

This [MiddleWeb](#) Classic appeared on at our site on July 2003. It's been viewed thousands of times since then, so we're sharing it here. Outdated links have been removed. Outdated ideas, if any, remain. ☺ (2012)

"A Million Words..." A Wonderful Tool to Connect with Parents

A MiddleWeb Listserv conversation

[Read the Education World article about the Million Words activity](#)

It all started with Deb Bova's idea for a beginning-of- the-year kickoff letter to parents. Over the next few weeks MiddleWeb readers were treated to a series of sometimes emotional reports from teachers who used this strategy to engage parents and learn more about their new students.

List member Charlie Lindgren shared his "Million Words" letter -- posted on his personal teacher website -- with other list members. You'll find it at the end of this PDF. If you're intrigued by this idea, see how he shaped the "Million Words" strategy to his own needs.

During a discussion of school start-up ideas, Deb wrote:

One thing that I would suggest to new and returnee teachers is something I call "In a million words or less, tell us about your child."

Teams send it home on the first day. I would learn so much from parents and families. I learn about health issues, social upheaval, and other issues that helped me to be a better teacher and to connect with kids and parents.

I send it out on the first day, and the response is wonderful. It just says "In a million words or less, tell us about your child" on the top, and where to return it. Parents do the rest.

Deborah Bova

Kelly expressed her gratitude for the assignment and shared several of the outcomes.

I sent home the paper with "Tell us about your child in 1,000,000 words or less" printed on the top. I told the kids that on the first day of school parents instead of students got homework.

The kids loved it, and many parents responded. I took some of them to my Assistant Principal, and we both sat there crying over them. It was really wonderful to get info on

my students directly from the parents. The responses were thoughtful, loving, funny, and extremely insightful. I feel as if I've learned more in a day than I could in a year.

Of course there was one downside. One parent wrote, and here is the response in its entirety, "He walks, he talks and sometimes he listens." This same parent on the emergency card under medical problems wrote, "He's allergic to school work." My heart just went out to this kid - he brought this in to me, knowing what was written on it. How must he have felt? I wanted to kick this parent into the next county! Sorry - but I'm really steamed.

Anyway - Thank you, thank you, and thank you!! (I'm so sorry that I deleted your email, and do not know who to credit. Perhaps you'll respond, so I can thank you properly.)

- Kelly

Deb Bova responded to Kelly's posting.

You are welcome. I am so glad that you tried it and had success. I have found out so much about my kids using this little sheet. It is neat that the parents get homework.

- Deb

Kelly followed up with comments about parents' willingness to share stories and insights about their children.

Deb,

Thank you for writing in. I really can't thank you enough for the idea. I've gotten more responses in since I first wrote, and it's amazing what the parents have shared with me. On the whole, they have been very balanced in the information they provided.

They've shared the children's strengths, weaknesses, and what they find special about them. I've had responses ranging from a few sentences to several pages. I feel guilty that I've never before asked the parents to tell me about their kids. Most of them really want to share what they know and feel about their children. Now, in hindsight, it seems like an obvious "duh" idea. Well, most of the ideas that I "steal" from other colleagues do.

Thank you again.

- Kelly

Barbara captured the power of this activity -- and its importance.

I tried the "Million Words or Less" idea with my 90+ 8th grade middle school students. Since we have quite a diverse population, I offered the option that if their parent/guardians did not write in English or simply did not have the time to write, that they could dictate to the student and the student would record their words.

Within one day, I had 60% back already and within one week, 99% were returned. Parents and guardians seemed thrilled to be able to share what was most important about their child with me. I gained invaluable insight into my students and my heart has been won over in one short week.

I would never have known most of this information throughout the entire year. This has been enlightening for me, freeing for the parents, and rather fun for the students. Most of my students commented that their parents wanted them to read what they wrote. I even had about a dozen parents who word-processed their responses.

Their stories were priceless. They brought me to tears and heartfelt laughter. They made me realize in a brand new way how much most parents and guardians love their children, how much their hopes and dreams are bound up in these children whom we are entrusted with every day to teach.

Our responsibility is great. Yet, we are not alone in this. This is the great beginning of a partnership with our parents in the education of the whole child. Thank you for sharing this idea with us.

Barbara

Susan was reminded that each child is a parent's precious gift.

I wanted to say a big thanks for the idea shared by someone of asking parents to tell about their kids in a million words or less. The responses I have gotten have been so informative and touching and serve as a reminder that each child we come in contact with is a precious gift and should be treated as such.

- Susan

First-year teacher Ashli shared a few comments that came from her parents.

My students loved the fact that the parents had homework.

From the parents, I got everything from, "My child can be good. My child can be bad. You will get to know him...Good Luck!" to a three-page novel. I learned all about my students from the people who know them best. I think the parents actually enjoyed writing about them.

Out of 120 students, I had one parent think it was "patronizing."

-Ashli

Melba offered Ashli some positive reinforcement.

