



SAMPLER

IMPROVE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN HIGH SCHOOLS

**The years in high school are the best
When partnerships support student success.**

Partnerships in high school differ from those in the elementary and middle grades. At the high school level, students are increasingly responsible for their own behavior and learning. Therefore, students must be active participants in family and community involvement activities. Still, high school students report that their parents and other family members are important in their lives, in their education, and in their plans for college and careers. This fact, confirmed in studies across decades, is often ignored by high school administrators and teachers who are unsure of how to organize effective programs that engage all families in their teens' education. Many educators avoid partnering with high school students' families.

At the high school level, effective two-way channels of communication with students' families and basic connections with community partners include meetings, forums, workshops, and sending information home. These occasions and materials help parents discuss adolescent development, teen health, peer pressure, and other teen-topics with other parents, educators, and community experts. Good connections of school and home also help parents support their teens' transition to high school; help students select high school programs and courses; understand school attendance policies; and guide students toward positive experiences and away from risky behaviors. With well-designed partnership programs, more high school students will internalize parents' and teachers' expectations to stay in school, graduate on time, and prepare for postsecondary education and training. This is important because students' accomplishments and decisions in high school affect their own *and* their families' futures.

Community partnerships also are important in high schools. Businesses; cultural, civic, and faith-based organizations; senior citizens; colleges and universities;

and other community groups extend teachers' curricula and provide students with unique learning activities and real-world applications, opportunities for job shadowing, part-time jobs and summer internships, community service projects to improve conditions in the neighborhood, and ways to explore careers, identify interests, and plan future education and training. Referrals to community services may help students and families address problems that affect students' attendance and achievements.

Adapt Activities for Classroom Teaching. The activities in this *Sampler* were conducted by high schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) to engage teachers, students, and parents across the high school grade levels. Individual teachers or subject-, grade-level-, or career academy-teams of teachers, and counselors may adapt the activities to strengthen partnerships with their own students' families and communities. For example, social studies or civics teachers may conduct community service projects with their own students, as in *Hunger in our Community*. Any English teacher could adapt the *Reading Counts Book Review Celebration* to encourage students to read for pleasure, produce videos on their favorite books, and present their products to their families.

This *Sampler* includes a few of many excellent family and community involvement activities from high schools in NNPS annual books of *Promising Partnership Practices*. The activities welcome students and families to high school, help parents monitor students' progress on graduation requirements, encourage students to read more, and celebrate students' successes. See more at www.partnershipschools.org in the section Success Stories. Click on a particular year's book and use the search function to identify activities from high schools.

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Review of Research: High School Programs of Family and Community Involvement

Joyce L. Epstein, Director

High schools, nationwide, have set ambitious goals to reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates (Balfanz, et al., 2010). Attaining these goals depends on the skills and attitudes students learn at all grade levels, from the earliest grades on. At the high school level, teachers work hard to improve the quality of their curricula, instructional approaches, and assessments. If they also involve parents and the community to support student learning and development, more students will stay in school and graduate from high school on time. A growing literature on family and community involvement in high school yields three main conclusions (Epstein, 2007):

- (1) **Parents want more and better information to guide their high school students.** Parents of teens overwhelmingly value education, but say that they need more timely and useful information about adolescent development, high school programs, and community services for teens. On their own, only some parents—mainly those with more formal education—remain involved at the high school level. Even these parents are confused by the challenges of adolescent development, demands of family and work life, complexities of high school programs, and lack of clear communications from educators about school matters.
- (2) **Students benefit from family and community involvement through high school.** Students' good relationships with parents are based on love and care at home. Parent-child discussions and guidance through high school affect teens' values, independence, and talents (Moore, et al., 2004). If parents were knowledgeable partners with educators in high school, more would encourage their teens to fulfill their educational and occupational goals. Teens benefit from sustained interest and timely advice from parents and other adults to achieve their best in school. Compared to similar students with uninvolved parents, those whose parents remain engaged earn higher grades in English and math, increase reading and writing skills, complete more course credits, set higher aspirations, have better attendance, come to class more prepared to learn, and have fewer behavioral problems. These results are significant even after accounting for parents' education, neighborhood characteristics, and students' prior achievement (Simon, 2004).
- (3) **Schools must take responsibility for developing more effective partnerships to reach more and different parents and to help more students succeed.** Secondary teachers know that family involvement is important, but about 90% reported that working with parents is one of their biggest challenges (Markow & Scheer, 2005). Now, with research-based approaches, high schools can organize effective programs that engage parents and community partners to increase students' learning and accomplishments (Epstein et al., 2009). Step one is to create an Action Team for Partnerships of teachers, parents, students, and community partners to plan, implement, and evaluate goal-linked involvement activities, including some that support students' successful transitions into high school and workshops for parents and students on teen-topics.

