

Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook



...for our Nation to achieve its full potential, we must make sure that every young child can read. This must be one of our highest priorities.

Richard Riley, Secretary Chief, U.S. Department of Education
Harris Wofford, Executive Officer, Corporation for National Service



January 2000

CORPORATION
FOR NATIONAL
★ SERVICE

MEMORANDUM

TO: National Senior Service Corps Project Directors and Staff

FROM: Tom Endres, Director, National Senior Service Corps

SUBJECT: Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook



I am pleased to provide you with the Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook, a compilation of information, tools and materials used by Seniors for Schools project directors as they launched a new child literacy initiative over the past two years. The Guidebook reflects the pioneering efforts of project directors who set out in 1997 to implement Seniors for Schools demonstration projects in nine cities – starting from scratch in some communities, building on previously successful tutoring and mentoring programs in others. Some of the tools and materials in the Guidebook were developed by training and technical assistance providers contracted by the Corporation for National Service, but most of what is offered here originated with the nine projects. The lessons learned by the Seniors for Schools projects about organizing and sustaining literacy activities are applicable to RSVP and Foster Grandparent projects that choose to engage in literacy activities. They represent the theme and spirit of the Seniors for Schools initiative -- a grassroots effort to recruit senior volunteers in their communities, give them the knowledge and skills they need to become effective tutors, and place them in their local schools to help at-risk children learn to read.

Seniors for Schools is a unique Demonstration Initiative where the work of the volunteers is focused exclusively on literacy. To attract a diverse corps of volunteers, Seniors for Schools imposes no qualifying income restrictions, nor does it require a minimum number of hours of service. The projects offer monetary incentives for volunteers who are able to serve 15 to 20 hours a week, but those who can offer only a few hours a week are also welcome. All volunteers are asked to commit to serving for one school year. This combination has proven to be an effective strategy in providing a broad base of opportunity for seniors who want to make a contribution to their communities.

I want to express our admiration and appreciation to the project directors, their staffs and sponsor organizations who, for the first two groundbreaking years, received instruction and guidance from overworked school district staff, harnessed and guided the good will and immense dedication of Seniors for Schools volunteers, and provided learning moments for children that could last a life time. We take pride in their efforts as another example of the power and effectiveness of Senior Service.

I would like to thank the Southern Regional Council in Atlanta, Georgia, a training and technical assistance provider during the initial two-year demonstration, for collecting these tools and materials, thoughts and ideas that the project directors and sponsor organizations put to good use getting the Seniors for Schools projects off the ground. As presented here in this guidebook, they represent practices that proved to be effective in getting the job done. Because there is always much to be learned from the experience of others doing similar work, I believe the advice, precautions, and lessons learned provided here will be of value as you start up a new literacy program, or continue operation of one that's already underway in your RSVP or Foster Grandparent project.

To maximize the Guidebook's usefulness, we would welcome the opportunity to have your feedback and input. Please complete the Evaluation Form provided in Chapter X. Tell us what you think and send us your own ideas and materials. We look forward to hearing from you and adding your contribution to the Guidebook so that it becomes a continuously useful resource.

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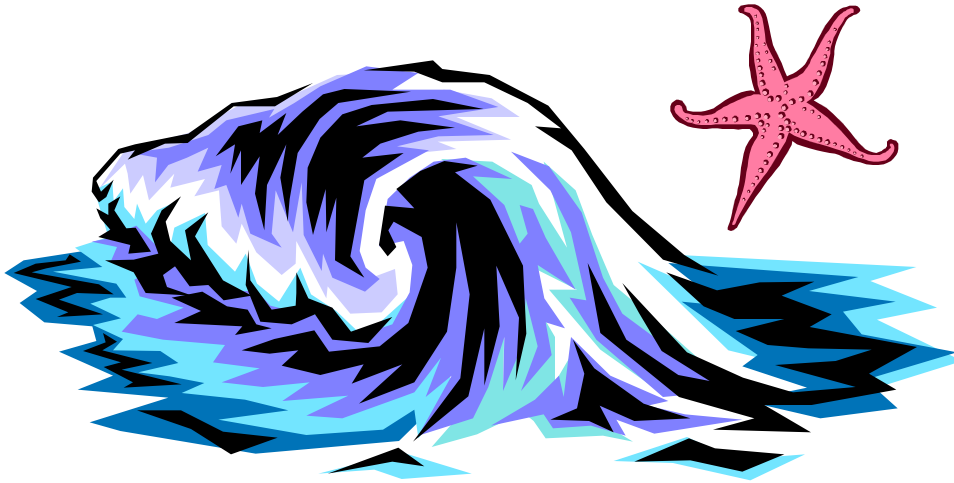
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EVALUATION FORM



The Young Man and the Starfish

A Story Inspired by Loren Eiseley

A man was taking a sunrise walk along the beach. In the distance he caught sight of a young man who seemed to be dancing along the waves.

