

# HOW TO BOOST ATTENDANCE TO FAMILY LITERACY NIGHTS AT SCHOOL

By Matthew Gollub © 2007

What's the most important indicator for a child's success in school? If you answered "family involvement," we're on the same page!

Parents don't need graduate degrees to encourage their kids to read at home. But it's vital for them to see reading as key to success in all academic subjects. And they need to see themselves as on the same team as their kids' teachers. Family Literacy Nights help communicate to parents some of the ways they can support reading at home: by sharing stories, creating quiet time, keeping children's books in the home, etc. But for Family Literacy Nights to fulfill their promise, the first step is getting lots of families to attend!

Here are top pointers for planning successful literacy events, from schools that have featured me as the guest speaker:

**\*Allow sufficient time to "market" the event.** Send home written announcements in appropriate languages. Announce the event over the intercom and school marquis. Use automated phone messages or get office staff to personally invite parents as necessary. Also enlist the help of a few key parents who can communicate to other parents the benefits of the event.

**\*Avoid scheduling conflicts.** Try not to compete with other events such as a band concert, municipal celebration, Friday night high school football game, etc.

**\*Choose a time that works for your families.** At 5:30, many parents are just coming home from work. A 7:00 start time can be difficult with young children. A 6:30 start time often works best.

**\*If funds are available, consider serving dinner.** Food from a local restaurant is both a convenience and incentive! Often restaurants will agree to big discounts to help support literacy and gain recognition. If serving dinner, consider starting at 5:30.

**\*Refreshments or dessert** can also entice people in lieu of dinner.

**\*Set up a childcare center in a nearby classroom** so that mothers don't have to hush younger siblings during the talk. Mention available childcare in your announcement; overworked parents will welcome the short break!

**\*Give students an incentive to attend** by asking them to check in with their teacher. Those present may be excused from homework. And classes with the most students can later be treated to root beer floats!

**\*Keep the feeling festive and fun.** Raffle off books or the wares of local merchants. Set up activity tables to demonstrate reading customs. Give kids prizes for reading or spelling different words. If your community is has the expendable income, consider a silent auction to raise library funds.

**\*Consider bringing in a guest speaker**—maybe an author or storyteller with whom students are familiar. But the guest must feel comfortable with crowds of wide-ranging ages. Guests might also be local business people, sports heroes, superintendents, the principal—any engaging, kid-friendly presenter who can describe how reading helped him or her in life.

**\*Reach out to parents who do not understand English** by having a translator greet them in their language and at least summarize main points of the talk. Translators should also assist with questions and answers, and any discussion that follows.

**\*If possible, offer a “free” children’s book or booklet** to students or families that attend. If R.I.F. or Title I funds are available, approach any publisher about what they can offer. My publishing company, Tortuga Press, for instance, drops the price of trade paperback books from \$6.95 to just \$3.00 for such events.

**\*If possible, raffle off books** at the END of the program as an incentive for families to sit still and listen.

**\*Build on the success of the first literacy event.** Think long term! By planning regular literacy events, you will condition families to attend them in the future.

The purpose of a family literacy event is to gradually help improve your community. More reading families mean better test scores and parent involvement. Such profound change does not take place overnight. But the rewards for planting seeds and harvesting readers are immense.

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