

I. COMMON START-UP ISSUES AND CONCERNS

If you have tried to build castles in the air, your work need not be lost – that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

Henry David Thoreau

This chapter examines the tasks that have to be addressed by project directors as they prepare to establish a literacy program. Those project directors working on an existing project will also benefit from the information presented here because it has been gathered from the field and is based on the actual experiences of project directors and their staffs who set up and operated the demonstration projects. This chapter should help you prepare and plan for the expected – as well as the unexpected – tasks of laying a solid foundation for your Seniors for Schools project.



The sample issues and concerns in the following charts are meant to offer a basic guide for addressing obstacles in operating your project. There are many other issues and concerns when developing your program, and you will have your own good ideas for solutions. Our goal is to highlight common concerns and problem areas identified by the project directors themselves, and offer you a starting point for finding your own approach and solutions.



Beginning a New Literacy Initiative

Issue/Concern:

You feel some anxiety about starting a new project. As the project director, you may even feel overwhelmed with the task set before you and feel some hesitancy in knowing how to begin.

Possible Solution(s):

Do not hesitate to seek help as you launch a new initiative, or continue to develop an existing program. You have many resources for information and problem-solving, beginning with the Corporation for National Service in Washington, DC, where you have support in the National Senior Service Corps offices. Consult your sponsor organization and school partners as well. Keep them abreast of issues and activities. The more you involve others in your project the broader your foundation for the project will be. **Seek advice and assistance as often as you need it.** Chapter X at the end of this guidebook offers a list of people and resources to contact for program support.



Administering a Grant Authored by Someone Else

Issue/Concern:

Frequently, the author of your program's grant is a writer, not a project director or manager. The author has identified key goals, objectives and implementation procedures that you may not have had a hand in designing.

Possible Solution(s):

It is okay and often necessary to tweak goals and objectives to fit a more realistic and manageable timeline and milestones for your project. You may amend the written goals and objectives based on your knowledge of your program and goals.

“Wonderful things can happen on any project. Some wonderful things will happen by sheer luck, no matter what you do. But even more wonderful things can happen when you and your team think carefully and energetically about the project beforehand – and during, and afterwards.”

“The Cycle of Questions,” in the Team Leader Toolkit, Resources for Service Learning, AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps



Securing Staff to Administer the Project

Issue/Concern:

When projects are selected, there must be qualified people available to do everything from helping answer the phones when recruitment calls begin to come in, to assisting with financial matters regarding the new grant. Thus, project directors often must move quickly to secure new staff that can help administer the project.

Possible Solution(s):

Expect an adjustment period for organizing any new project, but **plan for staffing early** in your preparations. Your sponsor agency may have staff who are able to help you out. **Ask advice from your sponsor.** They are already established in the community and will be a valuable resource for information and ideas for getting things done. They also fund your program and will be able to identify what the budget resources are for hiring support staff.



Recruiting AmeriCorps*VISTA Volunteers

Issue/Concern:

Within the SFS Initiative, one critical resource is VISTA volunteers. VISTA volunteers are excellent staff members. They serve in leadership positions and assist with everything from recruitment and volunteer selection to site-based management issues and long-term project sustainability. Some areas of the country find it easier to recruit VISTA volunteers because the desirability of their region means that there are more VISTA volunteers available.

Possible Solution(s):

Be sure to apply early to CNS for a VISTA volunteer. You may also try to recruit your own VISTA(s). Project directors report using strategies such as local cable-access stations, community newspapers, and church associations, as well as recruiting volunteers from within their own staff. Seek to partner with **the local VISTA office** and enlist their help in finding someone willing to serve with your program.



How to Communicate Your Project's Needs to a School Principal

Issue/Concern:

1) When a project is new and lacks a track record, project directors can sometimes feel reluctant and uncomfortable being up-front and direct when identifying project needs and expectations for the school's role.

2) Although school staff may have verbally committed to providing key resources when the project was drafted, they are slow to deliver on their promises. Project directors often feel that principals are already overworked and overextended. They hate to "burden" them with these matters and ask that the school's promises be kept.

