further science study at home to support their child.

The goals and objectives of hosting a science family night might include opportunities to do the following:

- Help families and children develop a deeper understanding of science concepts and processes by engaging in simple science activities, investigations and experiments, especially those science experiences that most easily occur after school, such as astronomy nights or night hikes.

- Meet scientists, science educators, or teachers with a special interest in science.
- Help family members work together to practice skills such as problem solving and critical thinking.
- Create interest and enthusiasm in families and students for science and encourage them to see science as a part of everyday life.
- Strengthen relationships between teachers and families.

As with the other family events, organizing a family science event requires a team effort among teachers, school, and community. A planning committee might include family representatives from the parent-teachers organization, teachers from the grade levels served, science coordinators, and individuals in the community who have a high interest or knowledge in science, such as the local meteorologist, pharmacist, or university science educators. The planning committee can make decisions such as whether the event is held at night or on a weekend, whether it should be done as a one-time event or periodically throughout the school year and whether it will be a schoolwide program or targeted for certain grade levels. The types of activities undertaken will influence the location such as whether it is held outdoors, in a large multipurpose room, or a classroom. Combining the science event with another established family event, such as a fall or spring carnival or PTO meeting, may increase attendance (Lundeen, 2005). The committee will also need to consider funding the event, since materials to conduct the different science activities can be costly. Table 14.7 is a checklist to help you organize a family science night for your school. Note that this checklist could easily be adapted for literacy and math nights or for other family events.

Since most family science nights will last only a couple of hours with families moving through several learning activity centers or stations, you will need resources for simple science activities. There are some excellent collections of materials that will help you get started. Examples include the Exploratorium (the first hands-on science museum in the United States, located in Berkeley, California), which has a valuable Web site, www.exploratorium.edu, with downloadable activities that can be used for family science night, and Steve Spangler Science (www.stevespanglerscience.com/experiments), which has simple eye-catching experiments that explore the “whys” of science concepts. Once the different activities have been chosen, it is advisable to have a meeting of the planning committee where the different science experiments are modeled with feedback from the group. Materials will need to be gathered, making sure that you have enough to repeat the activities several times with different groups of families and students.

Though family science events can take time and effort to plan, organize, and gather materials, they can be an extremely positive experience for families, students, and teachers. Teachers get to interact with students and their families in a less formal environment. Scientists get to interact with an interested public, including young children who may be encouraged to pursue science or whose interest in science is sparked by an activity, a question, or exposure to a field of science that they’ve never heard of before the family science event. Families get interested in science and their children’s science education, and

TABLE 14.7 Family Science Night Planning Checklist

Planning is essential for a successful family science night. Use the checklist below to help you plan and organize your first event.

Six months ahead

- Establish goals (Is there a particular topic or learning strategy that will be taught?)
- Determine location (Where will the event be held? Cafeteria, classrooms, gymnasium?)
- Predict attendance (How many people will be invited? Certain grades? Entire school?)
- Choose a date and time (Does an evening or Saturday work better for parents? Make sure to check community and school calendar for conflicts.)
- Recruit staff members (Individuals could fill roles such as event coordinator, publicity)
- Assign coordinator duties: Event coordinator, activities coordinator, food/prize coordinator, community coordinator, and volunteer coordinator.
- Determine time allotment during event (How will time during the event be broken up? Will you have activity centers followed by a time to reconvene and discuss experiences with the activities, the learning that occurred, and how this might be used in the home setting?)
- Decide how to promote and publicize the event. Consider letters/announcements/flyers to families, teachers, and the press. Multiple times in multiple ways increase attendance.
- Recruit presenters.

Three weeks ahead

- Send flyers home
- Recruit assistants
- Decide whether you will prepare/serve food or refreshments

Two weeks ahead

- Prepare activity schedule
- Make room assignments for each activity
- Order activity supplies
- E-mail reminder to presenters
- Send press release to newspapers, television, and radio stations
- Confirm teachers/staff to help with greeting families
- Create an evaluation form for the event
- Purchase activity supplies

Two to three days ahead

- Purchase food for presenters' dinner
- Prepare program, sign-in sheets, door signs, name tags, evaluations copies
- Call newspaper and TV stations to remind

Family science day

- Confirm photographers (buy disposable cameras for each session and ask participants to take pictures) and film
- Make any copies needed of handouts

(Continued)

TABLE 14.7 (Continued)

