



SAMPLER

IMPROVE STUDENTS' HOMEWORK COMPLETION WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**When I do my homework, I get to think things through—
I like to show my family all that I can do.**

Homework is a natural “connector” between school and home. Well-designed homework gives students opportunities to master skills, apply knowledge, and complete assignments. It also enables teachers to communicate with parents to help students develop good homework habits, and to guide parent-child conversations about classwork and learning. To activate these features, teachers must consider the purposes and designs of assignments.

If parents ask their children: “Did you do your homework?” students may answer “yup” or “not yet” or some other brief remark. A better conversation starter is for parents to ask something like: “Show me something you learned in math today,” or “What is the most interesting thing that you read about today?” These questions put the student in the role of “demonstrator” or “teacher,” and build students’ skills while providing parents with information about student learning.

It is important for students to have a quiet place to do homework. It is even more important for students to know that their parents value homework, enjoy sharing ideas, and monitor the completion of assignments. Students also must know that it is their responsibility—not a parent’s—to *do* the homework.

Teachers and other educators may conduct workshops and communicate with parents about the homework policy, results of research on the benefits of homework, and expectations for students’ work and parents’ support for homework completion. This information will clarify the connections of completing homework with higher student test scores and report card grades.

Discussions with parents should clarify what it means to “help” a child with homework. Specifically, “help” does *not* mean that parents are expected to “teach” their children all school subjects at every grade level. That is an unfair and impossible task! Rather, “help” with homework means that parents should talk with their children

about what they are learning in class and how school skills relate to real-world applications. Assignments can be interactive, enjoyable, and beneficial if, for example, students interview a parent about an experience, discuss how math is used in daily life, or make a parent their “science partner” in an experiment at home.

Because few parents can attend many meetings at school, homework is an easy way to build a bridge between home and school. By valuing and monitoring homework, and by interacting with their children about homework, all parents can stay in touch with their children as learners and remain informed about the hard work that students do with their teachers in class.

The activities in this *Sampler* were reported as promising partnership practices by schools in NNPS, or developed and tested by NNPS with collaborating practitioners. They illustrate ways to engage parents with students on learning activities at home at all grade levels. The activities include strategies to help parents conduct reading and math readiness skills in preschool; support science learning at home in the elementary grades; monitor time to study math in the middle grades; and encourage high school students read for pleasure.

Improve Classroom Teaching

Many of the sample activities were conducted by schools’ Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) to engage students with parents on homework and learning-at-home activities. Individual teachers may use or adapt the activities to improve the homework process for their own students and families. For example, individual teachers may guide students to set up a Blue Ribbon Homework Center for a dedicated space at home to do their work. Teachers may adapt the Home Conference to guide students to share and review their work in a particular subject with a family partner.

See other ideas on homework and home learning activities at www.partnershipschools.org in the section Success Stories.

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Review of Research: Family and Student Interactions on Homework

Joyce L. Epstein and Frances L. Van Voorhis

Are you buying a car? Friends will ask: *Have you done your homework?* Do you want to learn to play the guitar? To do anything well, you have to practice. Homework helps people master skills and make smart investments. Studies confirm that about 80% of students, teachers, and parents agree that homework is important for student learning (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007), but up to one third of those surveyed reported that some homework was poorly designed or just busy work. These contrasting realities tell us that homework matters, but that homework designs and the homework process need to improve (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012).

Research on homework has been extensive, but has mainly measured the *time* students spend on homework (Cooper, 2007). Cross-sectional studies indicate that, at the elementary level, struggling students tend to spend more minutes on homework, in part because it may take them longer than advanced students to do the work. This does not mean that spending more minutes on homework “causes” lower achievement in young students. Rather, the correlations tell us that students vary in the time they need to complete their homework. At the high school level, we see a different pattern. Advanced students, who may be in honors classes, spend more time on homework than do struggling students, who often have stopped doing any homework.