Possible Solution(s):

Develop a **partnership agreement** or **Memorandum of Understanding** with each school. Outline what will be provided by your project, and by the school. Also establish a timeline for meeting obligations, and benchmarks for measuring the success of the partnership. This will provide a shared understanding of expectations.

While it is necessary to respect the workload of your partner school staff, remember that your goal is success for the children. To be effective, your project must be fully supported, nurtured and valued by the school. So apply pressure, but do it with tact and diplomacy. Acknowledge the principal's and staff's other obligations, but remind them of the needs of your program.



Recruiting Senior Volunteers for the Project

Issue/Concern:

When project directors begin new projects, especially projects for older Americans, there is sometimes a feeling of uncertainty about where to go to recruit this population group. For projects that do not normally work with this population of citizens, recruitment can be a difficult undertaking.

Possible Solution(s):

It is expected that the availability of seniors for volunteer work will be **different in every community**. It may take time to identify recruitment strategies that prove successful and to understand the best ways to market your project. **Talk to members of your sponsor organization** about seniors in their community and ask them for ideas on how they may be targeted.



How Much Time and What Topics are Essential to Volunteer Orientation and Training

Issue/Concern:

There are so many things that project directors feel are important for volunteers to know and understand about their work. This is increasingly true for projects working in literacy and education.

Project directors may struggle with everything from determining appropriate training topics and trainers, to the length of time to be devoted to topics.

Another factor with training is learning how to provide critical information and avoiding information overload for participants.

Possible Solution(s):

Recognize first of all that **your project is unique**. There will be similarities in projects, but no two projects are exactly the same, nor are their needs exactly the same. Look to other projects for examples, **survey your volunteers** and find out what knowledge they feel they're lacking and look to your partner schools to be resources as well. **Schools** using particular reading models or approaches **will most likely want to provide some sort of training** to volunteers. Create a training outline or **training plan** for the year.

Remember, **not every topic can be covered** during the initial orientation period. **Build in trainings throughout the year**, and make these trainings relevant to the needs of the children, volunteers and overall project goals.



Identifying Appropriate Space within a School for Tutoring Sessions

Issue/Concern:

Space is at a premium because schools are frequently overcrowded. Volunteers may initially find they must hunt for a space to work one-to-one with children and to consistently call their own.

Not having consistent space for tutoring and volunteer meetings can cause volunteers to feel that the project lacks structure and organization.

Possible Solution(s):

Although space for volunteers may have been identified in the original proposal, without a doubt it must be addressed again when actually beginning work in a school. Be polite and respectful when working with school administrators, but **be very clear** in letting them know that **space is essential** to working with children and to the success of the project. The space does not need to be fancy, but needs to be **set apart in some way**, with some sense of privacy so there are not a lot of distractions.

Finding solutions to issues and problems may be one way to activate the team concept among your volunteers.



Comparing Literacy Models and Wondering if Your Project Made a Good Choice

Issue/Concern:

As project director, you attend your first conference with other project directors managing similar projects. You hear about all of the other wonderfully rich literacy models. Then you begin to question what you're doing at your own site and become concerned about its effectiveness.

Possible Solution(s):

Learn from others, borrow from others, but recognize and appreciate the literacy work that is unique to your project. **No two projects are exactly the same.** Every school system and district is different and they have selected particular literacy models for their own reasons. For more detailed information on the subject of choosing a literacy model, see **Chapter V** of this guidebook.



Effectively Coordinating Teams to Develop Team Work and Team Spirit

Issue/Concern:

Once volunteers have been recruited, how do you get them to work together? How do you go about developing strong teams and building strong leaders?

These are common concerns among project directors, because approaching the training of adults to work effectively in teams can feel very different from training young children or teenagers.

Possible Solution(s):

Recognize that not all volunteers are going to instantly appreciate working in teams, or the team building process. And understand that not everyone on a team will be the best of friends. Recognize that **building a team will take time**. It helps to enlist the senior volunteers themselves to help in this process. **Identify leadership roles for volunteers** to assume, and graduate to.

