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# Pizza, Pages, and Family Engagement: A Simple Approach to Family Literacy Night

by Jennie Baumann



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## Introduction

Sometimes the easiest (and best-attended) family literacy nights take nothing more than a dozen pizzas and a few tubs of books. As a former reading specialist and Title I coordinator at a Title I school, I have planned many family nights with prizes, food, and elaborate activities with multiple moving parts. The problem? Many activities do not match all students' ages or ability levels — a memory matching game based on homophones might work for second graders, but what about the kindergarteners or the seventh graders who attend? Or what about events with high preparation but no attendance? As teachers and administrators, we strive for maximum accessibility and participation. The Title I team at Jobst School attempted to solve these problems with an event we called “Pizza and Pages.” This article reflects on how our school found a family engagement solution that worked for our population.

## Family Literacy

Family literacy and engagement is a complex topic. Purcell-Gates (2000) asserts “There is a real lack of agreement as to what family literacy is, what it means for schooling, what it means for literacy development, and how, or if, we should go about instituting it, promoting it, or even ‘doing it,’ whatever ‘it’ may be!” (p. 853). There are a variety of viewpoints as to what family literacy can or should look like — as a concept or program (e.g., Paratore, 2005), as a community-based

initiative (e.g., McCoy & Watts, 1992), as educational activities for parents (e.g., Morrow, Paratore, & Tracey, as cited in Morrow, 1995), or as an expansion of current lived-literacy practices (e.g., Reese, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1999; Rodriguez-Brown, 2004/2009). Rodriguez-Brown’s (2009) definition of family literacy states: “family literacy is defined as parent/family/child interactions at home and in the community that support the early literacy learning of all children” (p. 728). Based on Rodriguez-Brown’s definition, I define family engagement as engagement with the child at home in supportive, sustained, social literacy practices, regardless of how the practice manifests.

While this article focuses on family book reading as a form of engagement, it is not the only way families can engage with literacy. Jarrett, Hamilton & Coba-Rodriguez (2015) refer to verbal practices used with multiple family members, such as reciting letters and acting out stories. Family members would use these practices with the child to seemingly encourage oral fluency and traditional storytelling. Reese & Gallimore (2000) suggest the use of moral tales as a way to connect literacy and the child. These stories would include the child’s name in tandem with the value being espoused. Mui & Anderson (2008) extend conceptions of literacy to non-verbal communication, environmental print, music and songs, and structured school-centric activities such as worksheets and games. These noteworthy

practices are beneficial to children as they develop literate practices at home, but may not be recognized or accepted as helpful practices within the school.

Family literacy nights/events held by schools can serve as a way to bridge the gap between these home literacy practices and reading achievement with school-based practices. While a standard definition for “family literacy night/event” does not exist, I will define it as an after-hours event for students and their families, involving the facilitation of literacy-themed activities or activities based on a specific literacy skill. A family literacy night or event is typically a one-night, stand-alone event organized around a theme, whereas family engagement is more sustained interaction and varies in scope.

### **School Context**

Jobst School (pseudonym) is a Title I charter school located in an urban city in Ohio and serves families who prefer an alternative to a traditional public school. Families served by the school live within the neighborhood where the school is situated. Students and their families are diverse in their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. At the time of this writing, 100% of students receive free lunch, and 16% are English-language learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Because Jobst is a Title I school, the team in charge of continued alignment of school and law, and therefore must make efforts to increase family engagement. Title I legislation states that schools must hold an annual meeting where they explain what the school does to help their students and the ways in which parents can continue to engage with their students’ learning (United States Department of Education, 2017). More specifically, Title 20, Chapter 70, Part A, Section 6318 states that in order to receive funding, schools must “build capacity for engagement” and “coordinate and integrate parent involvement programs and activities with other Federal, State, and local programs, including public preschool programs, and conduct other activities, such as parent resource centers, that encourage and support parents in more fully participating in the education of their children” (United States Department of Education, 2017).

Jobst’s curricular focus during the time of Pizza and Pages was supporting literacy practices and reading test scores. To that end, the School Improvement Team at Jobst spent thousands of dollars to replace the outdated and unaligned reading curriculum. Embedded within the new curriculum were outreach initiatives to connect with families and local organizations on research units, as well as book-reading challenges and family literacy nights.

Through trial and error, the Title I literacy team learned that complex after-school events proved unsuccessful for our population for a variety of reasons. Events such as a vocabulary night built around the book *The Word Collector* (Reynolds, 2018) and a middle-school Egyptian exploration night were both elaborate yet minimally attended.

### **Survey/Needs Assessment**

With limited participation and unsatisfying experiences with previous family literacy nights, what could be done to comply with the law? In order to better meet families’ needs, the Title I team created two needs assessment surveys in Google Forms, which were distributed through our school communication system. By using our school communication service, it ensured all families had access to the survey. Similarly, Google Forms is a familiar medium for our families, since students use Google Forms for school and at home to complete tasks and families have observed its usage. These two elements made the survey accessible and easy-to-use for families, which generated a high completion rate. In fact, families engaged more often in surveys sent out later, due to the success of this initial request.

Questions on the family literacy night/event survey included logistical questions such as optimal times and days; potential conflicts, such as church meetings and sports practices; incentives, such as food or gift cards; programming ideas; and potential obstacles, such as childcare transportation needs. Some of the questions requested personal information, and it is possible that some families may have withheld answers for fear of judgment; at the same time, however, administrators have worked to develop a sense of community with

families, many of whom have been with the school since its inception in 2009.

Results of the needs assessment helped the Title I team pinpoint what existing interests, needs, and resources our families had so we could tailor events to them. Families indicated that they wanted simple events at which their children could participate and be fed.

## Pizza and Pages

With survey data in hand, the Title I team began to plan for the first family literacy night of the year: Pizza and Pages. This event was tied in to the launch of the new reading curriculum and its emphasis on student agency and autonomy as readers. The Title I team invited families to school for a pizza dinner and read-in. Students were able to self-select books based on goals and colored “levels” related to reading ability, demonstrating to their families the skills they learned in class. Each student was able to articulate how to use the reading system and their reading goals to their families. Students also read books independently or to their families, which encouraged parents and caregivers to engage with the readings too. Families were blown away at the progress their students made in such a short amount of time — many parents/guardians remarked to staff about how they were grateful they learned the strategies their children were using so they could promote those strategies at home. Considering that many of these students had been identified as non-readers and disengaged at the beginning of the year, this was an incredible improvement both in turn-out at the event and in incremental skill growth by grade level. This corroborates the idea that engaging parents and showing them how and why reading is important can yield huge benefits to young readers (Paratore, 2005).

## Take Aways

This event was well-attended and well-loved because of its simplicity. The staff and Title I team provided a meal for families and opportunities for their children to shine, both of which were motivating for our parents and encouraged parent participation. All students could participate at their level without feeling bored or frustrated. Additionally, Pizza and Pages was inexpensive.

Because all of the books were already on hand, the only expense was pizza. All of these elements combined to make an event the students still eagerly request. Pizza and Pages can easily be replicated or adopted in schools around Michigan. An event of this caliber is easy to plan, easy to implement, and very low-maintenance, all while providing a way for families and teachers to work together to support sustained literacy practices.

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