As he got closer he saw that the young man was picking up starfish from the sand and tossing them back into the ocean.

"What are you doing?" the man asked.

"The sun is coming up and the tide is going out; if I don't throw them in they'll die."

"But young man, there are miles and miles of beach with starfish all along it – you can't possibly make a difference."

The young man bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it back into the ocean. "It made a difference to that one," he replied.

FOREWORD

The Purpose of this Guidebook

In one rendition of the often-quoted poem titled “The Young Man and the Starfish,” the writer speaks to the importance of vision and action, and to the ability of each of us to make a difference by acting on our vision. This rendition concludes:

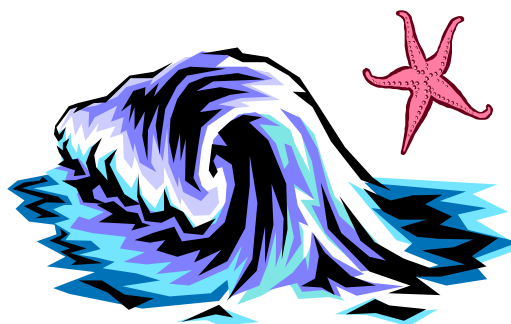
*Vision without action is merely a dream.
Action without vision just passes the time.
Vision with action can change the world.*

This guidebook seeks to explore the **vision** of children learning to read through the organized efforts of senior volunteers, and the **actions** taken to realize that vision through the Seniors for Schools projects.

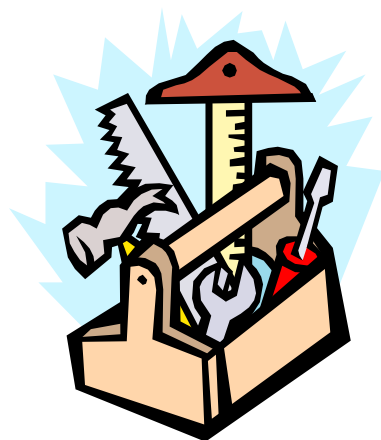
The nine Seniors for Schools demonstration sites provided significant lessons about literacy programming, including optimal methods of recruiting and retaining older volunteers and building strong relationships with schools and communities.

We feel the **lessons learned** will help both new and experienced Senior Service Corps project directors infuse their literacy programs with the potential to become a valued, self-sustained addition to the reading curriculum of their partner schools.

In the following pages we will look at the work of the project directors and hear from them in their own words about the issues and obstacles they encountered, and the solutions they developed as they sought to make the vision of Seniors for Schools a reality.



Tools and Materials



This Guidebook is a reply to the field’s request for clear-cut, easy-to-use information and tools that address starting up, building, and maintaining literacy programs in schools.

Accordingly, we have developed the manual as a reference, a learning tool, and guide for project staff, providing “how-to” assistance on establishing a **community-based literacy program** using older volunteers, and **building the infrastructure** for a program that will be able to sustain itself with ongoing school support, parent involvement, community participation, and alternate sources of funding.

Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook

The guidebook contains ten independent but inter-related chapters that group and organize information and materials to coincide with the major components of establishing and maintaining a Seniors for Schools project.

At the end of each chapter, we provide a **Tools and Materials** section, each of which is a collection of guidelines, lists, forms, handouts, brochures, tutor schedules...and more...that were used by the Seniors for Schools projects during the two-year demonstration phase.

Many of the tools and materials were designed and developed by the project directors themselves, and their staffs. The variety of tools and materials provides a good example of how each project is unique, and while sharing a common set of goals, objectives and core elements, each project operates in response to its individual characteristics and needs.

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At the end of this manual, we also provide a **Resources** section. This is a list of sources of written material, formal tools, individuals and references that will help you find the information and support you need to effectively operate your program.

