



School Family Program

by Harriet Wolf – Phillips Brooks School

Background

The Phillips Brooks School has 250 students. The youngest students are 3, 4, & 5 year olds in our Early Learning Center. There are two classrooms for each grade level K through 5.

Annual goals set by faculty have given high priority to diversifying our community, but we feel this goal has not been completely fulfilled. However, a majority of faculty and staff members have elected to join a S.E.E.D. (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) group. Members of this group have discovered that, although on the surface all we seem similar, we have significant differences which we have shared and celebrated.

Why I chose this project: As the school librarian, I teach all students once a week. I have seen that students in different grade levels have much in common, and would enjoy getting to know each other. Working with all the grade levels is a constant reminder to me of the maturation process in primary school students, and helps me to understand those students who may be ahead or behind in the process at a particular grade level. In S.E.E.D. I've learned how to share my personal experiences with others, to discuss in a safe environment how we may inadvertently make someone with a different background feel unwelcome, and to feel comfortable asking about and learning from those with different experiences.

I felt school families would give our community the opportunity to share interests in a multi-age environment, allow adults to enjoy children at all grade levels, create a safe place to explore the existing diversity in our community, introduce our students to the concept that they can create or discover family like relationships where ever they may be, and help us all learn and practice those skills which enhance personal interactions.

The School Families

There are 16 school families, with 13 children and 2 adults in each. The children in a family are selected from each of the 2 classrooms in grades K through 5. The adults include teachers, assistant teachers, administrators and staff. It is intended that these families continue from year to year with their current members (kindergarten students will be added each year), so that a student in kindergarten today, will be in the same school family when he/she is in 5th grade. Buddy pairs are assigned by school family parents. 5th graders are paired with kindergartners, 2nd graders with 4th graders, and 3rd graders with 1st graders. The older buddy goes to the younger buddy's classroom and takes that child to and from family meetings. Buddy teams work together on family projects.

Family Chapels

Teachers and administrators share in leading school chapels. Two chapels each month are designated family chapels. At these the presenter shares a family tradition, lesson, or favorite memory. Kindergarten students are accompanied by their 5th grade family buddy when attending chapel.

The Process

By the end of the 2001-2002 school year, there will have been 9 1-hour meetings of school families. In addition, school family groups have sat together at chapel, and participated in game days as a group. A school family steering committee of teachers plans each family meeting. A step - by - step plan, with specified goals, necessary materials, and a schedule is given in advance to adult leaders of school families.

Assessment: After each family event, adult family members discuss their experiences. Families answered survey questions after the 8th family meeting.

Through lines

How are our home families similar and different from each other?

Reflections: By focusing on these similarities and differences, we hope to acknowledge, learn about, and validate our differences. As we share our home family experiences, we learn we are not alone - others have similar problems and joys. If we become comfortable sharing our differences, we will have learned a skill that should make our community one that is welcoming to all new members.

How are our school families similar and different from our home families?

Reflections: By comparing school and home families, we hope students over time will come to an understanding you don't have to be related by blood to feel a bond with people you care for, and families take many forms.

What do we need to do in order to feel safe, connected and cared for by our school families?

Reflections: Family ground rules include using feeling messages, avoiding put downs, and whole body listening (with the eyes, ears, and heart). Older buddies watch out for their younger partner. These work to create a safe and caring environment, where students are connected by responsibility and respect.

Family Activities

Generative topic: What do you need to be a family?

Understanding goals:

1. Families identify themselves by name and shared interests.
2. Families have systems for making decisions
3. Members of a family work, play and learn together.

Understanding performances:

1. Each family picked a name comprised of an animal, 2 colors and an adjective.
2. To facilitate decision making, families selected their animal from a list of animals found on the property where our new campus will be located.
3. Each family came up with a method to reach agreement on a name.
4. Each family created its own flag using the family name, animal and colors.
5. A later free choice family event provided an opportunity to practice decision making skills, and to have fun with sports and crafts.

Assessment: See Exhibit "A" , Sections 1 & 2

Generative topic: Who makes up a family?

Understanding goals:

1. Families differ in size, makeup, roles, rules, beliefs and traditions.
2. A family is two or more people who are joined together by caring, or who are related to each other.

Understanding performances:

1. Each family read a different book featuring families in familiar situations, family traditions, conflicts and problems. Included in these stories were divorced, adoptive, multi-racial and immigrant families.
2. School families discussed questions such as "Who was in this family? How did they feel about each other? What did they do together? How did they deal with a problem? What did you like about this family? What didn't you like about this family?"
3. Each school family made a Venn diagram showing how the family in their book was similar or different from their home family.
4. Each school family, using a template, prepared a review of their book. Included in this review was a summary of what the group learned from the book. These reviews will be shared on our web site.
5. Family chapels (see page 2)

Assessment: See Exhibit "A" , Section 2

Generative topic: Why is a family important?