Studies show, for example, that when high schools conducted workshops on postsecondary planning, more parents discussed college and career plans with their teens (Simon, 2004). Other studies indicate that when guided, more families took action to help their teens improve attendance, reduce disciplinary problems, improve neighborhood safety, and meet course requirements in math. Well-organized teams compensate for changes in principals, increase the number of parents who become involved, and partnership over time (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). On-going studies and fieldwork suggest that well-organized partnership programs enable more parents with diverse backgrounds to help their teens address succeed in high school (United Way, 2011). Without such programs, many students are left with an incomplete support system on high school matters.

For details on these and other studies and resources, see:

- Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J., Moore, L., & Fox, J. H. (2010). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenges in ending the high school dropout epidemic*. Baltimore: Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.
- Epstein, J. L. (2007). Family and community involvement. Pp. 165-173 in K. Borman, S. Cahill, & B. Cotner (Eds.) *The Praeger Handbook of American High Schools*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Epstein, J. L., et al. (2009). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Markow, D., & Scheer, M., (2005). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Transitions and the role of supportive relationships*. New York: MetLife, Inc. Retrieved, 6/17/05 from:
http://www.metlife.com/WPSAssets/34996838801118758796V1FATS_2004.pdf
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- Sheldon, S. B., & Van Voorhis, F. I. 2004. Partnership programs in U.S. schools: Their development and relationship to family involvement outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 15, 125-148.
- Simon, B. S. 2004. High school outreach and family involvement. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7, 185-209.
- United Way Worldwide, & Harvard Family Research Project. (2011) *Family Engagement for High School Success Toolkit*. Retrieved 11/19/11 from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications>.



EVENING ADVISEMENT

NORTHSIDE HIGH SCHOOL WARNER ROBINS, GEORGIA

Northside High School saved two days of instructional time, involved parents in their children's academic decisions, and helped students stay on the path to graduation through their Evening Advisement program. This was a time for parents, teachers, and students to come together to discuss student progress and chart the students' next steps toward a diploma.

Evening Advisement took place over three evenings mid-way through the second semester, and involved great coordination in setting up 1,500 appointments, notifying parents of their appointments, organizing materials for teachers, and ensuring that the process ran smoothly on the appointment nights. The family involvement coordinator was a key player, especially in scheduling the 1,500 appointments.

But all the work paid off. This spring nearly 1,100 parents—72 percent of the targeted population—attended meetings, and the responses on an exit survey were overwhelmingly positive and encouraging.

"I have never felt so informed. Thanks," said the parent of a ninth-grader.

"This is GREAT. Please continue having this . . . good job, NHS," added another parent.

To achieve such a good turnout, the school and its Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) started early to notify students and parents, and to publicize the meetings. Students first heard about registration meetings during the fall semester. Letters, with appointment times, went to parents in February, giving them plenty of notice. Parents also received reminder phone calls from teachers, and an announcement ran on the school marquee for about a month before the meetings.

The advisement sessions provided an opportunity for parents and students to plan and schedule courses for the 2009-10 school year. An academic advisor met with each family to review the student's permanent record, test scores, and courses needed for a high school diploma. Then,

together, they chose required and elective courses and sequences for the next year, and entered the courses into the registration system, which generated a report. The academic advisor also addressed other topics, such as discipline and extracurricular activities.