One out of 120 is not bad at all, Ashli. I have had the same odds in the past. We have all been there. You seem to be getting off to a very good start. Keep us informed and always remember we are here for each other.

- Melba

Debbie asked a few questions.

The idea of having family members really engaged in sharing about their child appeals to me, but I think I'd like it to be more of a structured interview, with the student as the recorder.

I'm wondering how much time you gave for this assignment too. Some parents work long hours during the week and couldn't "appreciate" such an assignment unless they had the space of the weekend to complete it. Were there alternatives for families who couldn't complete this work?

I'm just wondering about the demographics at your school. I think that written homework for many of my students' parents would be extremely difficult because of language and educational barriers. My own mother would have had a panic attack, if she were given such a written assignment. She was always tense when writing absence notes and I never understood why until very recently when she spoke about her difficulties in spelling and her embarrassment and fear that somehow she might embarrass me.

- Debbie

Deb Bova answered Debbie's questions.

This was not really ever presented by me as an assignment. It was a "take home" item at the beginning of the year. I never got them all back, but I usually got 75% back. When I gave them out, I gave them out with this statement. "Your parents know you so much better than I ever will. I would like to give them an opportunity to share what they know about you, your talents, your hobbies, and your life in general."

I did tell kids if their families were uncomfortable writing it out that they could be the official recorder, and they could record what the parents said. I did tell them not to worry about spelling and punctuation as this was a draft. And I did explain that some parents write pages and some may just write "He is a good kid. We love him."

Kids brought them in on a regular basis for a couple of days and then it tapered off. I never kept score, checked people off, etc. I feel most kids were eager to return the stuff because they actually saw that their parents had positive things to say about them, and so often, parents forget to tell and praise about the positives in their own kids lives - .even though most they have more positive than negative to say about the kids.

So if this makes a parent or two uncomfortable, I guess I have to say that its benefits far outweigh the negatives. My kids come from a school with a 65% poverty level, and these parents love their kids and tell us good things about their kids even if they do it in poorly punctuated sentences. We do not ridicule any of that. We thank them for being willing and interested. We have opened the door to communication, and they appreciate that, even if they have to have their child write what it is they want to say about their child.

- Deb

Sarah shared a moving incident that came out of the "Million Words Letter" activity.

I am pleased to admit that I tried this "assignment" this year. So far, I have received about half from my students' parents and more will come in on Monday after the parents have had a weekend to write about their students.

Out of 70 (8th grade) students, only one came to me and said that his stepmother (that's the only adult he lives with) works two jobs and doesn't want to "spend time writing" on the weekend. After listening carefully to this boy, I heard something in his voice that prompted me to say, "How about you writing a paragraph or two about your stepmother? Then, you can give it to her to let her know what you think about her? I'll take that instead."

The next day, the boy came in and gave me two paragraphs about how much he loves and respects his step mom- made me cry. He was going to give it to her yesterday, so I'll see what happens on Monday.

- Sarah

Patricia thanked Sarah for sharing.

Thanks for the story Sarah! I will be trying it with my kids also. I hope I will get good responses too.

- Patricia

Deb agreed with Sarah's decision to alter this activity to meet the individual need of a student.

Sarah, I love your idea of having him write about his step mom. Awesome idea and, yes, when we have kids do this kind of writing or parents this kind of sharing; we do get a tear in the eye and a lump in the throat.

- Deb

Ashli provided further background.

I am fortunate to have my first teaching job in a private Catholic school. 95% of the parents are more than happy to do what ever I need. Then there are 5% to make my life HARDER. My cooperating teacher always said to think everything through and expect the unexpected. After the first few weeks, I'll get to know my students and plan accordingly.

I didn't plan for too busy parents, or alternative assignments. I wondered about the literacy level of my parents. I decided to do it anyway to see what the outcome was. If it turned out to be a disaster, then, at least I would know.

I began calling all my parents to say hello and introduce myself. They have called the assistant principal and told her how nice that is of me to do. They told me they enjoyed my assignment. I think they did. They enjoyed bragging about their child.

-Ashli-

Deb commented on the power in letting parents know that teachers want to know more about their children.

Hooray for you, Ashli- no tears in the first week is great! I think that it is wonderful that you are calling parents. That makes them so much more approachable if and when there is a problem with their child. I honestly feel that when you ask about their kids, they believe that you are valuing them as a parent, their child's first teacher, and an asset to the child's education-- not a deficit.

I have found that they are much more likely to listen to suggestions and be involved in programs and projects when I ask them to help me by sharing about their child. I think you will find that as well. Good luck.

- Deb

Trisha shared her experience with this beginning of the year activity.

I gave the "million words or less" assignment to the parents of 107 children. I had only one refusal. He gave no excuse, just refused. I gave them 2 nights to complete it (no weekend). I was thrilled with my responses. I teach writing and English. I found the other homeroom teachers begging to read them. Many parents gave me info I would never have received from the child.