At family science night

- Distribute to presenters: program, nametag
- Put up door signs on classrooms
- Set up registration table (sign-in sheets and signs, programs, nametags, markers/pencils)
- Set out box for completed evaluations (either a box lid or clear plastic container)
- All parents and students sign in and make nametags

Day after

- Summarize numbers attending by grade/parent
- Summarize parent evaluations
- Send summary to school principal
- E-mail “thank you” to all presenters; send evaluation summary
- Turn in receipts and reimburse presenters

Source: Based on the *Family Science Night Check List*. Used by permission from Joan Chadde and the Western Upper Peninsula Center for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education, Michigan Technological University (2006).

they learn more about science themselves and how to help their children with science homework. Family involvement is crucial to a child’s success in school, and this is especially important in mathematics and science, which are subjects that are perceived to be more difficult for student and families.

ORGANIZING A FAMILY TECHNOLOGY NIGHT

Sara eagerly ran ahead of her mom and her older brother, Adam, into the school door for “Terrific Tuesday,” a night when her school was open for families and children to use the school’s computer lab together. Most of the time, there were no scheduled activities, but this Tuesday was special because Mrs. Gallagher, the school’s technology specialist, had planned a program about Sara’s favorite author, Dr. Seuss. During Sara’s library class that day, she had used the Smart Board to show them some of the activities they would be doing that night, and Sara couldn’t wait to show her mom. She always checked out Dr. Seuss books from the school library, and her mom read them to her at night. She could read “Hop on Pop” by herself now! Sara’s mom had first been hesitant to come to school to use the computer lab, because she didn’t know very much about computers, but Sara and Adam had begged, and after a while, she enjoyed coming and watching them play games. Adam had even showed her how he could make a PowerPoint presentation for his science report. Tonight, Mrs. Gallagher first shared a Dr. Seuss story with the group, encouraging the children to read along. She then gave the group directions on how to log onto a “webquest” she had created about Dr. Seuss. Sara, Adam, and her mom searched Dr. Seuss’s Web site and other Web sites that Mrs. Gallagher

provided to find out answers about the author's life and his books. When they were finished, the reward was playing one of the games on Dr. Seuss's Web site (www.seussville.com). Sara's mom was proud of how quickly Sara and Adam were able to find the answers to the questions, and Adam had even taught her something new, when he had explained what a "search engine" was, a term Mrs. Gallagher used that was confusing. She wished that she was able to afford a computer for the kids to have at home, but was glad that their school opened the computer lab weekly for family use.

A final family event that has proven to be successful in involving families with their children's learning is a family technology night, an event that can provide an opportunity to showcase technology-based hands-on learning experiences for families and students. An evening for families and students dedicated to technology can do the following:

- Engage families in the latest technology, so they understand what and how their children are learning
- Provide information on how to help their children at home, using technology
- Further build social connections among families and with teachers

There are many different types of activities that can be done at a family technology event. For example, students can do a presentation about a topic they researched, using PowerPoint, or they can demonstrate to their families how to use a form of technology such as a Smart Board (an interactive whiteboard). Families can then be encouraged to do an activity together; such as completing a simple assignment, using classroom software like drawing a tree using the Kid Pix graphic software, or completing a webquest, an inquiry based activity where students must use Internet resources to discover answers to questions posed on a topic. A family technology event can also include separate sessions for children and adults, with teachers presenting information on topics, such as Internet safety, to adults, while children participate in technology-related activities in classrooms. Other examples of family technology night experiences are listed in Table 14.8.

There are special considerations in planning a family technology event due to the equipment needs. The location will be based on the availability of equipment and electrical and Internet connections. Therefore, it is important to plan well in advance in choosing a date and time and securing the necessary permission for the location. A planning committee that includes the district's technology staff can facilitate the planning and organization of the event. It is important to have technology support throughout the planning and implementation of the event. For example, equipment needs to be tested prior to the event, with contingency plans for technology problems such as a power failure, computer crash, or the network going down. Replacement equipment, such as projector bulbs, computer mice, or batteries for remote controls, should be stored in a central location that all event coordinators have access to. If computer stations are being used, it is important to consider the comfort of all body types, sizes, and disabilities. A final dress rehearsal test of each computer station and electronic equipment before families arrive can prevent unnecessary surprises. Safe use of equipment should also be considered, such as extension cords, wires, plugs, or any electrical devices that may be harmful to