Know what your desired outcome is. **Look around for skilled team-building resources and trainers**. As you plan your overall project, incorporate team building and group work into the plan. Team building is not something that should be introduced once a year and then forgotten; it should be a continuous thread that runs throughout your project.



Evaluating and Assessing the Impact of the Project's Work

Issue/Concern:

With any literacy project, it is sometimes difficult to know what to measure, how to measure success and how to communicate the progress of the project.

Possible Solution(s):

There are many ways to demonstrate the positive impact of your project. Work with your school principal or leader to **identify areas of your program that will be evaluated by the school**. Communicate what you need to know and mutually decide when this information will be provided to you. If possible, arrange in advance to work with a **local evaluator** that can provide assistance to your project. This evaluator should be willing and able to have an ongoing relationship with your project.



Transporting Volunteers to School Sites

Issue/Concern:

Volunteers have been recruited, selected and assigned school sites. Now, how do volunteers get to schools that may not be within walking distance or perhaps across town in an unfamiliar neighborhood?

What about transportation costs?

Possible Solution(s):

Every project may have a different and unique approach for addressing this matter. Some projects may opt to arrange and pay for a **taxi** to the training or school site. Other projects may **refund bus/subway fare or mileage** to and from their school site. Volunteers who drive may be willing to **carpool** with other volunteers.

There are a variety of options to explore. Finding a solution may be one way to begin activating the team concept among your volunteers.



*In the Tools and Materials section of this chapter we provide information and insight into more possible solutions. Two documents we provide are **examples of project directors' concerns at different stages** of operating a Seniors for Schools project. The first is a list of project directors' questions and comments compiled by the Southern Regional Council for the initial project director orientation, which took place at the very beginning of the Seniors for Schools demonstration. Rather than provide answers, the project directors' questions and comments are presented here to provide a perspective on the experience of starting-up new programs, and to provide focus for finding some answers in this Guidebook to the questions and concerns that new project directors may have. Another document is a collection of project directors' comments about their progress and lessons learned, gathered at the end of the first six months of the demonstration.*

*We have also included **a self-assessment tool** for tutoring programs, prepared by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, one of the America Reads LEARNS partners. The tool is a series of questions that will serve to identify important, fundamental aspects of a tutoring program, and to highlight expectations for program achievements. Use the questions **as a guide** for starting up a program. Then, after your program is underway, use it again as an assessment tool to gauge how well you are doing.*

Sample Tools and Materials:

Common Start-Up Issues and Concerns

LIST OF TOOLS AND MATERIALS

1. Recipe for Success
2. Where We Are at the Beginning – Project Directors’ Orientation
3. Outcomes and Progress: Early Lessons Learned
(Summary of Project Directors’ Comments
Seniors for Schools Winter 1998 Project Directors’ Training)
4. Lessons from the Field
5. Implementing Changes from Lessons Learned
6. Self-Assessment Tool

****A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS****

Start with...

1 Leaps in Literacy School

ADD

2 Full-time AmeriCorps Members

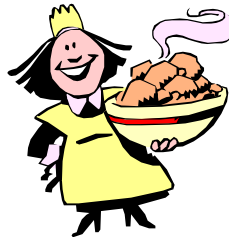
PLUS

3-4 Half-time Senior Leaders

PLUS

15-20 Well-trained volunteer Reading Coaches

SERVE



5 stipended volunteers allow for **15** non-stipended volunteers to provide a total of **30** minutes of one-on-one tutoring for **30** students, **4** days a week. Stipended volunteers create an individual session plan for each child and each Reading Coach each day.

WHERE WE ARE AT THE BEGINNING: SENIORS FOR SCHOOLS ORIENTATION MEETING

(What project directors & program managers reported before the first demonstration school year began.)

EVALUATION

- “I want to know what’s expected in terms of evaluation.”
- “Please be clear about the evaluation process.”
- “With regards to evaluation, what is appropriate at the local level?”
- “I want to clarify the evaluation process.”

REPORTING

- “Is there a form/format that we are going to use for our quarterly reports?”