Overall, I realized this: I have a huge group of parents who love their children unconditionally. They are so proud of every accomplishment and accepting of their flaws. Many brought tears to my eyes.

One parent wrote:

"She has been my girl for the last 12 years. I give her over to you for the next 11 months. Teach her well. Be strict, be kind, and love her."

So thank you for suggesting this wonderful assignment. It was for me as much as it was for my students.

- Trisha

Deb Bova responded to Trisha.

You are welcome, Trish. I can not take credit for the original idea, but cannot recall the name of the individual who gave this to me. I began to use it in 1990, our first year of teaming. So, I am the one that passed it on to our list, but it is not my original idea.

- Deb

Sharon wondered about how this may affect non-English speaking parents.

I apologize if this has been addressed. I love the idea but what about parents who do not speak or write English?

- Sharon

Deb answered.

Usually their kids will write it for them as scribes, but parents who write in their native language can do so, and the kids can translate it for us.

- Deb

Cossondra told readers about her positive experiences with this activity.

THANKS to whoever originally shared the idea of parents writing A Million Words or Less. I fine-tuned it for my purposes and the first few came in today, maybe 20 of the 100 that went home yesterday - WOW!!! What a great idea!

Parents were so positive, so willing to share, so surprised that a teacher actually "cared," and the kids LOVED the idea that their parents had an assignment. I HIGHLY recommend we all do this -- what a wonderful way to start the year with good PR between school and home.

The only thing I will change for next year is it will be for our entire team of teachers - I would love to share this year's responses with my team but in my "assignment" I promised to keep it confidential.

- Cossondra

The "Million Word Letter" prompted many positive responses from the parents in Matt's class. He wondered if other teachers did any follow-up.

I did the Million words also. I gave it out last Friday, and asked that it be returned by today, but if it didn't come back today I did tell the kids that tomorrow was fine.

Great stuff filled out by the parents, from the "my child is great as long as she gets her own way" to the 3-page typed essay. Some parents even wanted me to grade it and send it back home! Several included thank you's for having them do the assignment and giving them a chance to brag about their children.

I always wondered about those parents who we never see, and if they really do love their children; this assignment reinforces the fact that they do love and are proud of their kids.

I did have 2 students who said their parents refused to do it, which really upset me. I told the one that even if dad writes 4 words, "he's a good kid," that was fine. The other told me that his mom wouldn't do it because she was ignorant (his words!). I felt a little awkward with that response, but it was obvious the bond isn't too strong. He then talked about his dad, and that he would do it, but he is out of town. I told him not to worry about. Have a few more that should come in tomorrow.

What did those of you who tried this do when they didn't get returned- a follow up phone call to check on it, or just forget about it? I also e-mailed the parents who provided me with an email address to thank them for taking the time to help me get to know their child.

This is such a wonderful idea!! I only wish I'd encountered it before this year!

- Matt

Deb made the assignment completely optional.

I never bugged parents about the ones that I did not get back. I figured that it was optional, an activity that would let them help me get to know them and the kids. If a few did not participate, I asked the kids what they would like to share with me. If they wanted to do it, I let them do the response. If they were leery, I just let it go.

- Deb

Caron shared a sad story.

I got all of mine back, and they were wonderful, except one that really ticked me off, so I am going to vent. I have one child whose father is a gynecologist. He looked at it and threw it in the garbage and said he did not have time to fill it out. Fortunately, he came with his daughter to registration and we talked quite a bit about his precious, beautiful child so I could tell her, "that's okay - he made sure he found me the other day to tell me all about you and we talked for a long time. He thinks the world of you." That seemed to

help.

What broke my heart is that this girl's mother died two months before she was born. The mother was kept on life support until the daughter could be safely delivered. She has had enough issues to deal with, I really wanted to go bite dad on the forehead.

Sorry to vent.

- Caron

Deb commented on the incident from Caron's previous posting.

I would like to bite his forehead as well! How wonderful that you could make the connection with him at registration. Still, I would like to bite his forehead... for his lack of sensitivity. Was his daughter there when he talked to you about her? I got the impression she was not ... thus she missed the love and admiration he declared for this very special child.

- Deb

Lori shared her experience.

I am using this with both my 6th and my 7th grade students. They loved the idea. I have students writing about their names and parents writing about their students over the long weekend. I have had several parents already "turn" it in. A couple has even sent it in sealed in an envelope so their child cannot read it. The response has so far been fantastic.

- Lori

Kate had positive things to say about this activity.

My responses, too, ranged from the typed entry to no response at all to one that had only four adjectives (cool, smart, etc.), which I am quite sure were written by the boy himself. I just smiled and told him that his mom had really hit the nail on the head when she described him.

I left it alone if parents chose not to respond. As everyone else has noted, it has been really neat reading through the responses as they arrive. Definitely worth your time to do this activity!

- Kate

Carolyn spoke of how touched she was by her parents' "Million Word" responses.