Longitudinal studies are more useful in that they confirm—consistently—that, regardless of ability level, students who do their homework do better in school. These findings raise an important question for teachers in the middle grades and high school: *How can homework be designed that is so interesting that struggling students will put in the time they need to do their work?*

In a review of the literature, researchers identified ten purposes for homework. Homework is *instructional* when designed for students’ *practice, preparation, participation* as active learners, and *personal development* of skills and talents. Assignments fulfill *communicative* functions when the purposes are to increase *parent-teacher, parent-child, or peer-peer* interactions. Homework serves *political* functions if the purpose is to set school or district *policies* or improve *public relations*. Only *punishment* is not a valid purpose for homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2009). Each purpose requires a different *homework design*. Without teachers’ attention to the purpose and design of homework, some students opt out of homework and may, ultimately, drop out of school. Without clear communications with parents about homework, some get involved and support their children, whereas other parents are uncomfortable and confused about their roles and interactions with their children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

New Designs for Homework. Some researchers are studying new questions on the effects on students and parents of contrasting homework designs. For example, *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)* (see page 3 of this *Sampler*) guides teachers to design homework that requires students to engage a family partner in purposeful conversations and activities in different subjects (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2009). Without such guidance, parents are left on their own to figure out how to help their children on homework.

Three longitudinal studies evaluated the effects of *TIPS* vs. homework-as-usual on student achievement and on student and parent attitudes in math in elementary grades 3 and 4, language arts in middle grades 6 and 7, and science in grades 7 and 8 (Van Voorhis, 2011). Teachers were randomly assigned to *TIPS* or control homework conditions. Students were in *TIPS* classes for one year, two years, or neither year. Analyses of the data indicated that large percentages of the *TIPS* students in all grades completed their homework and most *TIPS* parents were engaged in homework interactions. With grade level, students’ prior achievement, and other background variables statistically controlled, *TIPS* students had higher standardized test scores in the *TIPS* subjects than did control students. Effect sizes ranged from $d=.23$ to $d=.49$, indicating small to medium effects of *TIPS* on student achievement, especially for students in *TIPS* classes for two years. The three studies also measured students’ and families’ attitudes and emotions. Results showed that students and/or families were significantly more positive about *TIPS* than about “regular” homework in all subjects (Van Voorhis, 2011).

The *TIPS* studies and other research on homework indicate that if teachers and administrators *designed* homework with attention to specific *purposes*, more students at all ability levels would complete their assignments, more parents would be involved, and more students would improve their achievement and other school-linked behaviors. (For a full discussion of these issues and reference list, see Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2012.)

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SPOTLIGHT ON INTERACTIVE HOMEWORK

Three activities to improve family and student interactions about homework were developed and reported by NNPS. One is a full intervention program for the elementary and middle grades to enable teachers to design interactive homework for students to discuss their work and ideas with a family partner. Two other innovative homework designs also promote conversations between students and parents.



Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) Interactive Homework

TIPS is a research-based process developed at Johns Hopkins University that guides elementary and middle grades teachers to design homework assignments that require students to talk to someone at home about something interesting they are learning in class. Used on a regular schedule (e.g., once a week or twice a month), *TIPS* helps parents stay informed about what their children are learning and enables them to be involved at home in positive conversations and interactions with their children about their schoolwork (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2009).

TIPS helps to solve some important problems with homework:

- *TIPS* enables all families to become involved, not just the few who know how to discuss math or science or other subjects.
- *TIPS* makes homework the student's responsibility and does not ask parents to "teach" subjects or skills that they are not prepared to teach.
- *TIPS* asks students to share and enjoy their work, ideas, and progress with their families.
- *TIPS* allows families to comment and request other information from teachers in sections for home-to-school communications.

For example, in elementary math, students may show parents how they are learning fractional parts in class and then talk with a parent about how they use fractions in the real world. In middle grades science, every *TIPS* activity requires students to "act like a scientist" with a family partner as their "science assistant." Students may test and record the viscosity of different liquids and talk with their family partner about how viscosity affects some supermarket purchases. In language arts, students may survey a parent or grandparent about hairstyles that were popular when they were growing up, write a draft about hair styles "then and now," and read their essay to their family partner.

TIPS studies show that families appreciate teachers' efforts to keep them informed and involved. Results of research indicate that, compared to students with only "regular homework," students who complete *TIPS* activities have more involved parents, more positive attitudes about homework, and higher achievement test scores in *TIPS* subjects (Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Van Voorhis, 2011).

