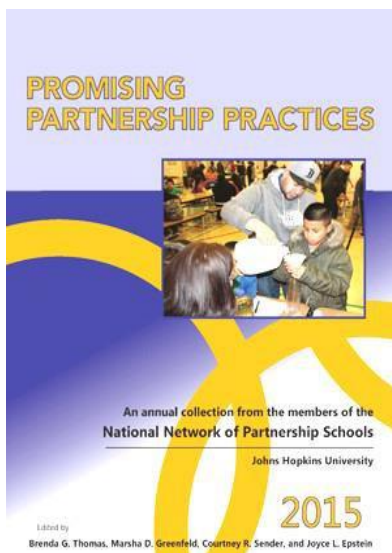


# Strategies that Engage Families of Children with Special Needs



From annual books of  
*Promising Partnership Practices*

*National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University and other resources*

These activities were summarized in the webinar with Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, March 2, 2016.

Many other activities in the NNPS books of *Promising Partnership Practices* have been designed and implemented to engage ALL students' families -- including parents of children with special needs.

Visit: [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org) and click on the section Success Stories.

## Vocational/Work Experience Program—WINGS Grant

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*Tallwood High School  
Virginia Beach, Virginia*

A local fried chicken restaurant helped special education students at Tallwood High School soar toward a brighter future as part of a new vocational training program last year. The school's Vocational/Work Experience Program brought students with special needs to Chick-fil-A to learn the skills required for jobs in the real world.

Tallwood has offered a vocational training program for students without disabilities for many years. Through unpaid internships, these students had opportunities to explore various careers.

Two years ago, special education and other teachers decided they were not doing enough to help their students with special needs prepare for life after high school. They formed a unique partnership with one of their long-time business associates, Chick-fil-A, asking the fast food restaurant to help train their students with disabilities. After some careful planning and collaboration between the school and the business owner, a new vocational training program was born.

The restaurant owner kicked off the program by sponsoring a luncheon at the school where students and teachers discussed career options. Managers from Chick-fil-A gave a short workshop on "What an Employer Looks For" in potential employees. The special education teacher followed up with parent meetings where she discussed how to set reachable goals for students, how to prepare a resume, and how to conduct mock interviews.

Teachers then gave a group of students in the special education program the opportunity to participate in a work/study experience at Chick-fil-A. Students from the school's gifted program partnered with the students in special education to guide them through their training. All of the students met regularly with mentors from the restaurant. "The mentor provides each student with job awareness skills needed to complete the assigned tasks and rewards the

accomplishments of the student with progress evaluations and snacks," said a school spokesperson. Students are paid in meals.

A job coach from the high school also is on site to guide student workers, monitor their progress and help out in case of emergencies.

The results are tangible. At least one student has been hired after graduation at the restaurant. Using the work experience as a reward, special education teachers have seen improvements in students' behaviors. As for business owners associated with the program, they are happy to have the help of dedicated employees.

"Chick-fil-A is so enthusiastic, so committed," said the spokesperson. "They love working with the kids."

The school used special needs and vocational training grants to cover the cost of implementing the program—\$600 last year. Tallwood hopes to expand its vocational training program by adding more work sites so that the school can better prepare its students with disabilities for life after school.

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# NSSED VIP: VOLUNTEERS IN PARTNERSHIP

**NORTHERN SUBURBAN  
SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRICT  
HIGHLAND PARK, IL**

## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

**A**fter examining the results of a multi-district needs assessment and reviewing the partnership practices of other school districts, the District Partnership Team (DPT) of the Northern Suburban Special Education District (NSSED) launched a volunteer program to increase family and community engagement. In the first year of the program, 24 trained volunteers worked with 175 students as mentors, coaches, lecturers, chaperones, and leaders.

NSSED is a special education cooperative. It coordinates three educational programs across 18 member school districts. The Educational and Life Skills program provides services to students (6-21 years old) with developmental delays and various disabilities. North Shore Academy is a K-12 therapeutic school for students who struggle with the social, emotional, and behavioral demands of school. The Early Childhood Program provides educational services to preschool-aged children with disabilities. The NSSED District Partnership Team (DPT) was eager to develop ways to connect community volunteers with students in all three of these programs.

The DPT tested a pilot version of Volunteers in Partnership (VIP) in 2011-12 in one teacher's classroom in a member district. Based on the positive results of the pilot, the DPT hired a part-time volunteer coordinator to recruit, interview, and place volunteers with students in the three programs listed above. The DPT involved the staff of each program by surveying teachers to understand how volunteers could help them in the classroom or with individual students.

The volunteer coordinator was responsible for interviewing volunteers, running background checks, and conducting orientation and training sessions. All volunteers received information about basic teaching strategies, communication skills, and behavior management

techniques. After volunteers were matched with a program, the coordinator scheduled regular follow-up meetings to ensure that everything was running smoothly.

The volunteers engaged with students in a variety of ways. They taught yoga, led music therapy sessions, read stories, prepared classroom materials, tutored specific skills, and completed gardening projects. "The experience has been really rewarding and educational," said one volunteer. "I look forward to every Tuesday. Being in the classroom is always the highlight of my week."