The manual also includes an **Evaluation Form**. Please complete it and return it to Angela Roberts, Program Officer for the National Senior Service Corps at the Corporation for National Service headquarters. The mailing address and fax number are provided on the form.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When discussions first began about putting this guidebook together, all partners concurred that it was important to provide the field with appropriate, meaningful, and user-friendly resources that could be modified and used for individual National Senior Service Corps projects. The guidebook could not have been created without critical input, information and ideas from the following individuals and projects:

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INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Seniors for Schools Initiative

On August 27, 1996, President Clinton announced the **America Reads Challenge**, responding to a 1994 National Assessment of Education Progress report, which found that 40% of all 4th graders in the nation scored below expectations for basic reading levels.

The goal established for the America Reads Challenge campaign is to ensure that every child can read independently by the end of third grade, with emphasis on benefiting children with the greatest need, such as children with limited English proficiency, children with disabilities, or children who are from low-income families.

To achieve America Reads goals, the President called for a nationwide effort to substantially increase the number of tutors and mentors available to young children in public schools. The **Corporation for National Service** and the **US Department of Education** were identified by the President to jointly lead the Challenge.

A cornerstone of this effort is enlistment of men and women over the age of 55 who are willing to make a significant commitment to help children learn to read.

The Corporation met the challenge by adopting the goals of America Reads and helping to mobilize thousands of volunteers to serve as tutors. A cornerstone of this effort is enlistment of men and women over the age of 55 who are willing to make a significant commitment to help children learn to read. Borrowing from similar national service programs that have worked with children in school settings, such as Foster Grandparents and Retired Senior Volunteer Programs, the Corporation established the Seniors for Schools Initiative.










The Seniors for Schools Initiative is based on the model of another tutoring program established with private funding in 1995 – The Experience Corps. The Experience Corps was designed to take advantage of the time and talents of America’s growing senior population to help children in kindergarten through third grade learn to read. Implemented in five US cities, the Experience Corps demonstration proved highly successful meeting literacy goals, while at the same time providing a high quality experience for the volunteers. Several **core elements** were identified as contributing to the success of the Experience Corps, and these core elements were adopted and incorporated into the nine Seniors for Schools demonstration projects.

Nine Seniors for Schools Demonstration Projects

The Seniors for Schools Initiative selected nine US cities where demonstration projects would be established and developed over a period of two years. In each city, the **help of local, state, and national service organizations** was enlisted to enhance and develop the demonstration projects. The cities selected for SFS projects are represented in the map on the facing page, with the name of the sponsor organization that funded and supported the SFS project in that city.

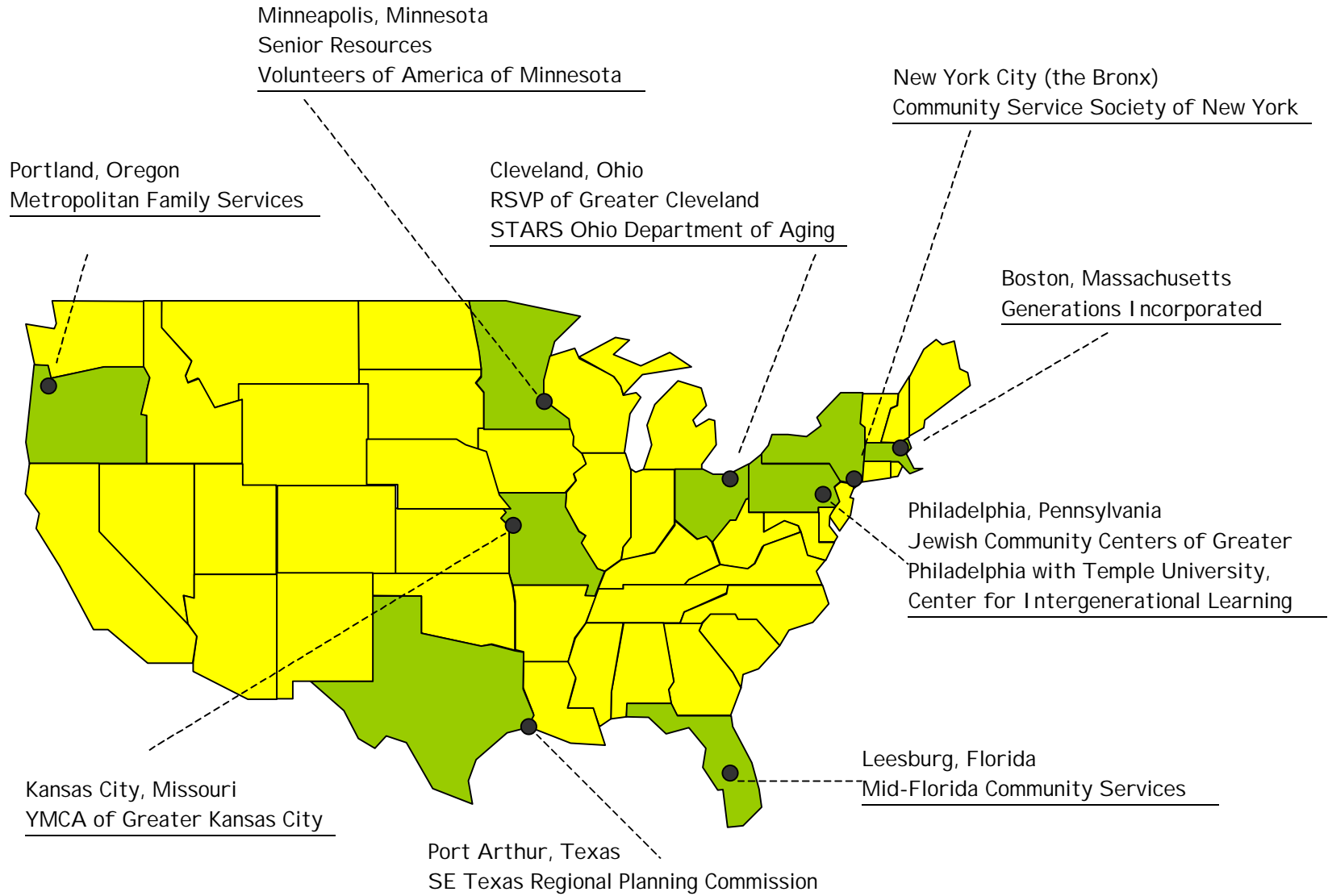
More than one school was selected in each city, and the selection of the schools to serve as SFS sites depended on the willingness and ability of the principals and staff to support a demonstration project. Schools selected were in disadvantaged neighborhoods, or had a large number of children at-risk for reading deficiency. In July 1997, the Seniors for Schools projects were underway.