For information on *TIPS Interactive Homework*, sample *TIPS* activities, *TIPS* research and evaluation reports, a CD with over 500 prototype interactive homework assignments for the elementary and middle grades, and a list of available materials and related reports, visit the NNPS website at www.partnershipschools.org. Click on *TIPS* and follow the links to *TIPS* Resources.

References

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Homemade Homework: Select Important Activities for YOUR Homework

Once a month or on a regular schedule, children and their parents could decide—together—on a *Homemade Homework* activity. With input from a parent or family partner, students would design or select an activity that is (a) important to them and (b) requires a school-related skill (e.g., math, reading, writing, science, art, music, technology). The special homework assignment would substitute for one teacher-designed assignment in a particular subject.

For example, after a discussion with a family partner, the student might decide to write a letter to a relative, neighbor, or friend; draw a scene or person or take a photo and then tell the story of an important event, experience, or meeting; plan activities and a budget for a family trip or desired purchase; write a review of a TV show, movie, or restaurant that the family experienced; write or learn a song, create a dance on a theme, or complete a craft project to develop a favorite talent; or conduct and report on other important activities of their choice.

Homemade Homework includes the student and parent discussing options and selecting an assignment. The student must conduct the activity and write a short report on the effort to complete the homework. The student and parent would share the result of the activity and note their reflections about its value, interest, or other reactions. The student shares and submits the activity in class.



Home Conference: Discuss Student Work in a Specific Subject

Originated by a middle school educator, a *Home Conference* is an organized meeting of a student with a parent at home to examine, enjoy, and discuss selected work products for a particular school subject. For example, a *Home Conference on Writing* might feature two or three examples of a student's best poems, stories, essays, or a mix of assignments during a marking period. These are placed in a folder with a "reaction page" to share with a parent.

The student makes an appointment with a parent for a *Home Conference on Writing*. At the meeting, the student reads aloud the writing samples as the parent listens. Then, they discuss the work. The student records the parent's reactions, opinions, and questions about each writing sample. In this way, the parent or family partner is not asked to read or write to complete this activity with the student. Finally, the student writes his/her own reflection on the family partner's reactions or suggestions, and personal ideas of how to improve or maintain excellence in writing skills over the next marking period.

This strategy can be adapted for the student to meet with a parent or family partner to share selected classwork or homework in any subject. Parents would know more about their child's development and improvement of skills in particular subjects if they were part of a *Home Conference* twice a year or at each report card period. Students would know that their parent or family partner is monitoring their progress, and is interested in their ideas and work products. Teachers would see that students can take charge of a well-organized parent-child conference at home.

Reference

These and other issues about homework are discussed in:

Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Second Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.





BLUE RIBBON HOMEWORK CENTER

AMISTAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KENNEWICK, WASHINGTON

When the principal comes knocking, it could mean trouble. For students at Amistad Elementary, however, when the principal knocked on their doors, it was to deliver a blue ribbon! Students and families who participated in a new program, Blue Ribbon Homework Center, received awards for completing the program's requirements, starting with having parents and children create a homework space at home for students to do their work.

The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) and other teachers at the school noted that some students did not complete their assignments because they lacked a dedicated space and basic supplies (e.g., tape, crayons) to do their work at home. The faculty agreed that all students—successful or struggling—would benefit by improving the homework process.

To start this project, the principal sent letters asking parents if they would help their children create a study space at home. Children whose parents responded to the letter received a backpack with pencils, notebooks, erasers, rulers, and other supplies that students need for homework. Community members donated the backpacks and supplies, and volunteers filled them, too. Participating families received another surprise—a visit from the principal.

Amistad Elementary's principal visited every family that agreed to create a homework center. After seeing the space, the principal presented the student with a blue ribbon and congratulated her or him for creating a place dedicated to doing homework. The principal also took pictures of the students and their families. He said that the home visits were his favorite part of the program. He felt it was important to make a connection on an individual, comfortable basis with each family to emphasize the importance of students' work on homework at every grade level.

The principal's excitement was shared by students and parents. One mother said,

"My son is so excited about his space. He doesn't let anybody mess it up. He tells his brothers, 'This is my homework center.'"

