



Downers Grove Fire Department Adopt-A-Firefighter Program

The idea: Fire and Life Safety Education coordinator arranges for a teacher and classroom to adopt-take care of their own firefighter. It is through their “very own” firefighter that the students and teacher learn about fire safety and injury prevention. Five lessons, each lasting 20 minutes, were developed based on the NFPA Learn Not to Burn Resource Books and Risk Watch behaviors. The firefighter and teacher become partners in scheduling, teaching, and reaching the students with age-appropriate lessons and family activities. The firefighter has the freedom to be creative with incentives, contest, and extra interactive activities. These ideas should first be discussed with and approved by both the department and the school or teacher.

How we do it: An “adoption add” is placed via e-mail, department intranet, or other communication vehicle for firefighters who might be interested in being adopted by a first grade classroom.

As firefighters respond with questions or indicating a willingness to participate, keep track of their names on a list. Two weeks later, send out a last call from the ‘agency’ for anyone who may have been on vacation and missed the original notice.

Schedule meetings in August. Try to accommodate as many firefighters coming on and going off shift as possible. I scheduled meetings on two consecutive mornings at 7:30 a.m. (our shift change is at 7 a.m.) I also served food. Any firefighter who could not make one of the meetings was asked to request “private tutoring” so all participants had the same information going into the program.

At the meeting firefighters were filled in on the program, their role in the upcoming year’s work, the rules that must be followed in our local schools, etc. It was at this meeting that each firefighter filled out his/her adoption certificate information sheet. Questions were answered and new ideas entertained. As promised, each meeting was held to one hour.

The firefighters were then matched with teachers and classrooms based on their still districts. In September, we began visiting the schools, introducing the children to their firefighter and explaining their role in taking good care of their firefighter. Each firefighter came with his/her own adoption certificate (see enclosed).

Additional ideas from firefighters and teachers:

- Firefighter invited to join class for lunch one day.
- Obtain teacher's schedule and drop by during recess to play basketball, etc. with the class (approved by teacher and department)
- Run friendly competition with another firefighter's class to see who gets their pre-test, smoke alarm tests, or other activities, turned in first. Award, reward, and applause.
- Invite the teacher to breakfast at the station the day of a special project or due date of pre or post tests.
- Host an end-of-the year party for classes at the station. Include hands-on activities.
- The list goes on.....limited only by the creativity of the teacher and firefighter team, and time constraints. (two of our firefighters actually went on a field trip with their class! – everyone wanted to be in their groups)

Possible Program Problems:

- The firefighters get a call just before or during their visit. We learned to discuss this potential problem with the teachers early in the planning process. The teachers agreed that if the firefighters were not at their classroom door within the first five minutes of the scheduled class, the teacher would teach the lesson and the firefighter would quickly review at the beginning of the next session. Or, the teacher would teach a regular content lesson and try to reschedule with the firefighter.
- Firefighters arrive at classroom later than the scheduled time. Firefighters learned that schools, for the most part, operate on a very tight schedule with little room for flexibility. It is important for them to leave the station in time to meet their class at the predetermined time.
- Getting called from the classroom too many times. Some classes just happened to pull the short stick when it came to their firefighters' visits. It seemed that every time they were to have their much anticipated visit from the firefighter, he/she was called away. Although it was exciting to see the engine leave for an emergency, it became frustrating for the firefighter and the teacher. Some firefighters decided to pay their visits on their day off. This speaks well for their dedication to their classes.

Enclosed:

- Sample of an Adoption Certificate
- Questionnaire for Adoption Certificate information
- Master Adopt-A-Firefighter database
- Individual Adopt-A-Firefighter schedule to put on department calendar
- Five Lesson Plans and teaching tips
- Evaluation form for firefighters and teachers for end of program

Feel free to use any of the above in part or in their entirety to help get your program off the ground. This is a cursory summary of the Adopt-A-Firefighter idea. Please call me at (630) 434-5986 if you have any questions. I will be happy to discuss the successes, pitfalls and mechanics of this program. Good luck with your adoption agency. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

Marsha P. Giesler
Fire and Life Safety Education Coordinator
Downers Grove Fire Department