The ATP was involved all along the way, with planning, training staff members, and securing supplies for the meetings and food for teachers' meals on advisement nights.

The impetus for this program was the previous registration process, which took two full school days. Parents' feedback indicated that they wanted to be more involved with their teens in the decision-making process. The Evening Advisement also contributes to the overall school and district goal of having every student graduate.



GUIDANCE ORIENTATION GUIDE

FRANCIS HOWELL CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

Making the transition from one school to another can be a harrowing ordeal, fraught with confusion for students and parents alike. When middle school students move on to high school they must adjust to new policies and expectations that are critically important to their success. Francis Howell Central High School confronted these challenges head on by developing a Guidance Orientation Guide to keep all parents and students “in the loop.”

Leaders at Francis Howell know that a positive climate requires all members of the school community to feel supported and informed. School leaders believed that they provided a wealth of information to students and families. However, alarm bells went off when parents voiced concerns about wanting and needing more information that would help them guide their teens into and through high school.

After reviewing the school’s communications to parents, the Parent Involvement Action Team discovered that although information was available, it was not concise, and many parents did not know where to find or access it. They decided to condense the most important information into a single, short, clear resource and distribute it to all parents, with special attention to the parents of incoming freshmen and new enrollees.

The school’s Guidance Department Chair developed a simple orientation guide in brochure form, with input from the Action Team. The Guidance Orientation Guide included:

- » *a catalog of parent resources*
- » *names and contact information for school faculty and staff*
- » *helpful advice on how to use the school’s chain of communication*
- » *grading information*
- » *clear explanations of school policies on everything from parking permits to yearbooks.*

One of the main challenges was to communicate clearly with parents on the standardized tests that students take. Previously, teachers sent letters home with students about tests, but many parents did not receive these notices. A section of the new guide outlined the test dates, what each test covers, and how results are reported and used.

All parents receive a copy of the Guidance Orientation Guide when they enroll their teens in Francis Howell Central. It is a useful resource that helps parents understand the school’s mission and procedures—well worth the \$375 it cost for printing and distributing. One parent expressed gratitude for making “the transition from middle to high school much less intimidating for families.” Another remarked that it “should be a required resource for all schools to provide.”



Hispanic Parent Education Evenings

*Gaithersburg High School
Gaithersburg, Maryland*

Improving the academic performance and school attendance of Gaithersburg High School's Hispanic students was a major goal this year. Staff, students, parents, and local experts teamed up to hold monthly meetings to help the parents of Hispanic students understand the intricacies of the school system, problems their teenagers may face regarding academic achievement and health concerns, and ways they could help their children attain greater success in high school.

"Most of the Latino parents are recent immigrants who cannot access school information given in English and, in general, are not familiar with how a comprehensive American high school functions," reported the student support specialist. As a result, the monthly meetings focused on academic issues such as the grading system, understanding report cards, course credit, final exams and other assessments, advance placements courses, and the attendance policy, and were conducted entirely in Spanish. Other topics included the school calendar, school offices and contact information, communicating with teachers and administrators, navigating the school system, getting in touch with Spanish-speaking personnel at the school, free and low-cost health care, drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention and intervention, and gang violence.

The staff met to organize the first parent meeting, focusing on the most pressing issues (including grading, attendance, support at home, and health), and covered additional topics at later meetings. Usually, three to five members of the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) gave presen-

tations at each meeting. The ATP also recruited students who could provide strategies that lead to academic achievement. In order to increase attendance, the ATP sent parents bilingual invitations and followed up with phone calls. Team members found that the best way to invite parents was a call from a Spanish-speaking parent or staff member whom they already knew. The staff provided handouts and refreshments for the parents.

"All of the presentations have been valuable, but especially the one on honors classes," commented one parent. Another said, "It really helps us that the presentations are all in Spanish." Parents requested a repeat performance of the presentation about drug and gang prevention. After the meetings began, the staff noticed increases in Hispanic parents' level of volunteering at the school, advocacy on their students' behalf, and comfort in accessing school personnel.