It never is easy to make home visits. The principal had to adjust his schedule to meet with all of the families in the program. A teacher and member of the ATP accompanied him.

Benefits were quickly apparent. More students were encouraged by teachers and parents to do their homework, more completed their assignments, fewer reported "lost" homework, and students' grades improved. "I've definitely seen an increase on homework returned from those who have participated in the Blue Ribbon Homework Center," said one teacher.

Amistad will continue this initiative. The staff plans to keep better track of those who are involved and monitor their progress. They will encourage more students to join in. It was clear that a small, organized, and dedicated space for homework is one easy way to start to improve the homework process.



ONE MILLION MCA MATH MINUTES

ANOKA MIDDLE SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

ANOKA, MN

Here's an equation: The cost of paper + x = higher Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) Math proficiency. The answer to the equation is: x = Anoka Middle School's One Million MCA Math Minutes program. In an effort to increase students' math proficiency by at least 5% across all subgroups, Anoka students and their families kept track of their math study minutes as part of a school-wide studying initiative.

This thrifty approach called attention to the importance of “the basics” for strengthening math skills—namely studying. The question was: If more students studied math for more minutes, more of them—at least 5%—will increase their math skills and scores.

Six weeks prior to the online MCA Math tests, Anoka math teachers handed out six Math Minutes record-keeping slips to each student—one for each week of the program. Students recorded the time they spent each week studying math or completing math homework activities at school or home. Parents and teachers signed the slips—thanks to reminders from the school e-newsletter and the principal's weekly phone calls to parents and students. Students submitted their slips at the end of each week.

Math teachers put these records in envelopes that were labeled with their names for the Volunteer Services Coordinator (VSC). Then, the VSC sent the envelopes home with students whose parents volunteered to count and record the minutes. Parents e-mailed the total minutes of math study per class to the VSC. The VSC entered this information into a spreadsheet that tracked each class's total math minutes for the week, along with the weekly total for the whole school per week.

To incentivize the program, the Arts Curriculum Integrator designed a huge poster of a math-minutes thermometer to hang in the school. The VSC updated the thermometer using red construction paper to show the increasing number of math study minutes over time. This presented a public record of students' progress.

One Million MCA Math Minutes was an inexpensive, easily replicable activity that encouraged over 1900 students, 3500 parents and caregivers, and 50 teachers to strive to increase math test scores. The practice turned math homework into a team-building activity, augmenting parental involvement without adding extra work for anyone. The simple record keeping focused students' attention on the importance of completing homework and studying for tests. The activity encouraged parents to talk with their children about their math work and time studying.

MCA test results will be available at the start of the next school year. The teachers believe that the school's Math Minutes program will be a real problem solver.



PRE-K/KINDERGARTEN LUNCH BREAK MAKE AND TAKE

SUNSET ACRES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SHREVEPORT, LA

Sunset Acres Elementary, a school where 98% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, wanted to get more parents involved in their children's education starting in the youngest grades, but they faced a serious challenge. Many students' parents worked more than one job, or worked at night, or on other schedules that conflicted with early-morning, after school, and evening programs and meetings. The solution was the Lunch Break Make and Take—a chance for parents who could not come to other school meetings to be welcomed at the school, meet teachers, and gain strategies and materials during lunch.

The Lunch Break Make and Take was conducted at the school library from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Parents could arrive during their lunch breaks or between their first and second jobs. Over sandwich trays, chips, and drinks, the principal and pre-K and kindergarten teachers welcomed parents.

Each teacher brought one hands-on reading or math activity that they used in class and that could be easily reproduced during lunch. These included alphabet arcs, math file folder games, and environmental print books. After the teachers demonstrated the activities and explained their educational purposes, parents were able to make the activities using materials arranged around the library.

As they helped parents make the activities, teachers were available for questions and answers about their expectations for young learners. Parents received gallon plastic bags to take home the learning activities that they created.

Sunset Acres Elementary School addressed several challenges in planning and conducting the successful Lunch Break. Teachers met in advance to discuss which activities they would feature and what materials they would

need to provide. They prepared activity bags with some pre-made materials and made CDs of letters and sounds for all attendees to take home.