LITERACY AND READING ISSUES

- “What’s the minimum number of hours volunteers need to spend with children in order to have an impact? How do you balance volunteers and the impact question?”
- “I want to learn more about reading.”

THE SENIORS FOR SCHOOLS PEER NETWORK

- “What are the other projects doing? Can we work together on some things?”
- “I want to learn about materials that are available that other Experience Corps programs may have used.”
- “I want to hear about general problems that Experience Corps programs may have had and learn from them.”
- “I want to hear about obstacles and successes that others have experienced.”

- I want to feel even more motivated to get back and dig into this work! I want some inspiration from Experience Corps people.
- “What are other people doing?”

WORKING WITH PARENTS

- “How have other projects approached the parents of the students they are working with? What was their approach?”
- “It’s a challenge getting parents involved in helping with reading...especially when they can’t read themselves. Can anybody help with parent involvement?”

TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- “To whom will I go with my training needs?”

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

- “Did anybody have problems getting volunteers to commit to 15 hours per week?”
- “How did you handle transportation for the volunteers?”

SPECIAL FEATURES OF SFS PROJECTS

- “I want to know the lay of the land.”
- “I want to learn about practical benchmarks we can use in our work.”
- “I want to collect as many tools as I can.”
- “Who are the new partners? What are our roles and responsibilities? What is expected of us?”

- What type of sensitivity training do I need to work with older volunteers? Is there a need for diversity training?”
- “What are other models?”
- “What projects will I want to get to know better?”
- “I am new to Senior Corps. What logistical differences should I know about?”
- “I am interested in hearing how the Experience Corps projects view this project.”
- “The schedule - because there are a lot of players, can we coordinate when site visits and conferences will be?”

“WHERE ARE WE IN OUR SENIORS FOR SCHOOLS WORK?”

- “We are almost ready to go! We only need to recruit a handful more volunteers.”
- “We are waiting to hire a project director.”
- We are waiting until after the Orientation Meeting next week to get started. We want to find out important information first.”
- “We are recruiting volunteers.”
- “We (recently) had a big meeting to discuss recruitment. We have a six-month start-up plan. We will have a recruitment kick-off within the next three weeks.”
- “We have hired a bookkeeper, and are meeting with our partner organizations. We’re also working on job descriptions, and are waiting anxiously to meet with our principals to find out what classes and teachers we will be working with.”
- “We just hired our project director last week.”
- “We are planning and getting set up in our school. We’re partnering with non-school entities for adult education.”
- “In September we will 1) assess classrooms, 2) work with teachers, 3) train volunteers.”

**Seniors for Schools Winter 1998 Training
Outcomes and Progress To Date
A Discussion Facilitated by Tom Endres, Director
National Senior Service Corps**

Summary of Comments from Participants

Literacy Outcomes and Progress to Date

Massachusetts and New York - Using Effective Tutoring Models

- Massachusetts - the Reading Coach™ model, with intensive service volunteer team leaders coordinating teams of part-time reading coaches
- New York - the Book Buddies model, with team leaders in key roles such as child assessment, development of lesson plans. The project also implemented an after school tutoring program.

Ohio and Oregon - Building Book Collections for Schools and Children

- Ohio - "Books for Kids" - a campaign to collect donations of new or "gently used" books as well as cash contributions to purchase books for children and school libraries. So far, donors include corporations and businesses, volunteers, and neighbors.
- Oregon - Partnership with "First Book" to work in coalition with other literacy leaders to receive donations of new books for the children and schools served.

Pennsylvania - A Menu of Literacy Rich Activities and Initiatives

- It is important to include literacy-rich activities that also tap parents.
- Literacy activities can be effective in non-school settings, such as places of worship or summer camp.
- Activities that promote literacy include storytelling, theater troupes, post office (letter reading/writing), homework help, and GED assistance for the parents of the students.

Texas - Working With Schools

- It is important to support volunteers in school settings and look for ways to overcome possible structural barriers (time constraints, space, classroom dynamics). For example the project utilizes retired teachers now to do child assessment.