I know we have probably talked this one out, but I have to throw in my two cents worth. Boy, I wish I had given this assignment last year. What insight I have been given into the lives of my new students.

I received about 93% back and read them until 1 in the morning and cried and cried. What shocked me the most was that these children come from loving homes, regardless of what happens within those walls. I was not expecting that. I thought I would get some nice platitudes about their children. What I got instead was raw, intense, honest emotions.

My sense from last year was that not many parents cared for their children. I wish I could have been proven wrong then. When you are given an opportunity to know the real sense of a person, you have been handed a gift. I hope I can treasure these children as much as their own parents.

- Carolyn

Ellen agreed with Carolyn.

Carolyn,

I just gave this assignment out last week myself, and I agree with you 100%. This is the most valuable thing I've ever done with my students. I read tales of students' births, their strengths and interests, parents' hopes for their children, descriptions of the challenges they've face....I could go on for ages. I was most touched by the aunt of twins who wrote three pages for EACH child....these kids have not had an easy time of it, but the aunt talked about the special qualities of both children. I teach in a school similar to yours, and I have been blown away by the love and hope my students' parents have for them.

Thank you, thank you Deb for posting this assignment. It will be invaluable, if only because it proves some of my assumptions wrong.

- Ellen

Deb, Thank you, thank you, thank you for creating this assignment. This has touched all our hearts, and made such a difference in how we see our students' families (and our students).

Like Carolyn and Ellen, and everyone else who has written these past few weeks, I cried and cried. I learned about the mother who has breast cancer and didn't want to tell her only child, my student, but has to be honest with him (so can I give him a little extra attention? Of course!) Or the mother who typed 3 pages about how she has had to fight for her daughter to get special ed. help since the 3rd grade (and she found out she has dyslexia and ADHD, wants me to know what a wonderful daughter she has, and how she lights up a room with her kindness). I have been teaching for 23 years, and have never had a more powerful assignment. Every parent that wrote thanked me for giving it!!!

Laurie

Principal Chris Toy decided to try the Million Words activity throughout his school.

Here is our version of the Million Words of Less Assignment. I asked my staff to distribute it during the first week of school. It was a huge hit. Parents responded thoughtfully and enthusiastically. I've read most of them and have asked teams to keep them on file to share with one another.

Thanks for the idea!

Chris

Freeport Middle School Parent Memo

Dear Parents,

The 2002-2003 school year has begun and your children will soon be working hard on their homework assignments. Fair is fair so....here's an assignment we'd like parents to do for us! We often say that parents know their children best. This assignment will give you an opportunity to tell us what you think is important for us to know about your child so we can better meet his or her needs.

In a million words or less tell us about your child, or children, if you have more than one child at the middle school.

Please return your homework assignment to your child,s homebase teacher by Friday, September 6th.

Welcome back to school!

Mr. Toy and the FMS staff

Sharon wondered if other teachers were acknowledging the parent notes.

I am so enjoying reading about my students from the parent's point of view. Is anyone acknowledging to the parent the letter received?

Sharon

Matt responded via e-mail.

I sent a blanket e-mail to all the parents who provided an e-mail address, thanking them for sharing their wonderful information. This was such a great activity and a great learning experience for me as a teacher.

Matt

Charlie gave parents several response options.

I am. I gave them the option of e-mailing me the essay instead of providing a paper copy. If they e-mailed me, I replied. So far, my most moving letter was from a mother who insisted on writing the letter by hand so that I could appreciate the love she had for her son.

I'm not known as a "warm and fuzzy" guy, but this activity really was great. It will give me a whole new look at my students.

Charlie Lindgren

(Read Charlie's letter at the end of this PDF)

Trisha wrote notes and letters and placed the pieces in student binders.

After reading each letter I wrote a small note on the bottom of the page. I also tried to make comments throughout. Sometimes my notes were as short as "Thank you" There were a few that I wrote letters back to acknowledging the ideas or concerns the parent had. These pieces are being kept in each students binder. I encouraged the kids to share my comments with their parents.

trisha

Sharon was disappointed at her response and wondered whether she should follow up.

Well, I did not get as many turned in as I hoped. Should I call their homes?

Is it because the student did not tell them the assignment? Is it because they cannot read/write English? Is it because they just can't fathom the idea? Is it because their home is chaotic? I don't want to put pressure on those unable....should I just accept the ones I received and stop there?

Sharon

Deb always emphasizes that students can serve as "scribes."

Yes-- accept what you have, and give one more word of encouragement. Tell your students that they may still share their family's responses, and to be sure to emphasize that they can write for the parents if the parents wish to handle it that way. I usually reinforce the idea of "scribes" and then let it go.

Deborah Bova

Chris had a follow-up idea.

I'd say that you accept what you've gotten. If I were going to push at all, I'd send a note home thanking the parents for sharing such wonderful things about their children. Then, I'd let parents know that you are open to receiving information about their children anytime.

