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Off to the Write Start: A Parent-Teacher-Child Story

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a parent involvement program for preschool, kindergarten, and first grade children. During the school year, students at each grade level come to the school for three evenings, with the goal of creating their own book in a different format at each session. Benefits of the program include: increased interaction between students and parents or other significant adults; teacher modeling of literacy support strategies; improved home-school communication; books written (and available for reading) at child's independent reading level; and increased familiarity of students and parents with teachers.

Welcome to Write Night, a parent involvement project created by Diane Jensen, preschool teacher; Sue Swinford, kindergarten teacher; and Wanda Bloom, first grade teacher at Jefferson Elementary School in Conception Junction, Missouri. Jefferson Elementary is a consolidated, public elementary school in rural northwest Missouri. It serves pre-kindergarten through grade six students, and has an enrollment of 94. Twenty-seven percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The authors are literacy professors who were privileged to view this

program in action on several occasions and who interviewed participants with the goal of sharing this program with their pre-service teachers.

Imagine you have just walked into a school library at 6:30 in the evening. You notice that each pre-school, kindergarten or first grade student and his or her mom, dad, grandparent, or adult friend is deeply engrossed in conversation while working on a book-making project for one and one-half hours with limited time off-task.

You overhear the following conversations:

Dad to child: "Before you start writing, why don't you say what you're going to write?"

Child to Mom: "This is a picture of me working on the computer."

Child to Grandpa: "Look! This is a picture of Jacob and me reading."

Mom to child: "What are you going to write here?"

Dad to child: "What kinds of things do you see on grandpa's farm?"

Grandpa to child: "See how you're doing such a good job? I'm so proud of you!"

Welcome to the sounds of Write Night at Jefferson Elementary School! Although these exchanges are more typically heard between teachers and students in classrooms, you are actually eavesdropping on parents and children who are sharing an exciting literacy experience.

What is Write Night?

Write Night is a parent involvement program that consists of parents and their pre-school, kindergarten, or first grade children coming to school three evenings during the school year to work together for one

and one-half hours to write a book that is completed in one evening. The pre-school, kindergarten and first grade teachers actively assist with all nine Write Night Sessions, three sessions for each grade level. At the session, the children are assigned for that evening to one of three centers where a particular type of book is made. By attending all three sessions, each child completes all three types of books. The children and their parents or other adult friends diligently work at the center to write the book. Next, copies of the book are made, the pages are laminated and cut, the book is bound, and finally the finished book is taken home.

How the Write Night Parent Involvement Program began

Jensen, Swinford, and Bloom collaborated to write an Incentives for School Excellence Program state grant funded through the Missouri State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. By working together, they felt that an effective parent involvement program could be established at their school. They used the grant money to purchase a computer, computer scanner, color printers, bookmaking software, laminating film, stamps, ink pads, markers, colored pencils and crayons, and to provide a small stipend for the teachers' time at the nine Write Night sessions. The result was an effective parental involvement program that is currently in its third year of operation and has been successfully replicated by neighboring school districts that also sing its praises.

A major objective of the program was to involve 85% of the parents as active participants in their children's reading and writing development as evidenced by their attendance at two of three Write Night sessions held for their child's grade level during the school year. A total of nine sessions, three for each grade level, are held during the year and all three teachers attend every session. If a parent and child have to miss Write Night because the parent works at night, the teachers offer a day-time opportunity for the parent to come to school to make the book with his or her child. If a child or parent is ill and has to miss a Write Night session, they are given the opportunity to attend another grade level's session. As a result of the parental excitement and support for this program, there has been 100% parental involvement during Year 1 and Year 2 at all three grade levels. That statistic alone supports the value of this program. An

additional benefit is increased communication among the teachers as they plan, then work together at each Write Night session.

Parental involvement in the writing process

We know that typically parents are their children's first, and most significant, teachers (Clay, 1975; Rasinski, 1989; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991). Children's first demonstrations of language are often patterned from their parents and other adult caregivers according to Reutzel & Fawson, (1990, p. 222). If parents, grandparents, and adult friends demonstrate their excitement and involvement in the writing process, the attainment of this critical skill will become important to their children. In fact, Rasinski and Fredericks (1991) noted that children learn behaviors that are modeled by significant people in their lives. The Write Night teachers share that if parents are unable to attend their special night, they ask friends or relatives to substitute for them, rather than have the child miss this literacy opportunity. Bissex (1980) and Calkins (1983) note that the valuing of writing is learned from parents and caregivers. The opportunity for progress is increased when a wide range of support is available to learners (Hansen, 1987). Indeed, it does seem to take an entire caring community to raise a literate child.