The Seniors for Schools demonstration projects ...

-  *Focus on providing reading skills to young children in kindergarten through third grade*
-  *Test and refine a shared model with common core elements and an emphasis on volunteer empowerment*
-  *Implement and refine unique approaches and ideas about how to achieve literacy goals*
-  *Establish an assessment and evaluation component to measure the outcomes of the volunteers' tutoring activities*
-  *Rely on grassroots leadership and involvement, to build a network of support from people in the schools and the community, as well as parents and families, to create a connection between home, school and the community*
-  *Provide leadership and lessons learned to inform a broader national service community*
-  *Contribute to the ongoing development and success of the broader, comprehensive national literacy campaign, America Reads.*



To achieve its literacy goals, the Seniors for Schools Initiative **partners with other national service streams**, such as AmeriCorps and National AmeriCorps*VISTA, Learn and Serve America, and the National Senior Service Corps. National Senior Service Corps staff, at the Corporation's headquarters in Washington, DC, provide ongoing support and assistance to project directors and their staff in the field. Training and technical assistance providers contracted by the Corporation for National Service also provide ongoing support.

The Nine Demonstration Project Cities and Their Local Sponsor Organizations



B. Program Overview

Seniors for Schools (SFS) has been designed to recruit adults over the age of 55 and mobilize their time, talent, experience and resources to work in a variety of roles, helping children read independently by the end of third grade. Special emphasis is placed on:

-  Developing effective mechanisms that **attract and retain adult volunteers** age 55 and older, of any income status, who can provide leadership and sustained service to meet ongoing literacy goals
-  Demonstrating that service **activities of the senior volunteers directly affect student achievement outcomes**, especially those related to reading and other literacy indicators.

Core Elements. SFS implements a model with standardized **core elements**. These core elements are meant to enable optimal literacy achievement in young children, provide roles for senior volunteers as valuable resources for local schools, and build positive relationships with participating schools, families, and the community that result in a lasting partnership.

Team and Corps. An important element integral to SFS is the **team** and **corps** concept. In each school, seniors working in **teams of at least four** participants carry out the project. **All teams in each project form a corps**, and efforts are made to cultivate identification with the mission and spirit of this larger unit.



Full Members. Senior volunteers who serve **fifteen or more hours a week** are called full members and are eligible to receive a **non-taxable stipend** and other direct support **incentives** developed by the individual projects.

Associate Members. Volunteers who serve **less than 15 hours a week** are called Associate Members. Though the goal of the program is to recruit as many full members as possible, associate members are every bit as valuable to the program.

