

Engage Families With Literacy Conference



Staff at W.G. Mallett School in Farmington, Maine, know that the early school-age years—from ages 4 to 8—are a key period of time for brain development and acquiring the foundation of literacy and math. As a pre-K-2 school, it's a priority for us to “grow” young readers.

Our teachers work tirelessly to ensure that students are proficient before exiting Mallett School. Yet, looking at our data a few years ago, it was clear we needed to do more. Our state assessment system was pointing to a subset of students who were not succeeding despite all efforts. When we analyzed that group's past data, we found that certain markers of concern were there from the very beginning, even in the pre-K screening data. Data showed that many of our incoming children were already seriously lagging in scores on the pre-K screening, and that even with our intervention, focus, and continuous effort to strengthen instructional methods, many of those same children were still off the mark at the end of kindergarten.

Analysis of years of data patterns revealed that a certain combination

of deficits was increasingly challenging to turn around. A particularly troublesome trio emerged: depressed oral language performance, weak competency of lack of fluency with letter identification, and struggles with fine motor skills.

Our teacher teams understand that we must meet children where they are, and we must be forward-looking. We began to discuss how we could support early, at-home literacy learning while continuing to strengthen what we already had in place. Once our pre-K teachers and literacy specialist joined the conversation, the idea of a literacy conference for parents was born. The conference would be our effort to bring parents of preschoolers to school, solely to engage and support them in literacy-related games and activities to try at home, and give them the rationale behind the activities.

Implementation

Our conference team consisted of our kindergarten and pre-K teachers, literacy specialist, and myself. We settled on “Growing Young Readers” as the title and theme—targeting all that could happen prior to and outside of school to support literacy learning.

We brainstormed what makes conferences fun and valuable for us as professionals, and were determined to incorporate those elements in what we offered to parents. We would have an inspiring keynote speaker, excellent and engaging sessions, refreshments, door prizes, and take-home materials.

Some time was spent in the unfamiliar realm of publicity and marketing: We asked our youngest students to contribute artwork, and then created posters with their art by working with our high school Tech Center. One teacher created a beautiful tri-fold conference brochure that was placed in strategic spots around town and used as a session guide at the conference. Our brochure highlighted the conference was free, and that it would feature exciting door prizes, giveaways and free materials. An early childhood professor at the local university agreed to be a keynote speaker. We all worked on securing donations from local businesses and used a small budget for supplies. Coffee and refreshments came from donations and our district food service.

For months, we worked on the conference sessions. We vetted the research, the expense, and the ease of carrying out activities, to ensure parents could replicate them at home. Sessions included using simple household items for rhyme, rhythm, and song. One teacher presented a session on using shaving cream, sand, and clay to play with letters and numbers on cookie sheets. Another session activity had parents engage in role playing and acting out a walk through the grocery store, with all the rich language possibilities.

We practiced conducting a read-

aloud, sharing tips and pointers for keeping it interesting, and fostering the joy of reading and being read to. There were other sessions on developing vocabulary, strengthening fine motor skills, and playing with writing. After lots of planning and preparation, the presenters shared the sessions with one another and offered tweaks and ideas as a final dress rehearsal. We were ready.

Conference day was a snowy Saturday in late March, from 8:30 a.m. to noon. The cafetorium was arranged beautifully with tablecloths, student artwork, and table decorations. We proudly kicked off with our keynote speaker against a backdrop of family-fun door prizes donated by local merchants. The sessions were intentionally short—just 35 minutes long—and each included time for parents to play with materials or interact with others. The time-frame allowed parents to choose three of the

seven different sessions to attend. In addition to their expertise and lively sessions, the staff secured books, magnetic letters, writing utensils, and even book bags donated by book companies and local businesses.

Results

Though a morning snowstorm dampened the attendance, the conference evaluations were all positive. Each attendee commented about what he or she had learned. People felt engaged, and parents said that they would definitely attend again and recommend the conference to a friend. The evaluations also told us that on-site childcare would enable more people to attend. We all left feeling proud, and having grown as organizers and presenters.

We are in the early stages of planning another conference for April 2016, and are adding sessions on at-

home math play. We are also partnering with a local children's task-force group. They will present some sessions for parents on behavior management and family problem-solving. We will connect with our local university early childhood majors to oversee childcare and activities.

Our kindergarten literacy data at the end of 2015 showed 99 percent of kindergarten students proficient on the end-of-year Developmental Reading Assessment. We attribute this to various efforts and know that the work with parents, and the in-school instruction, are equally critical ingredients. We are committed to helping parents and their young learners grow. We, in turn, keep growing and are leaving no stone unturned in the effort. 

Tracy Williams is principal of W.G. Mallett School in Farmington, Maine.



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