Chris Toy

Alayne "spread the joy" by sharing with her teacher teammates.

Reading the loving responses from the parents has been incredibly rewarding. What has also been wonderful is the reaction of the members of my team to the responses they've been receiving.

I don't think they were expecting anything special to happen and it's been great to see how touched they've been by what their students' parents have written! As a result of this, I suspect we're going to have a much stronger partnership with parents than we have in the past. So thank you, Deborah!

Alayne

Lori described her results.

I gave the million word assignment the first week of school. I got such an overwhelming response that I could not keep up with the responses. The students were dying to read them, and the parents were more than happy to share what they had to tell.

I got three pages from some, 1/2 from others and a couple of no responses. I am going to call the couple who did not respond to make sure they really got the assignment from their child. A couple I doubt received the assignment at all and I can take that up with the child at school. Many sent the responses in sealed envelope. A few even stapled them shut, with a request to not share it with the child but to please share it with the rest of the child's teachers.

I was thanked profusely by many parents for the opportunity to tell me about their child. I expected the parents of the top kids to have a big response and many to not respond at all. I was surprised at the parent care and love for their child. It seems that so many don't care when you only see the outside.

I also have parents now comfortable enough to call and talk to me about assignments and other problems their children have. Today, a child who is very quiet and painfully shy brought me a note from her mom to please call. It seems the latest assignment (writing a family history) is too much for her right now with a recent tragedy (death of her father). While this girl was afraid to ask not do it, her mom felt I was caring enough that maybe I would allow her to do something else. I know my students now in a way I still did not in the end of the year last year.

Thank You for the wonderful assignment! It was a huge hit!!!

Lori

Sharon described her results.

I received about 60% of the letters from parents. They ranged from poems, profound narratives filled with wonder and respect for their child, a blow by blow list of developmental milestones (when they were out of diapers!) to one parent refusing to believe that it was an assignment for him and made the student write an autobio! I was able to share these letters with the 6th grade team for which they were grateful. I have been able to use the information culled when speaking to the students and to recommend specific extracurricular activities I think they would be interested in. Great project!

Sharon in Seattle

Deb summed her thoughts and feelings up.

I am so glad that I shared this at the start of the school year with the listserv. I wish that I had saved all of the comments because it would have made a wonderful article for the Indiana Middle Level Education Association Journal. Thanks for sharing what you learned and treasure. I feel that way as well. I love to bond with the families by giving them the opportunity to teach me about their children.

- Deb Bova

Editor's note: When this topic came up again right after the holidays, several list members contributed additional info about how they did the Million Words activity. Here are some highlights...

In response to questions from a new teacher beginning her career in mid-year, Deb Bova wrote:

The parents , "In a million words or less, tell us about your child," is open ended and the parent or guardian can write as little or as much about any topic as he or she wishes.

In the letter, I usually ask kids specific things in specific paragraphs. Here are a few examples of what I tell the kids:

In the first paragraph introduce yourself. Tell me your full name, your date of birth, if you have brothers or sisters, if you are the oldest, youngest, or in the middle, and if you have any brothers or sisters who have been in my classes before. I also ask the kids what schools they have attended, and where they lived (states and cities). I also ask them what they would like to do, write, read, or learn. I conclude with them telling me any fears (bees, spiders, bad storms, etc.) that they might have. I also ask for their parents' names and their home phone numbers.

In the next paragraph, I ask the kids to share two things that they are good at doing (not necessarily school things) like: drawing, dancing, doing hair, cooking, helping at home, sewing, building things,singing, skating, on the computer, athletics, etc. I ask them to share a quote that someone positively commented on or praised them about their talent or whatever it is that they are good at doing.

I ask kids in this paragraph to tell me what was their best year in school... all the way back to nursery school. I encourage them to remember the names of teachers, friends, and activities that they enjoyed. I ask them if they could put one thing back into school, what

would it be. I also ask them if they could put one thing (peace, kindness, etc.) in the world, what would it be. I usually include the question, "If you could take one thing out of the world, what would it be and why?"

In the last paragraph, I usually ask the students to share one area that they enjoy in school or feel comfortable with in school. I ask how they feel about English-- or whatever subject I might be teaching them, and I encourage them to be honest...because I won't fall apart if they really do not like my subject. I tell them "My goal is to try to help you dislike it a bit less, to be more comfortable in asking questions and learning." I ask them to tell me three things that they want me to help them with in this class during this semester. I ask them to list what they do feel comfortable with in this subject or what might be one strength they have in this subject.

Cossondra George offered her version of a note to parents:

Dear Parents,

I know that you are busy but...

I have a request/assignment just for you. In a MILLION WORDS or less, please tell me about your child. Anything you feel is important will help me better teach your child this year. Each child is special and unique in his/her own way. No one knows this better than you. Please share their likes/dislikes/fears/hopes/dreams/past successes/past failures... anything and everything.

I would appreciate it if you could have your child turn this assignment in to me on Tuesday, September 3. However, I understand you are busy; therefore, I will accept these any time during the month of September.