Fields and Spangler (1995) write that the desire to learn more about spelling, punctuation, and conventional print is motivated by a child's desire to have others read what they write. As children begin to take ownership of their writing, their use of developmental spelling and basic punctuation becomes a valued means of standard communication. The children participating in Write Night have stories to tell and they want to share them with the important people in their lives. As the children reread their own words on each page and share their completed books with their families and friends, confidence in reading and writing is enhanced. According to Graves (1983), "The child's marks say, 'I am'" (p. 3).

During one Write Night session, a child asked his father how to spell "Stegosaurus." The father was uncertain himself, so he casually asked, "Mrs. Jensen, how do you spell 'Stegosaurus'?" The teacher quietly replied by spelling the word and the father and son continued the

book. What a wonderful example of open communication and trust between teacher and parent! Parents and friends provide positive modeling and motivation that results in children's growth in skill and confidence in a setting where there are positive interactions between teachers and parents. Enz (1995) believes that parents gain insight into their children's development as readers and writers when they are involved in the emergent literacy process. Most importantly, through involvement in the literacy process, parents begin to see their own children as writers (Hanson, 1994). They are able to observe teachers who model successful learning strategies with their children. A sense of trust and camaraderie is built through the informal exchanges among teachers, parents and children as they seek a common goal -- the "publication" of a book.

One mother commented that at first it was difficult to help her son write a story. She said, "We hadn't ever done anything like that before and it was hard work to get it down on paper. He didn't really enjoy the first Write Night, but now I can't keep him from attending. One day he was sick, and the first words out of his mouth when he awoke were, 'I have to go to school because I can't miss Write Night!'" Writing is now an enjoyable activity that he anxiously anticipates.

Informing parents

At the beginning of the year, a Write Night Note that lists the three session dates for each class is sent to all parents. The teachers encourage parents to carefully mark these dates on the family calendar. The day before a Write Night session, the classroom teacher sends a reminder note home with each child. On the day of the session, the teacher wears a special "Write Night" T-shirt to school. Diane Jensen shared, "The students become very excited when they see what their teacher is wearing, because they know that their special night is that evening." All three teachers wear the special Write Night T-shirts to each session.

Write Night format

Write Nights are held in the school's library three times a year for each grade level (pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade). Prior to the

first Write Night, the teachers determine the three different types of books that the students will construct with their parents or adult friends. Due to the limited number of computers and scanners, when the children arrive at Write Night they are assigned to one of the three book-making stations that is supported by one of the three teachers. The children rotate to their next book format on the following Write Night. During the year, the children make a book in each of the three formats. The following chart shows the types of books made during the first two years during the Write Night sessions.

At the computer book station, a teacher provides initial instructions for use of the computer program and printer. An easy-to-read, parent-friendly computer direction sheet devised by one of the teachers is also given to each parent or adult friend as a reference. The parents and children start to work immediately, creating and printing their own book with a title page, several story pages, and an "About the Author" page.

Children and parents at the ABC book station find pre-stapled booklets with blank paper ready for their own ABC book creation. A variety of stamps, ink pads, magic markers, colored pencils and crayons motivate the children in their writing. The children discuss each page with their parents, and together they decide what words or sentences will be written on that page. Some parents provide writing scaffolds for their children, by using dotted letter formations that the children trace. Each letter sound is emphasized as the child writes the letter. Prompts such as, "What does that word begin with?" or "What sound do you hear at the end of that word?" are heard frequently at this center.