To ensure that they could present their activities to the parents without losing instructional minutes with their students, teachers scheduled their presentations during their planning periods and rearranged their lunch schedules. When teachers needed to return to class, administrators took over for them at the Lunch Break.

A second challenge was confirming parent attendance. The planning committee created fun flyers to go home with students, sent information home in weekly folders, and advertised on calendars, newsletters, and the outside marquee. Because parents who wanted to attend had very different schedules, teachers contacted each parent to personally invite them to attend the Lunch Break.

The Teacher/Parent Involvement Liaison advises others, "Don't be afraid to give this a try!...Most teachers already have activities that can easily be duplicated for home, so it is easy [to implement]." The \$140 cost of lunch and supplies went a long way, as community volunteers used the activity bags when they tutored students at school. Sunset Acres hopes to hold this event twice yearly in the future.

Parents who attended Lunch Break Make and Take gained information, strategies, and materials to support their children's early education. They also established fellowship with other parents and partnerships with their children's teachers. In these ways, they were able to make and take away new and useful family and school connections.



Reading Counts Book Review Celebration

Creek Bridge High School
Marion, South Carolina

The administration of Creek Bridge High School took a cue from a favorite children's television program, *Reading Rainbow*, turning a student reading challenge into a television phenomenon.

The project began last September when the school's principal challenged the 440 students at the school to read more. During the semester, students participated in Scholastic's Reading Counts program, which involved reading books and taking computerized tests to check their comprehension. They were awarded points based on how many tests they passed. To sweeten the deal for Creek Bridge students, the school announced that students who received 100 points or more by the end of the contest in January would be invited to a special celebration. The top three point-earners would also receive cash prizes.

Teachers got busy encouraging students to read. They helped students select books at the appropriate level of difficulty and set aside time for silent reading in class. Parents followed up with encouragement to read at home.

The contest took a 21st century turn when, at the end, the school's top readers were asked to produce video reports on their favorite books. With the help of the school's media specialist, students filled out questionnaires about their chosen books and based the talking points for their video reviews on that information.

The videos debuted during the end of semester Book Celebration. About 100 parents and students enjoyed the videos and celebrated their reading success. Not only did students enjoy watching themselves and their peers, but they also enjoyed learning about one another's favorite books. Students received copies of their video book reports on DVDs with certificates for completing the Reading Counts program. After the celebration, the videos were featured on the school's web site.

Creek Bridge initiated the reading challenge and resulting celebration to improve the low scores that high school and middle school students posted on the South Carolina School Report Card. For the past five years, teachers and staff faced challenges in reading comprehension and language arts. They were having trouble getting students to read any books – let alone pass tests about them. The reading challenge, encouragement, and planned celebration brought real results. During the contest, teachers and students saw state test scores rise and library circulation increase. In fact, the books reviewed in the video were the most widely circulated books for months.

The cost of the program was \$1,000, covered by state technical assistance funds. Parents, school staff, and students agreed that it was money worth spending. Many, including the school librarian, have high hopes for an encore performance. "This is a great program. We must do it again!" the librarian said.

Creek Bridge High School plans to do just that, repeating the contest and productions of videos in the fall and in the spring next year.



SINGAPORE MATH NIGHT

T. H. WATKINS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
LAKE CHARLES, LA

When T. H. Watkins Elementary implemented the Singapore math method in their classrooms, many parents had questions about the new strategies, which followed the curriculum and instructional approaches used in Singapore. To give parents knowledge, tools, and resources about how to support their students' math learning at home, the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) held a three-activity Singapore Math Night at school.

The ATP used three rooms to address a different math theme and activity in each location. As parents, students, and families arrived for the evening, they received a rotation schedule and were assigned a particular beginning location.

In each room, a math strategy was featured along with an easy-to-use math manipulative that reinforced the strategy. In the Math Strategies room, students and families created a foldable flipbook that provided an at-home summary of five Singapore math strategies used in classrooms.

Participants at the next station made Number Bond bracelets using pipe cleaners and beads. Finally, the Model Drawing room explained and demonstrated how students used model drawing techniques to solve math problems. At the conclusion of the workshop, families enjoyed refreshments and left with three math teaching tools that they could use at home.