Overall, the result was an impressive turnout that the school hopes will translate into improved academic performance for Hispanic students. Parents seem more enthusiastic about their children's school activities and a system is in place for continuing dialogue in families' native language.

Planned efforts to improve the Parent Education Evenings include distributing a calendar with all of the meetings for the year and establishing a phone tree to improve communication and turnout among participants.



Honors/AP Informational Night

*Pacifica High School
Garden Grove, California*

Pacifica High School students and their parents spent an evening learning about the opportunities provided by the school's Honors/AP program. Eighth-grade students from feeder junior high schools also attended. Honors and AP teachers formed a panel to explain the program and field questions from parents.

The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) planned the event in response to a suggestion made by parents on the team. With over half of Pacifica's students participating in the Honors/AP program, parents wanted more information to better help their students make decisions to prepare for college.

Pacifica's principal opened the event by welcoming parents and students. One of the school counselors reviewed basic information about the Honors and AP classes and discussed the role of the counselor in helping students plan for college. At least one teacher from each department participated in the panel moderated by the speech and debate teacher. As teachers presented, parents wrote questions on forms that were provided for teachers to answer at the end of the evening. Parents included their e-mail addresses in case the questions were better answered one-to-one instead of with a large group. Teachers distributed to parents informational packets, which included a 14-page handout on frequently asked questions about the Honors/AP program. At the end of the evening, attendees provided feedback via evaluation forms and enjoyed cookies and beverages donated by the PTSA.

Parents and teachers on the ATP worked together to plan the event. Teachers

based their presentations on topics parents indicated would be most useful to them. Students in AP or Honors classes contributed information so that teachers could address topics of importance to students. After gathering feedback from parents and students, teachers held two meetings to plan their presentations and clarify the event's focus.

Honors/AP Informational Night was well-publicized, with notices on Pacifica's web site, in the school's bulletin, and on the marquee in front of the building. Parents distributed fliers to area junior high schools and advertised the event in the schools' monthly publications.

The event proved helpful to all involved. College-bound students learned which classes to take in high school, teachers' expectations for those courses, and what to anticipate on AP exams. At the same time, parents learned how they could support their teens in the program. Teachers gained a greater appreciation for Honors/AP programs in other areas of study.

Pacifica High School plans to hold Honors/AP Informational Night earlier next year so that eighth-grade parents and students will have access to the information before registering for ninth grade.



HUNGER IN OUR COMMUNITY: SERVICE-BASED LEARNING

FRANK W. COX HIGH SCHOOL
VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

There are many serious problems in our communities that need to be solved. Poverty and its related issues head that list and pose real challenges to improve the circumstances of the poorest among us. Frank W. Cox High School wanted its students to understand the nature and extent of social problems in their area and to try to solve some through the school's program of Service-Based Learning.

The community service project's goal was to help students become globally aware, independent and responsible learners, and productive citizens. To start, teachers embedded the project in tenth grade Honors English classes. Students were asked to select a service learning activity that they could accomplish, and, by so doing, improve the lives of others. The students decided that they could make a real difference if they worked together to solve targeted issues of hunger.

Students began by conducting research. More than 100 tenth grade Honors English students toured the Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia. The on-site staff gave them an overview of the situation. They reported how many people the Food Bank served and how much food is needed to feed the hungry. The staff also explained the Food Bank's mission and strategic plan. They provided the organization's annual report. After the tour, students asked questions to learn what they could do to help solve the problem of hunger in the area.

Next, the tenth graders and other students wanted to find out what it felt like to feel hungry. Researchers estimate that 60% of the world's population eats a small bowl of rice each day and 25% eat just a little better. By contrast, 15% do not want for food.

For a simulation, 220 students entered the cafeteria for lunch and received a ticket selected at random. The ticket's color determined whether the student received a bowl of rice, a bowl of rice and some fruit, or a full meal. The students reflected on this experience.

Finally, students participated in the Food Bank's Extreme Food Drive. Students created posters, spoke in their classes about the project, and went door to door in their neighborhoods collecting food for the Food Bank. Eventually, all students in the school participated.