Preparation for the third station begins several weeks prior to Write Night when children are loaned an instamatic camera for the weekend. The children plan four pictures that show their involvement in favorite activities or with important people in their lives. Then, these four pictures are returned to school with the camera, and are scanned onto book pages. When the children arrive at this station, they find the prepared pages with lines below each picture for their "All About Me" books. Their first task is to design a cover for their books. Pre-cut construction paper shapes are ready for their cover creation and a cover model is provided. Children write a title on the cover. After the cover is

complete, the children decide what sentence or sentences they will write beneath each picture. Preschool children write one or two words in the blanks on each page. Lively conversation between parent and child ensues during this process. The task of putting the child's ideas into one or two sentences is quite a challenge; however, it is impressive to see the many ways that the parents aid this concept formation.

Book Formats for Year 1	Book Formats for Year 2
Each child completes one format at each session	Each child completes one format at each session
Book designed on Storybook Maker Deluxe computer software	Book designed on Paint, Write and Play computer software
ABC Book Using stamps, ink pads, markers, crayons, ect.	Number Book Using stamps, ink pads, markers, crayons, ect.
"All About Me" Book Pictures brought from home are scanned onto book pages	"_____ 's Day" Book Pictures taken with an instamatic camera are scanned onto book pages

As a book is completed, the child proudly takes it to the teacher at the copy machine. The teacher makes two copies of each page, while the child anxiously waits, watches, and collects the pages. The child takes the pages back to his or her work area, and puts them in the correct order. The copied pages are stapled into books that are then placed in the school library collection and in the child's classroom library. The child takes the original book to another teacher who runs the laminating machine. The cover and each page of the book is laminated as the child waits to carry his or her laminated strip back to the work area where the child and parent carefully cut around each individual page, then put the pages in order. It brings a warm-hearted feeling to watch one child and Dad stand quietly holding hands waiting for the pages of their book to go through the laminator. The third teacher helps the child and parent punch holes, and puts a plastic binding on the finished book. With a wide smile of pride, each child clutches his or her book tightly, the ending of another successful Write Night experience!

Benefits of Write Night

The authors' observations suggest that the benefits resulting from this program are numerous. Preschool, kindergarten and first grade students interact with their parents, grandparents, or other significant adults in a delightful exchange of language as they write and illustrate their own books. Wanda Bloom, first grade teacher, shared that, "The child and parent working together to create something that they can keep is one of the greatest benefits of Write Night." Active two-way dialogues continue non-stop for over an hour during each Write Night session.

When asked, "What do you think is the benefit of Write Night?", one mother commented, "It is the undivided attention I am able to give my daughter without being interrupted by the phone, television, laundry, or other children."

Sue Swinford commented that she felt one of the greatest benefits of Write Night was the parent/child connection. "When I first started teaching, I had eighteen students. One student's mother worked full-time and one student's mother worked part-time; the rest of the mothers stayed at home. This year I had thirteen students, and only one mother stayed at home full-time," noted Sue Swinford. This changing family structure, along with the increase in single parent families, can result in less time spent with each child. When one considers that the average amount of time a parent spends in conversation with a child is extremely limited, one and one-half hours of uninterrupted time between parent and child is truly remarkable. Parents are often actively involved with and cheer for their children at sporting events; however, Mrs. Bloom, noted that "Write Nights provide an opportunity for parents to give positive recognition to their children for something related to academics."

In the initial stages of Write Night, the teachers model brief examples of scaffolding strategies that support student writing, such as: "What have you written so far?" "Tell me what you're going to write next." "What sound do you hear at the beginning of the word?" "Would you like me to print that letter so you can trace over it?" These strategies are frequently used by parents to help children develop stories.

Sue Swinford commented that, "Write Night gives parents a clue of how to help students in the reading and writing processes."

"Do you want me to trace the letters for the sentence?" asked one Mom. One dad cautioned, "Let's think about what you're going to say before you start writing." These are excellent examples of family literacy. Nickse (1989) noted the benefits gleaned by parents and children when they work as a learning unit through shared literacy activities. Her study inspired Carl Smith (1991, p. 700) to define family literacy in the broader sense as, ". . . families working together to promote mutual learning." Write Night facilitates literacy education for the parents, as well as for the children.

Advanced literacy development for the children is a benefit noted Diane Jensen. She feels that this program helps children develop concepts of print, concepts of literature, and writing fluency. Students who participated in Write Night activities were more likely to pick up a book and "pretend read" than students in previous classes. She also commented that her students showed great ownership and excitement in their own books.