Occasional Members. There are also opportunities for members who can volunteer on a **one-time or occasional** basis. These are volunteers with special knowledge or skills to share that can benefit the program.

C. Seniors for Schools Core Elements

The core elements at the heart of the Seniors for Schools Initiative were established to guide the implementation and operation of each of the demonstration projects so that they would **share common objectives and consistent methods for achieving goals**. The core elements are:

Service Activities Focused On Reading And Literacy For Young Children

Service activities must focus on improving the reading and literacy skills of young children, kindergarten through third grade. Volunteers play key roles by working with individual **children**, supporting **families** and serving as catalysts and organizers of **community-level reading initiatives**.

Critical Mass – Number of Volunteers

Projects focus on building ‘critical mass’ in the number of volunteers working at the schools, to maximize the impact on the children and raise the profile of the senior service. The **critical mass goal** is a total of

- at least **fifteen volunteers** at one or more schools the **first year**
- **thirty volunteers** the **second year**.

Priority on Intensive Service – Number of Hours

Intensive service volunteers are the backbone of the project. Ideally, a minimum of ten senior volunteers serve **at least fifteen hours a week** during the first year and twenty hours a week the second year.

Each project is encouraged to enlist **additional volunteers** who serve anywhere **from one to fourteen hours a week** depending on their interests and the availability of appropriate assignments. Projects can also organize **episodic opportunities** where senior volunteers participate on a one-time or occasional basis.

Diversity of Participants

Projects should recruit a diverse range of participants. This includes **income level** (any income level is eligible), a variety of **ages** (55 and above), **gender** (at least one-third men), and **ethnic and educational** background. Projects are also encouraged to engage **disabled seniors**, and to recruit a mix of seniors from the **targeted neighborhood**, as well as from **other neighborhoods**.

 ***Team and Corps Concept***

In each school, seniors working in teams carry out the project. These teams vary in size, although they have a **minimum of four participants**. Efforts are made to develop **cohesiveness** within the teams through a variety of training and support activities, as well as increasing community connection to the project. **Teams are generally school-based.**


The **corps** represents the SFS teams from **all the demonstration sites in the city**. They share a common purpose and support each other, contributing to each other's work with ideas, lessons learned, and mutual support. The corps is brought together in meetings and trainings, which helps build the satisfaction of the volunteers as participants in a group effort working toward a common goal.

 ***Service-Learning***

Projects incorporate the principles of **service learning** into ongoing operations. Service learning is meant to provide opportunities for volunteers to **reflect** on their volunteer experiences and **apply insights** to their service, enhancing student and school advocacy, community issues and their own lives. Volunteers then become active participants in the reflection process as **facilitators and discussion leaders**.

The projects must provide the senior volunteers with opportunities to make significant contributions to the schools and the children in those schools, and through those opportunities, maximize their satisfaction and performance.



 ***A Range of Incentives***

Senior volunteers serving fifteen or more hours a week are eligible to receive a **non-taxable stipend** and **other direct support incentives** developed by individual projects. The stipends range between \$100-\$200 a month.

Additionally, projects are encouraged to also develop incentive options for senior volunteers who serve from one to fourteen hours a week such as **enhanced health insurance, education credits, and transportation.**

 ***Leadership Development***

Projects are encouraged to develop **leadership roles** for senior volunteers within the project. Possible roles for senior volunteers include:

- **Site managers**
- **Team leaders**
- **Volunteer coordinators**
- **Parent group coordinators.**

Other leadership roles can be developed through the initiative of the senior volunteers themselves and approved by the school.

 ***Collaboration***

Whenever possible, projects should seek out opportunities to **collaborate with other Corporation for National Service programs, as well as other volunteer groups.**

The ideal project would include **some combination** of Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America volunteers, with full-time members of AmeriCorps*VISTA, AmeriCorps*State/National, or AmeriCorps Civilian Community Corps.

Additionally, projects will **collaborate with other community partners** such as literacy groups, youth serving organizations, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and other senior citizen groups, PTAs, churches, universities and colleges.

Private corporations are also willing partners in providing program support and are potential funders for building ongoing sustained programs.

 ***High Quality Volunteer Experience***

The projects must provide the senior volunteers with opportunities to make significant contributions to the schools and the children in those schools, and through those opportunities, **maximize their satisfaction and performance.**

Volunteers must be effectively recruited, well-prepared and trained, appropriately assigned, provided with clear information about their roles and responsibilities and given a range of supports to **help them maximize their contributions.**