The feeling seemed to be mutual. Students loved working with the volunteers. Teachers reported that students improved their interaction skills by developing close relationships with the volunteers and showed academic gains thanks to the 1:1 tutoring sessions.

Teachers, too, were grateful for the help. The volunteers assisted them by working with students on academic, communication, and social emotional goals, and provided an unexpected side benefit—emotional support. Teachers appreciated having empathetic volunteers in the classroom who understood the challenges they faced and offered praise occasionally.

The program cost \$20,000 to run. This included the salary of the Volunteer Coordinator as well as supplies.

VIP has enriched the lives of students with disabilities by bringing them together with caring volunteers for educational, vocational, and recreational activities. NSSED's partnership team hopes to recruit more volunteers next year.

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## Chats & Chews: Partnering for Success of Students with Disabilities

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*Lowndes Middle School  
Valdosta, Georgia*

National, state, and local standards have been established as foundations for what students should know and be able to do in core content areas. Lowndes Middle School administrators and faculty realized, however, that students attain these standards in different ways, at different times, and to different degrees of mastery. The school made an extra effort this year to partner with parents to ensure that students with disabilities made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by establishing a parent-teacher program called Chats & Chews.

The special education staff took the lead in creating parent-teacher socials. They invited parents to meet their child's resource teacher, find out about the expectations for the year, discuss their child's performance on standardized tests, ask questions, and voice their concerns.

The first Chats & Chews session was held at the beginning of the school year, allowing parents to choose between a breakfast and a light dinner session. Teachers created a warm, informal, and non-threatening environment for parents to interact and share ideas. For the second event, in December, the school decided to hold only the more popular breakfast session. Attendance tripled. This session focused on enhancing study skills and creating a home environment conducive to learning. Parents received tips on organization and supplies, concentrating on the maintenance of students' notebooks. The staff taught parents how to set up study areas at home, and each parent received a portable study carrel to help get started.

Parents were excited about the information they received, and many left the workshops with renewed determination and greater understanding of how to make their homes good learning environments. The special education staff found that the workshops helped students succeed academically, and it plans to continue the sessions next year.

Lowndes staff met after the workshops to evaluate the practice and suggest improvements. The school also surveyed parents about the best times for workshops, topics they are most interested in, and volunteers for another workshop.

Thanks to the efforts of its staff and parents, Lowndes saw increases in its eighth-grade writing assessment scores for students with disabilities. Other test results are pending, but the school is confident that the trend will hold across all subjects. Lowndes remains committed to closing the gap in student performance and achievement, ensuring that special education students receive the guidance they need from both home and school. These parent sessions are a great strategy for accomplishing this goal.

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## ELLIS TECH COFFEE HOUSE AND FAMILY GAME NIGHT

HARVARD H. ELLIS TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL  
DANIELSON, CT

Type 3

**H**. H. Ellis Technical High School became a nightlife hotspot this year with two creative school, family, and community partnership activities: Family Game Night, which featured representatives from a local gaming store and the Ellis Tech Coffee House, which featured students' musical and artistic talents. Both activities were designed to improve the climate of partnerships at the school and meet the school's goal of increasing family engagement activities and parents' participation by at least 5%. The school serves over 500 students from 18 towns in Northeast, Connecticut. Its ATP is working to create a welcoming climate and to encourage more and different families to participate in some school-based activities every year.

Family Game Night featured traditional games such as Twister and Pictionary and new simulation and strategy games brought by local gaming enthusiasts, including some parents. The Simulation Club at the school helped to organize and publicize Game Night. The only rule? No electronics or technology allowed. This ensured that the 50 students, teachers, and family members who attended would spend get to know each other by actually talking and playing games together.

A local community organization donated its popcorn machine for the evening. The attendees enjoyed popcorn, pizza, and juice while they learned and played games. Participants enjoyed time at Game Night and learned something about the gaming industry from expert gamers invited by the Simulation Club. "This was awesome!" a student exclaimed. "When are you going to do this again?" a parent asked.

The Ellis Tech Coffee House was an important and unique activity. The idea grew from a brainstorming session of the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP). A teacher on the team mentioned that many of his students had artistic talents. He suggested organizing an activity to show and share their skills,

knowing that parents would appreciate the effort.

The ATP announced the event via e-mail three weeks ahead of time, distributed flyers, and made personal phone calls to encourage attendance. The school's Simulation Club, Gay Straight Alliance, and Student Council publicized the activity and helped to generate buzz.

The ATP scheduled the event directly after a pasta dinner for athletes, which was already scheduled. The timing worked well because students and families who attended the pasta dinner were happy to have coffee and dessert while listening to the students sing, play instruments, and share their artwork. The Coffee House attracted 40 students, 50 parents, and 8 teachers, and a few community partners.

Many of students had never showcased their work outside of their classes. They loved the opportunity to share their work and talents with parents and friends. "I had no idea people would like my metalwork so much," remarked one artist.

Other highlights of the evening included performances using karaoke equipment lent by a local DJ. Two students asked family members to perform with them. "Watching one father and son team play the guitar and sing was so powerful," a teacher noted.