Sue Swinford feels that students' and parents' increased comfort with computer technology is another benefit of Write Nights. Most students appeared comfortable with computer technology while designing books at Write Night. The use of computers outside of the school setting was highlighted when the Jefferson School District added a Write Night photo to their kindergarten web page. Sue Swinford mailed a letter encouraging her students to check out the picture if they had access to a computer. She was amazed at the number of students and parents who stopped her in the grocery store, at the ball park, and around town to let her know that they had seen the photo. Several had gone to the library to look at the web page.

An additional benefit of Write Night is increased home-school communication. Teachers note that these exchanges provide valuable insight into a variety of family situations. The comfort level of parents interacting with teachers also increases with each Write Night session and establishes an easy camaraderie with a common goal, the literacy

development of the children. It is exciting to watch a child begin to write and it is easy for the teacher to provide positive encouragement for the efforts of both children and parents. "The research is clear: Given proper guidance and support, parents can supplement, in powerful fashion, learning that takes place in the school," (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989, p. 84). Write Night is an effective vehicle to accomplish the goal of parental involvement.

Books written during Write Night are on the children's independent reading level and this expands readable materials in the classroom library. Wanda Bloom shared that early in the year during first grade, it is often difficult for children to locate appropriate books for free reading because their reading vocabulary is limited. She noted, "The books written by the children are frequently read and reread, because they contain familiar text and the books are written by their peers."

The final benefit noted by the teachers, was students' and parents' increased familiarity with the other teachers. Children are often fearful when entering kindergarten or first grade because they do not know the new teacher. However, the teachers at Jefferson School have noticed that the children and parents are comfortable and free of fear at the beginning of school because they have already interacted with the other teachers during Write Nights. In the hall, Diane Jensen's preschoolers frequently say "Hello" to Sue Swinford and Wanda Bloom because of their shared experiences in book writing.

Technology and emergent writing development

When used as effective tools, computers encourage exploration and experimentation with language and at the same time facilitate communication (Clements, 1987). For little hands, writing an entire story can be a daunting task. The use of the computer, with a willing parent, grandparent, or adult friend to help with typing when needed, can free children to use their imaginations to convey their views of the world. Leu, Karchmer, & Leu (1999) coined a new term, "envisionment," to describe the thinking process that results from new uses of technology related to the reading and writing process. "Envisionments take place when teachers and children imagine new possibilities for literacy and

learning, transform existing technologies to construct this vision, and then share their work with others," (Leu, et. al., 1999, p. 636). The colorful pictures in the software programs captivate the children's interest by allowing them to quickly add illustrations to their stories. A number of the children compose pattern stories relying upon the pictures to help them organize their thoughts into a meaningful sequence. Eisenwine & Hunt (2000) note that the computer propels emergent readers and writers on their literacy journey. It may be necessary to make modifications of the Write Night program to fit diverse school settings.

Some possible modifications to Write Night for any school

To accommodate a larger student population, the Write Night program could be organized by grade level teachers and trained volunteers. Each teacher could be responsible for developing one type of book, and the students and parents could select the type of book they prefer. Also, the number of Write Night sessions per year could be decreased to one or two. This change would be less time-demanding for the teachers. If a grant is not feasible, modifications will also be needed. If computer scanner availability is limited, students could bring their own pictures from home and glue them directly on the book pages. At Write Night, the students could add the sentence descriptions in their books. Students could also make books in other formats, such as "My Collection," or "My Favorite Pet," rather than using computer software programs. It is a luxury, not a necessity, to copy all of the students' books. Therefore, students could share their books with their classmates on the next school day, and then take them home. The materials to make the books do not need to be expensive; outdated wallpaper sample books are often free and can be used for book covers, while staples can be used for binding. Limited funding might be available through the school's parent-teacher organization. With a little creativity, other modifications could make Write Night successful in a variety of school settings.

The happy ending of the Write Night story

Write Night provides numerous "come-in" benefits to children, parents, and teachers. As a result of these positive literacy experiences, it is as if these children and parents are responding to Shel Silverstein's poem (1974, p. 9), "Invitation," when they come to Write Night to read and write.

"If you are a dreamer, come in,
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer...
If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
Come in! Come in!" *Shel Silverstein*

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