This assignment is not graded; your child will not be penalized in any way if you do not send in this writing assignment. However, I hope you will choose to complete this for me and for your child. Anything you share with me will be held in the strictest confidence. I will never share it with anyone else without your permission.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
Cossondra George,
your child's 7th grade math teacher

Debbie Buckholts offered a somewhat different idea:

Something that I use at the beginning of the school year is an activity where I have listed different things that the kids may have done over the summer break or things about them.

Examples:

1. Find someone in this class who attended a Braves game this summer_____
2. Someone who has an older brother_____
3. Someone who participated in the Summer Reading Program_____
4. Someone who wears contacts_____

I have about 30 items listed on a page and this requires the students to get up and interact with their classmates and at the same time find out things about each other. They can only get a person to sign their paper once and they can not sign their own paper. Then we share as a whole group. This gives you and the other students to find out things that they have in common and some unique things about the students.

This year I found out that one little girl had seven older brothers and that another had participated in a surfing contest in California. Several had attended the same Braves game.....etc.

Debbie

Almost a year later, the subject of the Million Words activity came up again on the listserv, as teachers began to think about start-up activities for Fall 2003. Several teachers shared their experiences from the year before and some fresh ideas emerged.

On June 25, 2003, a MiddleWeb listserv member wrote:

I start back to school July 30 ! One thing I want to work on is getting to know my students better. Not what other teachers know (sometimes that can be negative). I have decorated my classroom all about me and the first reading lesson is that they have to write 5 sentences about me. (inference) Last year the Spurs Parking Only sign on the wall above the door kept them thinking. Students would come in and talk about the game all year long and I had to make sure I saw the game or read about it in the paper. One young man carried on and on about one game and he said, "Hey, I was using elaboration and detail. Boy my writing test is going to be good this year. I get it talking and writing together." (by the way he made a 4.5 out of 6 the best he had ever done). Sorry that I rambled on. Any ideas?

Lori described her success with the "Million Words" activity last year p; and prompted several other list members to recall their experiences.

The best lesson I have ever done was "In a Million Words or Less" and I asked the parents to write about their child. I had about 99% of my parents return the assignment and I learned a lot about the students, much of which I may have never found out. The parents love the opportunity to "brag" about their kids and the kids love to know what the parents think of them.

I got the added benefit of having very early positive contact with the parents. The thing I do with the students in the classroom is I have them make a list of things they wish I already knew about them as a first day assignment. It is usually my first journal assignment, but it also gives me good insight into the students and their likes and dislikes.

Marcella had a mostly good experience p; but some negative feedback, too.

I used this activity last year and I must say that most parents were cooperative and gave us a wealth of information. However, I did get a very nasty message from a parent who wrote to me to tell me that it was none of my business and I got paid for teaching his son and not to pry in their personal business. Anything I wanted to know, "ask my son yourself". He complained to the principal and told me that he was looking forward to discussing the issue with him on back to school night. Go figure!

Other parents considered it a burden, especially if they have more than one student in the middle school. Some wrote down "something" on a piece of paper and turned it in. I wouldn't have accepted such poor work from my students.

Lori replied:

Marcella,

I had a wonderful experience with it. I only had a couple of parents who didn't turn in something that was really wonderful. I didn't count off for inadequate parent writing. It was very worthwhile in my experience. My parents appreciated the opportunity to brag a bit on their students. I learned a lot and connected with the parents in ways I may not have otherwise. I am sorry you were not impressed with the assignment -- I think many of us here found it wonderful.

Melba pointed out the importance of the way in which the message is sent home.

Marcella, I wonder how you sent this idea (A Million Words...) home. Did you give this assignment to the students orally with the intention that they would in turn explain it correctly to their parents, or did you put it in writing explaining yourself to the parents your intentions? If you relied on the kiddos to do an adequate job of explaining it to their parents, you can bet that all they said was words to the effect: "she wants you to tell her about me" or worse "she wants to know what bad stuff I do that she should know about".

I do know that some parents get really protective when teachers ask for family history or information. I had one father refuse to fill out a registration form (the section asking for number and names of siblings) and told me it was none of my business and this was required by the school district and not me! I also had a parent (father) call me to ask why I asked his son to interview his grandparents and members of his family when we were studying cultures and norms in social studies. Some parents do get very protective and we either have to respect that and leave it alone or take the time to call the parent and explain it more thoroughly.

Don't give up on this activity; it is a good one.

Principal Chris Toy shared his note from last year.

Here's the text of what I sent home to parents regarding the million words or less activity.
A Million Words or Less, A Home Base Writing Assignment

Dear Parents,

The 2002-2003 school year has begun and your children will soon be working hard on their homework assignments. Fair is fair so...here's an assignment we'd like parents to do for us! We often say that parents know their children best. This assignment will give you an opportunity to tell us what you think is important for us to know about your child so we can better meet his or her needs.

