

Family Day: An Investment in Our Future

One Indiana elementary school strengthened the ties between students and their parents by hosting a celebration of the family—and strengthened school pride as well.

On the morning after our first Family Day at Daniel Hale Williams School (Gary, Indiana), we-did-it expressions beamed from the faces of a tired but proud and happy staff. It was a dream come true, a successful intervention program executed with precision and affection.

A few months earlier, the words from a banquet speech by Judge James Kimbrough had propelled me into action: "We've lost one generation of young people, and we are in the midst of losing another." As an elementary principal and a city councilman for nearly 14 years, I had suspected for over a decade that our young people were going astray, literally wasting away. However, to hear this idea capitalized in Judge Kimbrough's statement caused me great distress.

As I prepared to go to work the next day, I began formulating questions to pose to the faculty. Was the breakdown in family structure partially to blame for the alienation of our youth? What role could the school play in supporting or rebuilding family strength? Could we offer some kind of intervention to help families at risk?

If we could strengthen family structure for our students for even one day, we might be on our way to proving Judge Kimbrough's dire warnings wrong. In any case, we needed parents' support in our quest for academic excellence.

I began to imagine a family celebration where parents could spend the day with their children, watching films, hearing speakers, singing together, and sharing a day of learning. I presented my ideas and questions to the faculty that afternoon; and with

their support we began to form committees to plan Family Day.

We set a target date for the end of the grading period when we normally would have our attendance, pride, and honor roll awards—it happened that the day fell during American Education Week. The committees immediately went into action to locate films and speakers, select activities, coordinate lunch plans, and publicize the event. Students wrote "raps" in celebration of families and sent out invitations.

Finally, it arrived—Family Day. We began the day by joining hands and

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encircling the school—parents, students, and staff—to recite our Family Day rap and sing our school song. Even the drizzling rain could not diminish the strong sense of pride and family spirit we felt that morning. We moved through the day with ice-breakers, discussions, films, speakers, lunch, sock hop, and academics. We closed with our first grading period awards program.

It was a glorious day. Parents and children shared their likes and dislikes and suggested ways to improve their family settings. They discovered each other's uniqueness and learned to cope with each other. Parents learned more about parenting; children learned they could say "no" to drug use and "yes" to their parents' authority. Parents and children danced together, the children mimicking dances of yesterday and the parents struggling to do the dances of today.

Nothing else has been half as rewarding as to see more than 200 parents involved in a full day of activities with their children. With parents' commenting, "I enjoyed this day so much" and "I learned so much" and the children with beaming faces saying, "Let's do it again," you can understand why we feel we have begun restoring school and family pride.

On future Family Days we can continue to make positive changes toward strengthening the fiber of our society. No more lost generations at this school; we count Family Day as an investment in our future. □

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