SCIENCE FAIR SOLILOQUY

Planning a science fair can be an exasperating, infuriating, and difficult task. But the end result can be such a gratifying experience that all the frustrations seem to pale in comparison. The smiling face saying, "Look what I did!" makes up for the months of begging him to please get started!

My first science fair was thrust upon me by a principal who asked "when" not "if" I would hold a science fair. An annual Reading School Science Fair was scheduled and I was the lucky person who was going to plan it!

I began by reading all the articles I could find in Science and Children, National Science Foundation materials, and talking with several people at Emporia State University. Since one of my classes was made up of veterans from two previous fairs, they too had suggestions for me. This entirely exhausting exercise only convinced me that NO ONE WAY to plan a successful fair exist. Each fair must fit into its particular school environment, but some general guidelines are helpful.

Approximately six months before the fair, the date, time, and place need to be set. This is usually the easiest task you'll encounter while planning a fair although you may not believe it at the time. The organizer needs to begin finding judges early. Judges can be almost anybody, but retired teachers really seem to enjoy judging and they are well accustomed to dealing with students. Professionals in the areas of health, Fish and Game Commission, and utilities are also good. University professors are great but are often too busy and don't always understand young children. The only people you must NOT use are school personnel and relatives of possible exhibitors.

Remember that the students are the most important part of the fair. They must be motivated to choose a topic they'll enjoy and to begin thinking about how they plan to investigate it. Occasional comments about your plans will help them realize the need to begin thinking early. Approximately four months before the fair, send home an information packet to parents if you want their assistance. This packet should include general scheduling information and exactly what role you expect the parents to play. The timeline students need to follow in order to produce a finished product by fair time needs to be included. Students need duplicates of this timeline so they can take much of the responsibility for completing the projects on time. If you clearly outline your expectations for student and parent roles, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by the amount of parental support you'll gain. If both home and school work together, the student benefits. I always have the students work at home with parental supervision but I check on their progress at least monthly.

With three months to go I insist on an entry form signed by the student, teacher, and parent. This form should include the topic, a project title, a procedure sheet, and a rough sketch of the finished product. (The students always balk at this and usually change their minds but at least they are beginning to visualize the finished product.) The time to order ribbons and make certificates, if you plan to give prizes, is now. I believe all
students need a reward for their efforts. We used purple, green, and orange ribbons rather than the traditional blue, red and white.

The month before the fair, check with the custodian about tables and electrical outlets. The cooks need to be consulted about a hospitality room for the judges. Include the teachers in the lounge in some of these early plans especially as they affect other teachers. When people know what to expect, they are more willing to cooperate.

The final month is your busiest time. Not only are you having to deal with sob stories in the classroom, but also time has come to check back with all the judges, custodians, and cooks. Worst of all are your internal feelings of failure. During this final month before the fair I'd wake up in the middle of the night thinking of some detail I'd overlooked. Somehow I lived through this month and you will too.

Then came the big day! I found the students were as excited as I was. Each person stood up in front of the class, told about his project, and answered questions from his peers. I was especially pleased with one girl's report. Her project looked awful! Her background had been thrown together with misspelled words and jagged edges. Yet, when her classmates asked her questions, she knew what she had done, how she had done it, and why she did it. This student served as a model as my second fair took shape.

My second fair was much larger since it included the entire USD #251 rather than one school. The planning was about the same except we used a representative from each school. More people needed to be consulted at all stages. Communication was still the key. The biggest difference in my two fairs came as a result of what I learned from that little girl. We had all students talk to the judges and explain what they had done and why. Although this means many more judges, I think more students experienced success. Even those with limited language skills were able to prove they understood scientific principles. A few students did clam up but most enjoyed talking one on one with the judge.

As I look back, I have to admit that science fairs are a lot of work. Months of planning is required. Occasionally, you have to bite your tongue when a colleague criticizes your efforts. But too often in our society sports figures gain all the glory. Science fairs provide an avenue for intellectual advancement that allows our achievers to excel. To me, that happy child’s face makes it all worthwhile. I hope you’ll agree after your first fair!

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