Throughout the evening, students assisted in showing their parents how they used the various strategies in their math classes. An exit evaluation collected qualitative and quantitative responses to Singapore Math Night. The results of these surveys showed that families "enjoyed seeing their students explaining the math." The experience helped families understand why math teachers at T. H. Watkins emphasized teaching students *how* to solve problems and *how* to find an answer.

Singapore Math Night responded directly to parents' requests raised in previous ATP meetings to know more about the school's new math approaches. The planning committee created a rotation schedule that reflected the needs of all families, many of whom have students in more than one grade. The resources that students and parents took home applied to all grade levels.

In response, one parent of two student in different grades said, "I am better equipped to help my students with homework. I understand how to use the strategies." A parent of three children echoed those sentiments, adding, "I am thankful to have the items to bring home to help with math."

Singapore Math Night helped families gain some strategies to support their children with math learning at home in ways that matched teachers' approaches in class. In turn, students had more positive conversations about math with their parents at home.



TABLE TALK

WINDSOR OAKS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

Students are curious, talkative, and imaginative creatures. To keep them thinking and talking at home, as they do at school, Windsor Oaks Elementary School developed Table Talk, which serves up interesting topics for discussion that add “meat” to dinner conversations.

Each month, the school sends home a Table Talk calendar, one for grades K-2 and one for grades 3-5. Each one is filled with conversation topics. A letter to parents explains how to use the ideas to spark children’s thinking and imaginations each day of the month.

Parents check off topics they discuss at dinner (or breakfast, or any time). When students return the completed calendar the next month, it is used as a raffle ticket. Prizes include books, snacks, and art supplies. The goal is that the calendars will promote creative thinking, meaningful discussions, and enjoyable conversations at home.

Each month, the calendar presents a theme. For example, in April 2011, the K-2 calendar followed a springtime theme. Topics for imaginative conversations concerned plants in a world that was different from our own. “What if plants had feelings like ours?” “What if a dog buried a bone and a bone tree grew from it?” “What if sunflowers gave off sunlight?” “What if plants could grow without sunshine?” These “what if?” questions challenge students to think creatively. They can exchange ideas—just for fun—with a parent, sibling, or another member of the family.

The April calendar for students in grades 3-5 had thought-provoking questions with real world applications for modes of transportation. One night the questions for discussion was, “What if airplanes had not been invented? How would this have changed history in the twentieth century.” Another night, students and parents discussed, “What if all roads were one way? Describe your route to and from school.”

These odd questions give children a chance to think outside the box. By exchanging ideas with others in the family, children feel listened to and appreciated. One student shared, “It is really funny to see what ideas my mom has on some of the questions.”

Ultimately, Table Talk gets students and parents thinking, laughing, and talking together. Said one parent, “[Before Table Talk] our conversations usually turned to who had to do what or go where. Once we started incorporating the Table Talk questions into our conversations we found ourselves enjoying the conversations, laughing, and getting into some really interesting discussions.” It is clear that students and parents at Windsor Oaks are talking together in some curious and creative ways.



TAKING SCIENCE TO THE HOME

EDISON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KENNEWICK, WA

Every school is working to increase students' interests in STEM subjects—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Often Engineering is overlooked, as schools focus on science and math. Edison Elementary School's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) received a fun-filled engineering kit that included suggested activities, a supply list, and a video. The ATP decided to put the kit to use to focus on Engineering as an important field for applying math and science to improve our lives.

Taking Science to the Home was designed for 4th and 5th grade students and families. The planners wanted to include learning activities that could be enjoyed in school *and* taken home to strengthen and extend student learning.

One evening in February, over 120 students and their families came to the school gym and hallways to participate in challenging, educational, and—yes—fun engineering activities. Six stations, all from the Zoom Engineering Kit, were set up, and students were given related take-home activities and supplies.

Stations included Polishing Pennies, an experiment to see which household liquids could best shine up a dull penny. The take-home kit for this activity gave students different liquids to test. At Hoop Glider, students manipulated a straw, tape, and two strips of paper to create hoop gliders that flew down the hallway. Then, they measured the distance flown. Students and families raced their Puff Mobiles—vehicles powered by a simple puff of air—which they made from straws, Lifesaver candies, paperclips, paper, and tape.