Understanding goals:

1. How do you express how you feel to members of your family?
2. How do members of a family take care of each other in their family and their community?

Understanding performances:

1. At family chapel, family groups sat together. The presenter's school family joined her in front of the school. She modeled for the school how to tell a family member what you valued about him/her. Family groups then had the opportunity to have one to one conversations where each shared with the other what they valued about the other.
2. For Valentine's Day, school families prepared valentines to be sent to school alumni. Families discussed communicating caring, and staying connected with those who may not see often.
3. Buddies brain stormed 5 things that "home" meant to them. School families then read the book Fly Away Home about a homeless boy and his dad who lived in an airport. Buddies were asked to cross off the things on their list that they wouldn't have if they were the boy in the story. Groups discussed how it felt to cross things off. They discussed the things the boy was lucky to have, and ways to help families in our community who may be homeless.
4. School families collected items for the Ecumenical Hunger Program.
5. School families planted daffodil bulbs in areas reserved for each family.
6. School families picked up trash on campus, and made stepping stones for campus beautification.
7. Older buddies have learned that their younger buddy depends on them for guidance.

ance, and younger buddies have learned to trust and care for their older buddies.
Assessment: See Exhibit "A" , Sections 2 & 3

Personal Evaluation of Project

What Worked: Based on responses to our survey, school families did form a bond. The students did "get" the concept of assuming responsibility for younger buddies and for our campus. Teachers seem enthusiastic about their school families. Several have expressed their pleasure at getting to know students in other grades. Those school family parents who don't work regularly with the children, enjoy the contact. A survey of school family parents will be conducted at the end of the school year.

What could be improved

Group discussions are sometimes difficult for younger students, particularly kindergartners. Presenters have asked for more direction in preparing family chapels. Some teachers feel the family groups meet too frequently.

What I would like to change next year

This year the school family steering committee decided on the dates for family events, and the nature of the event for each date. Small groups volunteered to plan and facilitate specific activities. We then tried to tie the activity to an understanding goal. Next year I would like to change the planning process by selecting our understanding goals, and then deciding on appropriate understanding performances. Personally, I would like us to focus on the ground rules we adopted this year, especially whole body listening. Our kindergartners and 1st graders are the school experts in this area, and by teaching the older school family members, they may feel more integrated into the activity. I would also like to involve students in the planning of family activities. Understanding goals as family chapel themes is something I would like to explore.

Exhibit A
Assessments

1. What do you need to be a family?

Section 1

In response to survey question,

"[What] have you learned...in your school family about how to make decisions?"

"Consult with each other.

Vote. Get past personal preferences. We use our

words. Talk... it

out...be flexible.

Can't always

have own way in a big

group.

Brain storm...put heads

down and raise hands. [how to be]

a good sport if you don't get your own way."

2. Who makes up a family?

Section 2

Students were able to share feelings with their school families. One family parent reported that a book about a divorced family, and her own sharing her experiences after her parents' divorce, resulted in one of her family members feeling safe enough to share her own experience. In another family a story, about an American child whose father lived in Africa, prompted a child to talk about how much she missed her father who lived in in another country. Previously this child had said her father was dead .

In response to survey question:

"How is your school family different from your personal family?"

"It's larger. I don't have two Moms. We don't all have the same hair. No dad. We don't know each other as well. We don't have pets. We don't treat each other as badly. School families have more interesting names. We aren't related. School family is much bigger. We don't fight in our school family like at home. Different last names. We don't look like a family. Don't see each other every day. Has people really different from you. You don't

kiss your school parents. Different heritages. My school parents won't buy me video games or candy."

In response to survey question

"How is your school family similar to your personal family?"

"Two parents. Everyone is nice. You're always together. Encouraging. We do stuff together. Rules. Both are called a family, both have brothers/sisters/parents. Meet to try to solve problems and make decisions. We disagree sometimes. We work, build, do projects and have fun together. Group feeling. Go to them for help/advice. Both strong community you can come to. Act like teams & help. All kind & generous. Support. They take care of me as well as they do at home."

3. Why is a family important?

Section 3

In response to survey question,

"Why is a school family important?"

"It's... about trying to make our campus pretty and working together hard. We help our school. ...get to know each other....learn how to get along. To find out about different people. We learn to get past... appearances. Learn to work like a team. ...understand each other...form a support group. You know more people at our school. Opens our eyes to other people in school. Creates a unified school wide community. We learn to treat others in school like a family member."

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