Literacy Outcomes - Lessons Learned

“What can we teach/tell others about Seniors for Schools and Literacy Outcomes?”

Positive Lessons

- Learning and realizing the benefits and pay-offs of being flexible and patient when working with schools.
- Tutoring programs endorsed by schools or school districts allow volunteer efforts to support the structure and design already in place, rather than starting from scratch or adding an extra layer.
- The strengths of a tutoring program with a solid structure - which allows milestones and measurable outcomes for the children.
- Learning to look at and address underlying or hidden obstacles to child literacy achievement, such as an anti-truancy program coordinated by the volunteers.

Challenges

- Managing the ongoing coordination of a decentralized project and balancing all of the pieces and interests (e.g. keeping the volunteer happy, the teachers informed, the students on task and on target, the principals up-to-date).
- Knowing that adopting a pre-developed tutoring program model (such as Book Buddies or Reading Coach™) will sacrifice some of the flexibility and creativity of the overall program.

Comments

- Literacy outcomes can and must extend beyond one-on-one tutoring.
- Volunteer eagerness to "help this child" or "make this child read" can eclipse other non-tutoring literacy goals. Volunteers want to maintain the single focus and see results.
- It is important to know when the project is strong enough to "selectively broaden" to encompass the activities beyond the tutoring - when is the optimal time to expand in new directions.

Outcomes Related to Volunteers

Projects are Building Strong and Effective Teams

- Teams are an avenue to allow the volunteers to share information, trust one another, and work as a group that supports the goals of the projects, as well as providing peer support.
- Team building is very important to the volunteers and a powerful incentive to participate and stay involved with the project.
- Strong teams allow volunteers to take initiative in activities and empower them.
- Strong teams are a boost to attitudes.
- Team building resources are sometimes easily available and free in local communities. For example, in Portland, Oregon, Portland State University offers diverse topics and leadership development opportunities to the volunteers.
- Team building promotes group relationships and belonging that can be as strong and powerful as family ties.

Volunteers Can and Do Offer Beneficial Suggestions and Ideas

- Experienced and involved volunteers will begin to suggest training topics and needs, and it is important to listen to these requests carefully and act on them, as many times, the volunteers are right.
- Volunteers may begin to suggest activities they envision would be helpful to advance the project outcomes (such as using stories to demonstrate and reinforce literacy lessons), and often have good ideas that should be encouraged.

Team building resources are sometimes easily available and free in local communities. For example, in Portland, Oregon, Portland State University offers diverse topics and leadership development opportunities to the volunteers.

Outcomes Related to Teachers and Schools

- Teachers are noticing and commenting on how good the volunteers are with the children. (Florida)
- Schools now want more Seniors for Schools volunteers. One principal made the comment, "It's like they have been here forever!" (Massachusetts)
- Volunteers, teachers and reading specialists are now communicating on a regular basis. (Missouri)
- Volunteers can help teachers "see" a child through a broader lens. For example, a first grade teacher concentrated on a child's self-esteem/confidence due to a Seniors for Schools volunteer. (Ohio)
- Greater success in accessing school liaisons, who are key factors in success and acceptance of the project in schools. School coordinators attend team meetings, volunteer leaders attend teacher debrief sessions, and important information is shared and relationships formed. (Oregon)
- One of our principals would like a volunteer for every classroom! (Pennsylvania)

**Lessons from the Field:
National Service Projects Learn with Their Partners
By Gale Greenlee**

from *The TUTOR*, Summer 1999

As much as funding and a good supply of books and volunteers are necessary for a strong program, the **relationships you form** with communities, schools, parents, and volunteers are directly related to your program's success. Here are tips from the field that may help you create productive partnerships in your program.

√ **ESTABLISH COMMON GROUND AND TRUST.**

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the partnership between Metropolitan State University (MSU) and Dayton's Bluff Elementary started when MSU's president and the school's principal met at a community function.

"The two agreed that their schools should work together for mutual benefit and a partnership was formed," says Meredith Oyen, program coordinator of **America Reads at MSU**.

She attributes the success of their collaboration not only to a meeting of the minds, but also to the fact that "the relationship was built on trust and open communication."