Students used gumdrops and toothpicks to create their own Gumdrops Dome structures. The Paper Tower task challenged students and families to construct the tallest structure possible using only two pieces of newspaper. Finally, students filled bottles of water with packing peanuts and paper clips, finding the right balance

to suspend the peanuts in the middle of the water—making not a floater, not a sinker, but a “Flinker.” A volunteer engineer from the community circulated among the students and families to talk about the field of engineering.

Each station provided a take-home activity to reinforce the engineering concept at home. To make sure that all students had access to the same great activities, the ATP provided take-home bags to all students, including those who were unable to attend. Each kit included a plastic bag, instructions, and materials for the specific activity. Some kits provided the same supplies used at school, and other kits had slightly different activities—e.g., marshmallows instead of gumdrops—so that students and families would find something new in the experiments at home.

In preparation for Taking Science to the Home, the ATP scheduled a kit-making party and gathered volunteers to put together enough kits for every 4th and 5th grade student. The local UPS store donated packing peanuts for the Flinker station. Each classroom volunteered to collect one kind of supply needed for the event. The ATP committee chairs collected the donated supplies and made any necessary additional purchases.

The ATP promoted their practice in two unique ways. One week before the event, the ATP went to each 4th and 5th grade classroom with a traveling cart of all the activities to pique the students' interest. The day of the event, every student went home wearing a bracelet with a reminder about the time and place.

After completing the activities, one parent said, “This was so fun! I can't wait to do these at home with all of our kids!” That was exactly the point of Taking Science to the Home!



TARRANT READS TOGETHER: DINNER THEATRE

**CESAR TARRANT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
HAMPTON, VIRGINIA**

An old African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” At Cesar Tarrant Elementary School, it also takes a village to support students’ reading achievement. In order to encourage parents to read aloud to their children and to have the community at-large support this effort, Tarrant’s Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) developed Tarrant Reads Together, along with a related Dinner Theatre.

Tarrant’s reading coach heard about a school that initiated a program called *One Book, One School* based on guidelines from *Read to Them*, a program that encourages adults to read aloud to kids. (See choices of read-aloud books at www.readtothem.org.) He discussed these ideas with Tarrant’s ATP, which then added a few new details to meet students’ and families’ needs. Tarrant Reads Together aims to get everyone in the school community—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and all support staff from bus drivers to custodians—reading the same book at the same time.

The ATP kicked off the two-week reading activity with a Dinner Theatre. To prepare for this, the school’s reading specialist took the first chapter of the selected book and rewrote it as a play. Children volunteered for roles and practiced their parts to be ready for the performance. On the evening of the Dinner Theatre, faculty served as wait staff and provided dinner to the attendees. The volunteer cast of students performed the play for the audience.

Following the play, staff introduced the book to parents. The reading specialist described the basics of the program, explaining details about the materials that each participant had received. To close the Dinner Theater, there was a short presentation and discussion on the benefits of reading aloud to children.

The school organized this program by giving participants a reading schedule of pages to read on Monday night through Thursday night

for two weeks. Parents were encouraged to read the selected book aloud to their children, regardless of the students’ ages. Everyone appreciated this opportunity to spend time together as a family. One parent reported, “I love the Tarrant Reads Together program. It provided an activity that our whole family could enjoy together. I never thought about reading the same book aloud to my children who are different ages.”

By keeping everyone on the same reading schedule, the school promoted conversations about the book. Each day in school during morning announcements, students and teachers followed the program by posing trivia questions on the prior evening’s passages. Students could answer these questions to enter a drawing for small prizes, which kept their excitement for the program high.

Tarrant’s ATP knew from experience that some children did not have anyone to read to them at home. To overcome this obstacle, faculty created community reading spots for students to use during their free time. The school also partnered with the local Boys and Girls Club, which provided a location where teachers, administrators, and community members could read to students to fulfill the daily read-aloud schedule.

Hundreds of people attended the Dinner Theatre and even more participated in Tarrant Reads Together. Said one teacher, “I couldn’t believe our turnout. The staff, students, and families really came together to have a fun night at our school. This two-week program provides our families with an important vision about the value of literacy.”