TABLE 14.8 Ideas for Family Technology Night Experiences

- Offer mini question and answer sessions about how teachers integrate technology into the curriculum.
- Address how your teachers use e-mail and/or Web sites for home-school communication.
- Provide families a chance to play with their child's school software programs. This can prepare them to help when their children have questions.
- Distribute class rules about computer-generated homework and provisions for computer access for students who do not have computers.
- Showcase your computer station setup. Include platforms (PC or Macintosh), models, equipment age, district/school plans to upgrade, and networking capabilities.
- List and demonstrate frequently used software titles (including versions) for learning and remedial assignments. This helps families understand how different titles tie into their child's schoolwork.
- Supply a list of teacher-recommended instructional programs and software for home use (word processing, spreadsheets, AppleWorks, etc.).
- Provide a complete list of school-authorized online resources for student learning and discovery.
- Introduce tips for securing a safe online environment.
 - Provide adult-child Internet awareness information including a contract to read with their child, and have him or her sign it.
 - Explain the school's *Acceptable Use Policy* (AUP)—a required written agreement between the school and the student (under 18 years of age) with parental/guardian consent about proper use of e-mail, the Internet, and the consequences for not doing so.
 - Present how the Internet is used in instruction; how the students are monitored for safety when online in the classrooms and labs.
- Offer tips encouraging a balance between computer and noncomputer activities at home. Include reading, outdoor activities, hobbies, and family games into the balance.
- Demonstrate ergonomics for setting up a computer study area in the home for promoting and maintaining healthy posture and good study habits.
- Introduce an informational Web site demonstrating your school's technology use. Content may include class projects, student work, and online family activities.
- Take digital photographs to give to participating families. These photos may also be used to enhance your school's Web site and advertise upcoming family nights.
- Make tee shirts. Demonstrate student creativity using a simple software program. Print the design on transfer paper. Press the designs on tee shirts with a hot iron.

children. Trash receptacles at each door can be used to encourage families to throw away all food and drinks before interacting with the technology. The size of the group must also be considered to make sure that all have the hands-on experiences with technology. While a presentation by a teacher on Internet safety can be helpful for families, events that also include actual use of technology by families and students are of high interest. Families may be hesitant in using technology they are unfamiliar with, but students can be trained to serve as guides for their families, demonstrating how to use equipment and software. Completed technology-assisted class projects and student work around the

room and near computer stations can also generate interest among families as students explain how they created the work.

SUMMARY

This chapter has described a variety of ways in which families can be involved in their child's education through school-based events. The examples in this chapter move beyond the traditional "audience member" level of participation for families that is typically found in school events such as a Science Fair or an Open House to an active level of participation where families and children are learning together. Although planning, organizing, and implementing these events can be time-consuming, the benefits that teachers, families, and students can reap outweigh the disadvantages, and these events can go a long way toward building a partnership relationship with families in educating their children.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Reread the "In the Classroom" case study presented at the beginning of the chapter, and reflect on these questions:

1. Using Table 14.3, Checklist for Culturally Responsive Family Events, evaluate the teachers' plans. Did they consider everything necessary to have a successful event?
2. Family events, such as this one, require much time and effort on a teacher's part. What are the benefits of organizing and hosting an event like this? Do you think it is worth it?
3. How can these second-grade teachers use this experience to plan other successful family events?

WEB SITES

Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, www.barbarabushfoundation.com.

This Web site offers information about grants available for family literacy activities, which must include "intergenerational activities where the parents/primary caregivers and children come together to learn and to read."

Education World, www.educationworld.com.

This Web site has a wealth of resources for teachers, including professional development articles on hosting family events. Check out the Family Fitness nights, where kids and families engage in physical activities together: www.educationworld.com/a_curr/profdev/profdev095.shtml

LearnNC: Science Family Fun Night, www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/familyfun022006.

One night a month a North Carolina teacher opens her classroom to families where they work together to solve logic problems and conduct experiments. Through this monthly fun night, she increases family involvement in her students' education and finds ideas for science experiments and other classroom science projects.

PTO Today, <http://ptotoday.com/boards/school-family-events>.

This page highlights family events message boards where successful ideas for family events can be spotlighted and discussed through online interactions. Some ideas included "Inside Winter Games," a "Read-A-Thon," and a "Family Arts and Crafts" night.

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), www.rif.org.

This site offers numerous resources to support literacy, including information on Family Literacy Events. RIF is also a source of free books and literacy resources for needy children and families.

WEB-BASED STUDENT STUDY SITE

The Companion Web site for *Home, School, and Community Collaboration* can be found at www.sagepub.com/kgrantstudy. Visit the Web-based student study site to enhance your understanding of the chapter content. The study materials include practice tests, flash cards, suggested readings and movie lists, and more.