This trust and honesty came into play when MSU proposed a program model best suited for a different population. According to Oyen, school officials responded saying, "Take it to the suburbs. This won't work on the East Side." Trusting the school's judgment and "respect [ing] the depth to which they know and understand their constituents," Oyen and MSU reshaped the program to fit the schools' needs.

√ **COMMUNICATE!**

For Alison Groene, a VISTA working with the **America Reads program at Southwest State University** in Marshall, Minnesota, communication is central to the program's success. Early on, SSU formed an advisory committee of school and university staff and community members to map the program's direction. "Understanding everyone's expectations was necessary, as was determining collectively whether the expectations were realistic," says Groene.

Knowing that teachers have limited time, Groene also developed a "Teacher-Tutor Journal" to facilitate communication between school staff and volunteers. Tutors can ask questions about a student's progress, and receive suggestions from teachers.

√ CLARIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

Foster Grandparent (FGP) Special Projects Coordinator Rileyne Brown also stresses the importance of open communication, especially in terms of clarifying each partner's role. "I think for a volunteer program to be successful, the partners need to clearly state at the beginning what the objectives are, and what each partner will contribute."

As part of FGP's agreement with schools in Roseville, California, the school district offers meeting space, finger printing, and special tutor trainings. In return, the **Roseville Reads Literacy Project** provides tutors and intergenerational bonding.

√ INVITE PARTNERS TO SHARE THEIR EXPERTISE.

Caitlin Scott is the assistant director of youth education for **America Reads** at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. She describes the partnership with Oberlin Public Schools as "many voices creating a rich harmony."

What's their secret? Teacher participation plays a vital part. "When looking for tutoring techniques to make a program really sing, we encourage America Reads initiatives to go to their local master music-makers—the teachers," says Scott. Every other week, a participating teacher conducts a tutor workshop on reading assessment, children's developmental levels, and art and writing in tutoring sessions. "Tutors, who are trained by the teachers they work with, are best able to harmonize their one-on-one tutoring with the child's classroom setting," notes Scott.

√ PRACTICE TEAMBUILDING AND RECIPROCITY.

Richard Cone is director of **USC Readers**, which sends Federal Work Study students from the University of Southern California to tutor at local elementary schools. To strengthen partnerships, Cone tries to build cohesion between tutors and school staff. "We work to convince school staff and our tutors that we are all on the same educational team, and that our tutors are there to augment their work," says Cone.

In the spirit of reciprocity, USC Readers does more than just tutoring. "We attend functions and serve on advisory boards," he says. "We remind ourselves that we are there to serve them, their faculty, their children. Integrity is the best foundation for any relationship."

√ **PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR YOUR PARTNERS.**

In Philadelphia, VISTA Emma Lattimore teamed up with a counselor at a local elementary school to create a family literacy program. To involve parents as partners, the **National School and Community Corps** offers weekly sessions for them to learn reading strategies. Parents receive a copy of the “book of the day” for their home libraries. The local book bank also provides books for teachers and families.

One mother noted, “This program has taught me something new. I’m reading better and my children are reading more.”

Building relationships with a school or community member takes time and effort. Remember, showing appreciation for your partner’s contributions and celebrating your collective successes can strengthen your program and foster student achievement.

New and Improved!
Implementing Changes from Lessons Learned
Cleveland Seniors for Schools

By Sarah E. Torian

from *The TUTOR*, Fall 1998

The State of Ohio took control of the Cleveland School System in 1995 due to bankruptcy and mismanagement. As a result, several elementary schools were closed to reduce costs, leaving many children in overcrowded schools. This fall Cleveland's mayor was forced to assume control of the school system. This instability in the schools increases learning difficulties for students, over 85 percent of whom live in poverty and 72 percent of whom live in single parent homes. These difficulties are evidenced by only 15 percent of Cleveland's fourth grade students passing the fourth grade proficiency test in 1997.

