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The future teachers in Malcolm Butler’s Teaching Science for All Children class closed the Spring 2011 semester by opening the minds of elementary school students at two local schools to the fun of science.

The Family Fun Science Night events at Lakewood Elementary and Rawlings Elementary, organized by the students with help from community organizations and businesses, featured activity stations for elementary school students and their parents to experience science concepts in a fun, interactive way. Collectively, the events attracted more than 700 participants. The elementary school students and their parents completed activities focused on physics and chemistry concepts.

“This event is to help families see the fun side of science,” said Butler, associate professor in the College of Education, who began this program at USFSP in 2007. “My students are expected to know the science, but that’s not what they stand there and explain. They allow the children to have fun with the activity.”

Upon entering Family Fun Science Night, parents and children received a passport, which directed them to 18 different stations. Once they checked off each station, the parents and kids received prizes donated by local businesses.

Butler created this program to involve students with the community and help students realize the benefits of parent involvement. The students developed and designed their stations throughout the semester and focused on creating engaging activities that allow parent-child interaction. To make the event possible, the students contacted organizations and agencies, such as the St. Petersburg Pier Aquarium and United States Geological Survey (USGS), to participate and set up their own stations.

Graduate Student Missy Pedzich also interned at Rawlings, one of the event sites.

“One of the things that Dr. Butler really stresses is to call on the community to help out,” Pedzich said. “It becomes more effective because the community wants to be involved with the schools.”

Five schools requested Family Fun Science Nights at their schools this year, but only two nights were possible. At least one high-need school is selected because Butler wants his students to see that parents of students in high-need schools want to be involved, contrary to a stigma he said exists.
“I want parent involvement to become the expectation for these future teachers when they have their own classroom,” Butler said.

The elementary schools raised the funds for the event through fundraising and parent involvement. Butler receives support from parents, teachers and administrators, who appreciate the impact of Family Fun Science Night.

“The family night that USFSP does in coordination with Pinellas County Schools is a great experience for both students and their families,” said Stacia Baldwin, the Science Magnet Coordinator at Lakewood Elementary. “The students here get to have a hands-on, minds-on experience with the wonderful world of science and see how everyday things they do relate to science.”

For Pedzich, the opportunity for community involvement through her academics was the reason she chose to attend USFSP.

“I’ve learned a lot,” Pedzich said. “I’ve always been nervous about teaching science, but with Dr. Butler I see that there are so many little things that you can do that are quick and fun. If we are enjoying it, the kids are going to love it.”