In a million words or less tell us about your child, or children, if you have more than one child at the middle school.

Please return your homework assignment to your child's homebase teacher by Friday, September 6th.

Welcome back to school!

Mr. Toy and the FMS staff

Concerning parent resistance, Chris added:

It seems to me that this activity is still worth doing. After all, I can't think of ANY activity we do that is universally accepted. IF most parents were cooperative and it gave us useful information for serving kids' needs, isn't still worth it even if there are a few naysayers? Besides, they can just not do the activity.

Cossondra agreed p; do it anyway.

While I had no parents complain, a few did not complete it - but I agree with Chris - do it anyway.

It was great! And, I got an email from a parent just this week, thanking me for the great year his son had, and saying, "We knew it'd be a great year when we got that first assignment when you wanted our input."

Chris wondered about what to do the second year.

In thinking about the million words or less assignment, since we did it last year, I wonder if it should be changed slightly for parents who did it last year....or perhaps not, since the kids probably have changed? Thoughts? I will definitely do it similarly to last year's for the incoming 6th graders.

Lori had an idea.

Our 8th grade teachers are going to revise it just a little bit and ask what it is that the parents believe is the most important things they want their children to learn this year. They plan to leave the 7th the same and add the 6th grade for the teachers interested. The 6th graders I had last year had an overwhelming response by the parents. . .Some even sent the letters to all the teachers not just to me.

It was really powerful and I don't think there is anything wrong with asking the parents to do a similar activity each year. They are bound to have different concerns this year than last and definitely different hopes as the new standards go into effect and their students have to finish 8th grade with a 2.0 to go on to 9th grade in the next fall.

Chris replied:

Thanks for the ideas Lori. I asked one of my parents about differentiating the million

words assignment. She pointed out that I tell parents that the middle school years see the most change in students from year to year. Perhaps I could ask 7th and 8th grade parents how their children have changed since the beginning of the previous school year.

Jennifer shared her experience p; a slight twist on the activity.

I assigned a similar assignment last year...I had students bring it home the day of our open house - then the parents could turn it in there or anytime afterward. When I met with the parents, I explained to them that I really wanted to know about their students and the more information I knew upfront, the better I could work with their child. I explained how some of the questions I asked related to class - since I would be differentiating, the more I knew the more I could create appropriate assignments, etc.

I then threw in something like "this is something that has helped me greatly, and I hope you take the time to complete it. However, if you feel that the answers to these questions are none of my business, that's fine too. If you decide not to, you will not get a phone call and your child's grade will not be effected. I just want you to know that this is one of my favorite assignments and I hope you complete it. "

I had a vey good return rate and most of the parents gave me additional positive feedback about the assignment.

This year, I think I'll have more sheets available at parent-teacher conferences so that parents can complete them as they are waiting. (unfortunately, the way our conferences are set up parents often have to wait).

I'd highly recommend this assignment. I kept them in a binder with the data/parent contact sheets for each student so I could flip though them frequently and/or review them before I called parents with problems or concerns. It was very helpful!

First-year teacher Ashli says the activity got her career off to a good start. When she read them again at the end of the year, there were a few revelations.

I have to admit that my students LOVED me right away when they learned that their parents had the first homework assignment. For the most part, I felt that my parents LOVED to brag about their child. Most of them went on an on. Some wrote, and I quote, "Camron can be good. Camron can be bad. Good luck!" Others wrote, "Harrison is a sweet and loving child. He has been known to create havoc on the classroom." She couldn't haven been more right!

I had one parent say that she didn't like the "Patronizing way the assignment was given..." I had one parent come up to me during the open house and say that they enjoyed my

assignment for them. I smiled and thanked them, and said that I think that it is important for parents to be involved..blah, blah. Then they proceeded to say that it is a good way for me to see what kind of education level my parents were. I again smiled and said that I wasn't even thinking along those lines. I just wanted to learn about my students from the people who know them best. I was honest, too. Although they were right. When I thought about it more, I was able to tell who were the big CEO's, who were the stay at home moms, and who were too buisy to take the time to do the assignent.

I read them as they came in. Not knowing any of my students yet, nothing really sunk in. I reread them the last week of school. Some made things clear. I also realized that some students had their parents really fooled. I thought about giving them back, but a few parents said not to let their child see what was written. Since I couldn't remember who said that, I just threw them away.

I think next year I'll do the assignment again. I'll give more time for the due date since some parents told me that they couldn't do the assignment becasue they were at office depot getting more school supplies. And they wonder why their children have lame excuses for not doing their work....

John commented on Ashli's report that one parent felt the assignment was presented in a "patronizing" way.

I suspect "tone" is important, just like it is here on the listserv. I think we've all become skilled at nuance and tone, because we want to communicate effectively without body language, etc. You face the same challenge in a note home to parents.