How can children master the skills and receive the encouragement and resources needed to learn when they face obstacles such as these? A group of dedicated and determined volunteers are trying to find the answer to that question. These volunteers are a part of Cleveland's Seniors for Schools project, sponsored by the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of Greater Cleveland (RSVP) and funded by the Corporation for National Service.

In four schools—chosen because of their high poverty rates and low proficiency scores—thirty-four Seniors for Schools volunteers are providing one-on-one tutoring to more than 150 children. These volunteers also have organized a "Books for Kids" program.

As a part of this program the volunteers hosted four book fairs, giving more than 1000 gently used books to more than 450 children. Schools' libraries were given over \$2500 worth of new books and all students tutored received a new book as well.

As Cleveland SFS Project Director Joy Banish gears up for the project's second year, she feels that she and the volunteers are ready to extend the successes they achieved last year. With a year's worth of wisdom and experiences, the project is utilizing some new local resources and making strategic changes to be even more effective.

Laying the Groundwork

As a new project entering four schools simultaneously, the Cleveland volunteers faced many challenges. "I felt like I was trying to be in four places at the same time!" Banish exclaims. "I spent most of my time driving all over town." To make better use of her time, she recruited a VISTA volunteer and acquired an AmeriCorps member from a partner agency to serve as volunteer coordinators at the schools. The two coordinators manage activities in two schools each. They provide support and encouragement for the tutors, manage supplies at the schools, and act

as the communication link between teachers, tutors, and project staff.

Communication is Key

Realizing that effective communication with the school is a key to success, the volunteers identified one person (community aide, reading teacher, or head teacher) in each school to be the key contact. They sought a person who was knowledgeable about the school and whom they could usually manage to reach by phone or in person to answer questions. Doing this made managing all of the “little” problems that arise much easier. Originally, the coordinators’ main contact was the principal but, says VISTA Jennifer Spitler, “The principals are very busy. Working with a reading specialist instead works well—someone who has more time to give us some direction.”

Does this mean the Cleveland teachers and principals were left in the dark? Of course not! Keeping them well informed is essential. “The best way to communicate with teachers and principals is to use their staff mail boxes,” says Banish, “They can reach us using the mailboxes too.”

Preparing Tutors

Recruiting and training tutors is another big challenge for new projects. “It was difficult for us to find five volunteers able to serve fifteen hours a week in each school at first,” reports Banish.

Churches and libraries are where they found the most success. “We sent a letter to every church and synagogue in

the entire county, asking them to make an announcement during service or post information.” Convincing the local paper to write a feature story on the project and its volunteers helped attract tutors too.

With 13 volunteers returning from last year and 20 beginning this year, Banish has an extensive orientation and training program planned. New tutors will attend a one-day orientation explaining the Seniors for Schools program and basic literacy information. The following two days the new tutors will be joined by veteran tutors as they hear speakers, ranging from library and school staff to local literacy program personnel. The new tutors will also role play with the returning volunteers.

Effective Tutoring and Student Selection

The Cleveland volunteers also learned that it is imperative to have an effective system for selecting the students to be tutored. Last year, the principals chose the teachers they would work with, some of whom were not cooperative. This year, they have drafted a “Memorandum of Understanding,” stating what the tutors will provide and what the schools will provide, and had the principals sign it.

After many discussions with the schools’ four principals it was agreed that all future tutoring would occur outside of the main classroom. Seniors will tutor in the hall or the library. “Tutoring inside the classroom is very distracting to both the children in the main groups as well as the children in the small groups being

tutored,” explains Seniors for Schools tutor John Jackson who began tutoring last November because he wanted to provide a good role model for the children. He adds, “I came from a poor environment and worked my way through college. Learning that barriers can be overcome helps to build up their self-esteem. They can do things and need to know that.”

Defining Goals and Showing Results

Literacy project goals should be very realistic and concrete. With the help of a technical assistance coach from STAR (Support and Training for Assessing Results), a Training and Technical Assistance provider for evaluation, Banish is reworking the project’s goals. “[The STAR coach] asks me honest questions I need to be asked, ‘Why did you decide to do that particular project?’ and ‘What do you hope to achieve by doing this?’ This makes me evaluate the need for doing it, and who will benefit from it.” STAR has provided Banish with step-by-step instructions and samples of other project’s goals and objectives as a guide.

