

## **Family Reading Time = Quality Reading Time**

**By Mary Alice Anderson**

**Published in *Book Report*, Linworth Publishing, September 2002**

During the past school year, middle school students, their parents, two enthusiastic teachers, a media specialist, and Dianne Gray, an award-winning, local author, enjoyed Family Reading Time, a two-year-old program created and hosted by Winona (Minnesota) Middle School. The reading teachers applied for funding to support the project through a local Parental Involvement Grant Project. The project was funded by a local philanthropist who values families and education. The grant application was based on the hypothesis:

If a program were developed to reach children and families through reading, then the families would be able to spend quality time together to increase their communication skills and promote lifelong reading skills that would, in turn, improve their child's classroom performance.

We received \$4,570 of funding the first year and \$3,575 the second year. (A local philanthropist who values families and education provides additional funds for the project.) The money was used to purchase 40 to 50 hardcover copies of each program book, a binder to hold the book and discussion questions, door prizes (gift certificates to bookstores), and snacks. We hired older students to provide on-site baby-sitting for younger children, so families could bring them to school for the evening, thus making it easier for families to participate.

I collaborated with the teachers to select the books, schedule the media center for FRT evenings, and provide publicity on the school's Web site. The first year, we held three FRTs and invited 350 eighth-grade students to them. The second year, FRT was available three times to 150 fifth-grade students and once to eighth-grade students, a change necessitated by curricular and grade-level shifts within the building.

### **Program Details**

For each Family Reading Time, a title is chosen and study questions are developed for it. Participating families receive a copy of the book and of the questions a month before the event. Attendance has ranged from 20 to 50 for the evenings, which last about an hour. Following general introductions, the participants break into small groups to discuss the books. We make a point of seating families with people they don't already know, to provide them with opportunities to meet new people. The evenings end with group discussion and a drawing for door prizes.

A special evening enjoyed each year was our discussion of the award-winning  *Holding Up the Earth*  by Winona, Minnesota author Dianne Gray, who attended those meetings. She enthusiastically shared her experiences of writing and getting published, and of her delight at the selection of  *Holding Up the Earth*  as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults title. Diane said "my book has introduced me to people I didn't know; it goes way beyond my expectations. I wanted to get it published and have families reading it." Thirty Winona middle school families read the book together and participated in this parent/child book discussion.

We continued our Minnesota-author theme with Garrison Keillor's young adult novel,  *The Sandy Bottom Orchestra* , and Kate Dicamillo's  *Because of Winn Dixie* , a favorite of the fifth-grade students. Keillor's book about a teenage musician, her father, and her intellectual but slightly offbeat mother was a good match for many of the families of eighth-grade students. Katherine Paterson's  *Master Puppeteer* , also an

eighth-grade selection, was the most difficult to read, because it's about a different culture. The eccentricities of Grandma Dowdel in Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* made for a lively discussion between fifth-grade students and their families. That title also taught us a great deal about life during an earlier time in America's history.

In an effort to make FRT as accessible and interesting to as many families as possible, we sometimes schedule the evenings to coincide with other events, as well as plan for other events to be part of FRT. These "mixed bags" have varied from meeting during the school's Book Fair to having an English teacher share information about her trip to Japan during the program for *The Master Puppeteer*, and from having eighth-grade students perform a choral reading of "The Raven" to introducing parents of new fifth-grade students to some of the technology resources in the media center.

## **Evaluation Time**

Given that our overall goal for Family Reading Time was to improve student reading and communication skills, we wanted to collect data that would measure whether or not such changes had occurred. So, the reading teachers collected qualitative and quantitative data by administering a survey after each year's program. These surveys provided a record of how much time families spent together reading and discussing each book, as well as suggestions for program improvement. Twenty-five families responded to the first survey. Of that number, 92% reported an increase in the time their family spent reading together, while 83% reported that the time spent talking about books had increased.

In addition, the surveyed families listed several reasons explaining why they liked participating in FRT. They enjoyed:

- \* discussing books together.
- \* meeting new people.

- \* spending quality time together.
- \* encouraging their children to read.
- \* valuing books.
- \* developing good reading habits.
- \* having opportunities to see/experience their children's thinking processes.
- \* learning and improving their reading skills.
- \* expanding their knowledge and increasing their vocabularies.
- \* doing something educational together.
- \* meeting others who enjoy reading.
- \* an opportunity to let their child know s/he is special.
- \* being inspired to share their thoughts and ideas.

Parents also indicated that FRT fostered positive habits in students. One parent noted, "My daughter grew in her ability to predict outcomes and had a better memory for characters and events than I did." Another reported that FRT provided "An opportunity to discuss literature on a higher level with people." Still another said, "My son's reading time increased some. It got him to think about what he is reading."

## Twists and Turns

As positive as our experiences with Family Reading Time have been, and as happy as we are with the results, the program isn't without its problems:

Preaching to the choir. When developing FRT, we predicted that the families who would participate would be the families of students who were already readers—and this prediction was accurate. Many of the parents involved in FRT are themselves educators, either in our school

district or at one of the nearby universities. So, although the program is having demonstrable success, we're probably not reaching the students and families who most need our help.

Attendance. Another issue we encountered was that often families would plan to attend an event, but were unable to because of busy schedules, conflicts, or transportation problems. In an attempt to decrease these instances, we allowed some students to attend without their parents.

- \* Insufficient child-care. Some families wished there had been more child-care available
- \* Insufficient book copies. Some families wanted two copies of each book.
- \* It was challenging to find books that appealed to both boys and girls.

Despite these imperfections, it's clear that FRT is successful and worth continuing. This year, we're expanding the program to include seventh graders and their families, and we've selected *A Year Down Yonder*, Peck's sequel to *A Long Way from Chicago*, as a book for that age group. We also plan to continue the technology component as a way to provide online school resources that students and their families can access together.

It's wonderful to see parents, teachers, and kids talking together during Family Reading Times. In addition, FRT is a great example of how media programs can support the broader learning community and of how teachers and media specialists can work together. To quote one parent, "This is an awesome opportunity."

Many thanks to the classroom teachers and my partners in this project, Eileen Champion and Rachel Peteson! Mary Alice Anderson is a Media

Specialist at Winona (Minnesota) Middle School, a frequent contributor to professional journals, a member of Linworth's editorial advisory board, a conference presenter, and an adjunct instructor in the College of Education at Winona State University.

## **Reading List**

- \* Kate Dicamillo, *Because of Winn Dixie* (Grade 5)
- \* Dianne Gray, *Holding Up the Earth* (Grades 5 and 8)
- \* Garrison Keillor, *The Sandy Bottom Orchestra* (Grade 8)
- \* Katherine Paterson, *The Master Puppeteer* (Grade 8)
- \* Richard Peck, *A Long Way from Chicago* (Grade 5)
- \* Richard Peck, *A Year Down Yonder* (Grade 7)