When Principal Jackie Daniilidis and her staff proposed taking 500 students to the Audubon Zoo in historic Uptown New Orleans, they knew they could not do it alone. They involved parents from the beginning: inviting their input during the planning stages, engaging them in homework projects to prepare for the trip; and asking for commitments to chaperone.

The idea was to supplement 3rd–5th graders’ classroom study of world habitats and biodiversity with an intensive real world experience. Daniilidis and her staff also wanted to demonstrate to parents how field trips and other activities outside the classroom could boost interest in science and other subjects. A Sharing the Dream grant paid for zoo admission and bus transportation, including a wheelchair-accessible bus for special-needs students. For families recovering emotionally and financially from Hurricane Katrina, visiting a world class zoo for the first time was a special treat. “The joy on the faces of the children and the excitement of the parents was a very meaningful experience for me,” Daniilidis said.

Parents made a scrapbook of the zoo trip, featuring photographs and students’ drawings and stories, and worked with their children on a project to create a new species of animal, which required students to explain what kind of habitat it would need to survive. “Parents viewed themselves as significant stakeholders in this cooperative effort, which was indicated by the level of input and suggestions in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the project,” Daniilidis said. A new parent/teacher committee has been formed for the 2009-2010 school year to plan and implement similar activities and events.