The ATP plans more activities to feature students' work, specialties, and talents, and suggests that other schools do the same. "The best thing you can do to improve your school's climate is to feature students and their talents. It also helps to engage the staff, parents, students, and community members in planning, conducting, participating in, and appreciating the event," said a school staff member.

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CLIMATE OF PARTNERSHIPS

## *SPECIAL* Program Spotlight

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### Featured Program: Family as Faculty

*Family as Faculty is a program at the University of South Florida, Tampa that addresses a new state competency on teachers' ability to develop collaborative relationships with families. The program recruits family members as guest lecturers to provide students in the College of Education opportunities to learn about the barriers and keys to effective involvement of families in their children's learning.*

### Program History

The Family as Faculty program began in late 1999 under the initial direction of Karen Childs at the Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. The program patterned itself after a model at the University of Vermont College of Medicine, Parent to Parent of Vermont, and the Institute for Family-Centered Care, which featured families of students with disabilities in its courses. Florida statutes, with a recently added teacher competency on family involvement, provided some of the impetus for the program's inception. Recent research by the Harvard Family Research Project also informed the program, pointing to the need for family involvement in teacher preparation and the promise of guest lectures as a method for bringing parent voices into the curriculum (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997).

### Program Description

The goal of the Family as Faculty program is to "enhance home-school partnerships by providing future educators with opportunities to listen to the voices of families from a variety of walks of life."

The program recruits and trains a diverse group of parent presenters to deliver 20-30 minute lectures to teacher education classrooms at the University of South Florida, with additional time for questions and answers. In general, family presenters focus their lectures on involvement in their children's education and academic success, revealing barriers and keys to successful involvement, and telling personal stories. Sample themes of specific family presenters include issues of ADHD, language barriers, socioeconomic barriers, teacher conferences, and grandparent caregivers. For example, one parent with a learning disabled child shares her strategy of videotaping her interactions with her daughter and sharing these with the child's teacher to help the teacher relate to the child better.

A faculty guide describes the program and assists faculty members in scheduling and planning such family-centered activities. It also describes instructor responsibilities, such as introduction, presence throughout the family member's visit, discussion facilitation, student preparation, and faculty and student evaluation of the visit.

## Program Implementation

The program recruited parent presenters through flyers, meetings, district parent liaisons, and presentations to community-based organizations. Candidates, who were primarily mothers, completed a three-day orientation and training session in which they reflected on their experiences, identified specific issues and personal stories, and considered what makes a good presentation. This was followed by practice presentations, group feedback, and a campus tour. Beyond the initial training period, parents have built their own informal network with one another. Parents received a \$150 training stipend and \$30/hour for each presentation, including transportation time. Recently the program has changed to a flat fee of \$40 for each visit to a classroom.

Outreach to faculty involved more effort. Program staff circulated a brochure to faculty and doctoral students, and met with program administrators and key professors. Faculty in special education and counselor education have been the most responsive. The program has adjusted its typical guest lecture format to accommodate faculty needs. Parents have agreed to role play counseling interviews with students in counseling education courses and reflect on the students' performance, and on occasion, parents have even brought their children to participate with them on a panel.

## Program Costs

The program costs approximately \$20,000 to operate, per year. The costs are broken down as follows:

- Training/Orientation of Families (\$150 for 20) = \$3,000.00
- Development/Printing of Brochure = \$1,000.00
- Lecture Stipends (\$30/hour @ 50 lectures\*) = \$1,500.00
- Project Coordinator (.50 FTE 12 months) = \$15,000.00

\*reaching an estimated 2,500 students

## Program Evaluation

The program is being evaluated by a third party evaluator, the At-Risk Institute for Children and Families, at the University. During the first year, the program staff and evaluator worked together to fine-tune program goals and how to establish outcomes. As part of the ongoing evaluation, the program conducts a pre- and post-test of the parents' orientation and collects written feedback from faculty, students, and family speakers, after each visit. So far, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and in Fall 2000, requests from faculty have increased.

## Update: Added June 2002

Family as Faculty continues to thrive in Florida. The program receives an increasing number of requests from faculty at the University of South Florida to invite parents as

guest lecturers for various courses taught at the School of Education. Part of the success of Family as Faculty can be attributed to its careful matching of faculty needs for their courses and the parent speakers. Parents deliver key messages to students and use their powerful stories to stimulate student awareness and inquiry.

Other state universities are beginning to replicate Family as Faculty. Through Curriculum Infusion Institutes, Sally Wade, director of the Partnership, and her staff bring together faculty from Florida's public and private universities and colleges to learn about ways to integrate family involvement in their education courses. The Family as Faculty program is a centerpiece of these institutes. The University of North Florida and the University of Central Florida are replicating Family as Faculty. Additionally, with the Partnership as co-sponsor, a consortium of higher education institutions in the Miami-Dade and Fort Lauderdale area organized their own curriculum infusion institute.

As an outgrowth of Family as Faculty, a Teacher as Faculty program evolved. Teachers that are NBTPS board-certified act as guest lecturers, talking to students about their family involvement practices. Plans are underway to develop a panel with both parents and teachers sharing their messages with pre-service teachers.

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