The Cleveland volunteers are also overhauling their assessment methods. Last year, the teachers completed reading skills assessments. It was a time-consuming and inefficient process,

making it difficult to assess the benefits of the project. The results were there, but were difficult to see, a necessary requirement for any literacy project. This year, the project will use the Brigance Diagnostic Comprehensive Inventory of Reading Skills assessment method,⁴ a standardized test that measures literacy knowledge through reading comprehension, word recognition, word analysis, and reading readiness. The volunteers will conduct the Brigance test in September as a pre-assessment and will repeat it in January and June. If a student’s scores have improved significantly by January, they will return to their regular class schedule.

Networks of Support

One area where the tutors found a great deal of success last year is in building a strong network of support from people in the schools and the community. The local public libraries have been involved with the program from the beginning. The children’s library staff and the community outreach staff attend every event hosted by Seniors for Schools, providing information on literacy and what the libraries have to offer parents. With approximately fifty libraries in the area, this is a significant network of support.

Lessons Learned by Cleveland's Seniors for Schools

- √ Tutoring projects don't just work with students and volunteers, but work with entire school staffs, parents, local agencies, and the *whole* community.
- √ Organization and flexibility are keys to effectiveness.
- √ Having a good staff is critical. One person can NOT do it all.
- √ Start small. Make your goals realistic and attainable. It's better to do one thing and do it well than to try to do many things and not complete them.
- √ Work only with schools and teachers who are willing to work with you and to help you.
- √ Screen volunteers carefully. Don't accept volunteers in order to get the numbers. Make sure they are qualified and dedicated.
- √ BE PATIENT! You can't do it all in one year, but you CAN do it!

How's Our Program Doing?

A Self-Assessment Tool Designed for Use
by All Program Stakeholders

from The TUTOR
Summer 1999

Ask key partners (including volunteers) to complete this survey. In addition, provide a blank sheet of paper and ask each partner to jot down specific examples of what the program does for each numbered item.

Building Relationships with Stakeholder Partners: Does Our Program...

1. ...involve stakeholders (partners) who have something to offer that enriches the relationship?
Yes Some No
2. ...involve stakeholders in planning, implementing, and monitoring the program?
Yes Some No
3. ...have partners at all levels who clearly agree on the mission of the program and on their roles and responsibilities? (Do you have a written "cooperative agreement" or memo of understanding (MOU)?)
Yes Some No
4. ...practice reciprocity? (Does your program have benefits for all partners?)
Yes Some No
5. ...maintain open communication links with your stakeholders?
Yes Some No
6. ...take time to create and maintain a cohesive team (i.e. members, staff, and stakeholders)?
Yes Some No

Communicating with Key Constituents: Does Our Program...

7. ...designate a liaison (contact person) for ongoing communication between school/site and program?
Yes Some No
8. ...select tutors based on their appropriateness for working with children?
Yes Some No
9. ...monitor tutors' effectiveness and provide them with ongoing support?
Yes Some No
10. ...provide clear guidelines and liability requirements for adult/child interaction?
Yes Some No
11. ...involve parents and students in planning and in program activities?
Yes Some No

Setting Realistic Goals: Does Our Program...

12. ...work toward reasonable, realistic, and achievable goals? (re: number of students served, reading achievement expected?)
Yes Some No
13. ...know our goals and have frequent times set when we measure whether we are meeting them?
Yes Some No

Facing Our Problems: Does Our Program...

14. ...seek honest feedback and constructive criticism from stakeholders and the site community?
Yes Some No
15. ...have a process for solving challenges that everyone knows about?
Yes Some No

Sharing with the Community: Does Our Program...

16. ...enjoy support from the community?
Yes Some No
17. ...share successes with the community? (Good public relations.)
Yes Some No

Adapted by SRC-Learns from
"Growing Your Tutoring Program—A Checklist for Self-Reflection," by Nancy Henry at NWREL-LEARNS