The students organized and boxed the donations. With support and music from a local radio station, the students loaded the food into a Food Bank truck. In all, students, families, and others in the community donated over 7,000 pounds of food to the Food Bank.

Importantly, students took the lead to organize the project. They learned a lot and produced impressive results. Teachers helped them along the way and families and others contributed to the project. With service-based learning, students and the school made a difference in the community.



LOOK WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE

CHIAWANA HIGH SCHOOL PASCO, WASHINGTON

Chiawana High School wanted its families to feel at home in the new school. It also wanted to stress the school improvement goals of promoting students' mathematics, literacy, and science achievement. Chiawana combined these goals into a Family Math, Science, and Reading Night.

The school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) and Gear-Up program worked together to plan an evening designed to be fun and informative. It began with dinner, with Gear Up picking up the tab. The school sent a van to an area where many families lived, so lack of transportation would not keep families home.

At Look What's Happening Here, parents cycled through state-of-art labs, viewing some of the new and exciting resources that the new high school had to offer. In the cardio-lab, parents were able to experience a fitness center and learn how the physical education department incorporates math into its curriculum. To demonstrate how much fun science can be for students, teachers opened the science lab and two teachers led the families through several discoveries.

To promote literacy, Gear-Up staff taught parents how to help their students search the internet for information on college choices and college planning, including financial aid information. Also in the computer lab, families learned how to use the Parent Portal to access their children's grades and attendance. At the end of each session, a staff member used the Public address system to let families know it was time to move on to the next location.

School leadership students not only helped organize the program, but also helped serve food, and escorted parents from one activity to another. There was free babysitting service available, too.

The ATP learned something that night. Because Chiawana is such a large school, it would have been helpful to have walkie-talkies for team

members to communicate. This was particularly important when one of the translators needed for the many Spanish-speaking families was sent to the wrong room. It took time to get the translator to the right place.

Despite minor communication challenges, the math, science, and reading night was a success. The ATP Co-Chair spoke for the team: "We thought the event was a home run. We partnered with Gear-Up and brought students, staff and community together."

About 65 parents, 20 students, 12 community members, and 10 teachers and administrators attended. Pleased with the turnout and positive evaluations, the ATP has decided to repeat this activity. They plan to advertise it more widely in hopes of bringing in more first-time and returning parents to learn more about the school, its programs, and its commitment to family involvement.



Making the Most of Your High School Career

*Joseph A. Foran High School
Milford, Connecticut*

Students and their parents typically feel anxious at the start of high school. To ease these fears, Joseph A. Foran High School hosted a night for incoming freshmen and their parents to get all of their questions answered. During the evening, the school communicated its academic expectations along with opportunities for extracurricular and family involvement.

“Parents appreciated the information and spoke of how many of their fears had been alleviated. They liked the idea that their sons and daughters would be encouraged to take responsibility for their own high school success and appreciated that independence is encouraged but the necessity for parent involvement continues,” said the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) co-facilitator.

After a welcome from the principal, incoming freshmen and their families split into four color-coded groups. The colored flier for each group indicated the schedule of sessions and their location on a map of the school. These sessions included presentations on “If I Knew Then What I Know Now,” presented by a group of seniors; “Class Scheduling and Testing Timeline,” presented by the guidance department; “Motivation, Organization, and Homework”; and “Extracurricular Activities.” Each presentation concluded with time for questions. After all the sessions, the groups met for refreshments and had the chance to ask administrators and student volunteers any remaining questions. Teachers made themselves available to answer student and parent questions about their areas of expertise.

The ATP, which includes students, planned Making the Most of Your High School Career to provide the most important information to rising freshmen and their families. They coordinated with the feeder middle schools to ensure that they did not duplicate information shared at the middle school orientation. ATP members developed the desired sessions, coordinated student and teacher volunteers, solicited food donations, and held meetings to train students for their individual presentations. They advertised the event by sending news releases to the local papers, giving middle school principals fliers to post and notices to print in their school newspapers, and sending invitations to every eighth grader enrolled in the district, along with the parochial schools in the area.