I thought Charles' version of the Million Words message hit just the right tone: TELL ME ABOUT YOUR SCHOLAR! Yes, you are getting a homework assignment! I joined a listserv over the summer called "Middleweb" that introduced me to some truly wonderful people with great ideas. Around the beginning of August they started to discuss "opening day activities." In a Million Words or Less. was a huge favorite, and a huge success. The reason behind it is that it takes us a great deal of time to know your child. Some we never really know. This activity gives you a chance to tell me what you think I should know about your scholar. I will read every one of them. I will not share your comments with any other person, including Team E teachers, unless you tell me in your message that I can....

Deborah added:

I readily agree about the tone... and I always couched this handout in this way--- when I began it years ago and still today:

(across top of page is this short note)

Dear families,

You know more about your child than I will ever know, and you can help me to be the best teacher I can for child if you will share with me... so--(a few spaces down and in really fancy font and word art arrangement goes)

In a million words or less, if you please, tell me about your child...

Bottom of paper, Thanks, and my signature.

Hope this helps. I never couched it as an assignment... just a desperate need for assistance from the people who know their kids the best.

Elisa returned to Lori's other idea p; having students make a first-day list of things they wish their teacher already knew about them.

Lori, What a fantastic idea! I'd like to try it in the fall when I will be teaching 6th grade math.

Lori provided more details.

I simply write on the board--make a list of 5 things you wish I already knew about you. If they start asking questions I tell them they know themselves better than I do and to please tell me things they think are important about them. I give no more instructions or I feel like I am telling them what I want to know--what I want is for them to share some bits about themselves and I always share aloud first-five things they need to know about me:

1. They are always welcome in my room
2. I will always get both sides of a dispute in writing before I talk to anyone
3. I am always fair. . .but they might not think so-fair to me is sometimes different from their definition
4. I expect them to follow the rules-all 8 of them in my room all the time
5. If they give me 80 minutes of concentrated study/work time I will give the 5 minutes of talk time while I sign planners for the day-everyday!

Debbie wondered about the level of participation of various students.

I like Lori's idea about asking kids what they'd like us to know about them but I'm wondering about the range of replies... I can imagine getting volumes from some and nothing much from a whole group of others, especially some of my boys.

I used to administer a pretty specific survey that asked a lot about them, their homes, backgrounds etc. and still left room for their own additional sharing. I'm wondering if we need to scaffold the giving of info. for this age group. For some of my students it's not cool to volunteer, but they will give the information if I ask them directly.

On a slightly different note...do your kids complain about having to fill out index cards for every class? Have you figured out a way around it? I was thinking that we might do electronic cards in first period and then just share them throughout the staff.

=====

Lori elaborated.

When I do it I require a minimum of five things. . .some write more but seldom if you give them a limit they will all meet the minimum requirements. My boys wrote better answers than my girls--more serious about things they wanted me to know like they liked reading about sports events but not novels, I found a couple who liked to read but not write book reports-but they liked projects-I found all kinds of things. We did cards in only one class and kept them in a team file-that way only one person had to take class time and the kids only wrote the information once. I kept it in my room as I was the team leader.

Some will only give bits and bites of information but confidentially they will all tell you something about themselves--they one subject love most to talk about and I use it as a first writing and I read them all the first week!

Lori

Charlie Lindgren's Letter to Parents

**IN A MILLION WORDS OR LESS . . .
TELL ME ABOUT YOUR SCHOLAR!**

Yes, you are getting a homework assignment! I joined a listserv over the summer called “MiddleWeb” that introduced me to some truly wonderful people with great ideas.

Around the beginning of August they started to discuss “opening day activities.” *In a Million Words or Less* . . . was a huge favorite, and a huge success. The reason behind it is that it takes us a great deal of time to know your child. Some we never really know. This activity gives you a chance to tell me what you think I should know about your scholar. I will read every one of them. I will not share your comments with any other person, including Team E teachers, unless you tell me in your message that I can.

Your scholar is in for a great experience in science this year. The curriculum is rigorous, but very doable. The overshadowing goal of the curriculum is to prepare your scholar for those “Two Days in May” when he or she takes the science MCAS. My central theme is that “We are all in this together.” Every lab we do, every discussion we have, involves everyone. This philosophy will be best expressed in something brand new this year called the “Mars Student Imaging Project.” The culminating activity will be a proposal that we will submit to the scientists at Arizona State University. If our proposal is accepted, we will actually be able to work with NASA scientists, and use the Mars Odyssey spacecraft to take an image of the surface of Mars to answer our question!

This should be a very exciting and busy year. The key is communication. You will know everything your scholar is doing through my web site (which) gives you the weekly homework assignments. You will also find links to Internet pages we are currently using, PDF files of all the lessons we do, a link to my email address, and a link back to our school homepage.

Take your time with this, but there must be a deadline. Please get *In a Million Words or Less* . . . to me no later than Friday, September 13th. You can either send it with your scholar or e-mail it to me. You can find my e-mail address on my web page.

Clear Skies,
Charles F. Lindgren