Parents and students appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the high school. One parent e-mailed ATP members afterward with the simple message, “Awesome job!” The high school felt this event left students and parents with a positive impression of the four years to come. They plan to hold this program in the future, and other area high schools have already adopted it, hoping to duplicate its success.



Parent Huddles

Naperville Central High School
Naperville, Illinois

In a school of 3,100 students, good communication is hard work and often difficult to achieve. Naperville Central High School set improving communication with students, parents, teachers, and the community as one of its school-improvement goals. A strategy to help reach that goal was Parent Huddles—small groups of parents meeting to discuss a specific topic after a larger presentation by an expert. Students, teachers, school staff, and community and business partners were invited to attend the Parent Huddles too.

A subcommittee of the School/Family/Community Partnership (SFCP) team surveyed parents via e-mail about topics of interest. Based on the many responses, the subcommittee selected Parent Huddle topics and worked with the administration to determine suitable dates.

The first Huddle, in January, addressed how students select courses. The second Huddle, in March, focused on time-management skills, with a title most people could relate to: “Too Busy for Life!” A large group session with brief presentations by several experts from the school staff kicked off the event. Then the parents joined their huddles with one of the experts and members of the SFCP team.

To accommodate as many people as possible, the Huddles took place in the morning and evening on the same day. Because space is limited at the school, the morning session was held at a private home nearby.

About 60 parents attended the first Huddle with favorable results. “I thought the format was great; it really gave a big school a

small-school feeling,” said one parent. “I attended the evening meeting and the turnout looked great. This would be an excellent meeting to have every year,” said another about the Huddle on course selection.

Not just parents found the Huddles helpful. The director of Student Personnel Services said that the Huddle helped reach one of the department’s goals: to work more directly with parents regarding course selection. After the Huddle, better informed parents were able to help their children plan the next year’s schedule.

Parents signed in to the Huddles, listing the ages of their students and their e-mail addresses, which were used to send feedback forms. Based on parent and faculty response, members of the Naperville Central community are likely to be huddling again in the 2005-2006 school year. The SFCP team is considering preparing handouts with relevant information and reading lists for future Huddles.



Passport to Possibilities

Middle Township High School

Cape May Court House, New Jersey

What better way is there to foster a dialogue between school and community than to host a cultural fair where all are welcome? This is just what Middle Township High School did one evening in May with its Passport to Possibilities. The family event brought together musicians, performers and artists, and featured cultural booths and ethnic foods. Nearly 500 parents, family members and others from the community came to the fair.

"The attendees traveled throughout the school and tasted food, watched various performances and viewed student artwork and projects," said one administrator.

This enjoyable educational event required a good amount of planning by the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP). Student involvement was crucial to the fair's success. Teachers assigned projects that the students could research and present throughout the school. The foreign language and home economics classes prepared food from other cultures that could be sampled in the "Cultural Café," and students created artwork, dances, and vocal and theatrical presentations.

In keeping with the theme, the students crafted passports that they took from area to area to get stamped during the fair, and later earned extra credit toward their class grade for submitting their passports to teachers. Middle Township High School did a wonderful job of integrating curriculum requirements with the planning and hosting of a community event.

Another key to the event's success was the participation of community-based organizations. The Cape May County Museum displayed historical photographs and artifacts in two displays. The Kingdom of Luzerne held fencing demonstrations, craft demonstrations and theatrical performances in the gymnasium.

Enlisting performers for the event was the main challenge, as the ATP relied exclusively on personal contacts to find volunteer entertainers. The ATP publicized the fair in newspapers, on the radio, and through fliers and the school's "Global Connect" system, which automatically phoned each student's home to encourage the family to attend.

The fair celebrates diversity in the school while emphasizing community involvement in the educational process. By showcasing student talents and achievements, the fair promotes tolerance and mutual understanding not only within the school but also in the community at large.

Best of all, there were no costs involved. Staff members and community-based performers all volunteered their time in a true show of community spirit. The students supplied the projects and food as part of course requirements.

Overall, the event provided a fun-filled, informal setting where students, teachers, parents and community members could get to know one another. The administration was particularly pleased that nearly 600 students participated.



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.