

VII. PARENT AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents.

John Boulby

In this chapter we explore the importance of achieving **parent involvement and community support** for your literacy program.

Reaching out beyond the school is essential for the long-term success of your program. First and foremost, for a systematic, structured tutoring program to have a lasting effect in a child's life, parents must become involved. When parents become involved, a child's efforts to learn to read will be reinforced in the home. The child will feel that the time spent with a tutor is valuable and learning to read will be a reward worth working for.



During the two-year demonstration phase, the project directors realized that most parents want to become involved in their children's learning experience, even though at first it may have appeared otherwise. The parents of at-risk children are frequently "at-risk" themselves – living at or below the poverty level, holding down more than one job, unable to speak English fluently, even unable to read. They are intimidated by schools and teachers – perhaps even by books. It is the project director's task to reach out to parents and make them feel welcome "as-is."

Literacy is also a community issue. Ordinary citizens should feel connected to the schools in their community, and take pride in the accomplishments of a program that raises the reading level of its children. When community leaders and organizations understand the value of your literacy program, they become stakeholders in the program and take pleasure in its success as an accomplishment of their own. They are then more likely to support it over the long-term.

This chapter highlights strategies to promote parent participation in their children's reading efforts, and also addresses activities that build connections to the community.

The chapter offers guidance to help you:



Assess the current level and potential of parent involvement at your school(s)



Devise methods and strategies to draw parents into the literacy program



Develop methods and techniques to involve individuals and groups in the community as stakeholders in your program.

A. Thinking Critically about Parent Involvement

An important factor to consider when working with children is the significant role and impact parents have on developing attitudes and skills for reading achievement. A child's guardian, whether a mother, father, grandmother or aunt, is their first teacher, and after the teacher and tutor have done their good work, the parent or guardian provides the environment where the good work can take hold and grow. Or diminish for lack of nourishment.

Children who are literacy deficient usually live in a home where the parents are preoccupied with issues of day-to-day survival and feel little connection to the school. The project director's challenge is to find the most effective ways to reach out and connect to these individuals in ways that will draw them into the literacy program's activities and offer them the satisfaction of becoming a part of their children's learning.

“Various barriers stand in the way of successful tutor-parent connections. Frequently, parents are intimidated by schools and school personnel...To overcome these barriers, it is important for the tutors to constantly reach out to the parents.”

from *The TUTOR*, April 1998

Opportunities to involve parents and guardians can be incorporated into a literacy program's design at the outset. Developing productive relationships and partnerships with parents can be addressed in many ways, depending on the depth of your program, and the extent to which your school partner is interested in creating a link with parents.

Before initiating these relationships, ask yourself and key partners these questions:

- As the project director, how do you define parent involvement: **what is your vision** of parent involvement? What are realistic expectations?
- What are the **priorities of the school** principal/administration? Where does parent involvement and support fall on their list of priorities?
- Is **current parent involvement** low, moderate or high at your partner school?
- Do these **activities fit well** with the needs of your school?
- Is there a **particular project or activity of special interest** to your school principal/school leadership that can be a vehicle for parent involvement?
- What **types of parent involvement activities** are of interest to you and your program?
- What types of activities **already exist** and appear to be running well at your school?
- Will activities you plan **depend solely on your program's resources**?
- How would an **activity be sustained** if your program were to cease to exist?

Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook

- Have your **ideas and strategies for parent involvement been approved** and supported?
- What is your **school's policy** regarding you and volunteers **communicating with parents**? Is there a **process** they would like you to follow?
- What **resources or assistance** can your school partner offer your program **to maximize outreach efforts**?

These questions should help you explore this topic. You may not be able to fully respond to each one. The goal is to bring these issues to the forefront as you plan. If you get stumped on a particular question, jot down questions or concerns you have. You can use members of your staff and partners to assist you in sorting and shaping your ideas and vision.

B. Parent Outreach and Relationship-Building Strategies

To involve parents in their children's education, and to draw them into activities hosted by the school, devising effective methods of communication will be an ongoing objective. Letters sent home are a convenient means for establishing contact. But remember that paper sent home from school can get lost in the shuffle even in homes where parents are actively involved in their children's learning. Try to make letters or memos to parents attractive, simple, and easy to read – make them noticeable. Because teachers routinely need to send things home and get evidence that something has been seen by a parent, enlist the knowledge and experience of your partner teachers to identify the most effective means of getting written communications through.



Whatever response you have from a parent, act on it! Follow-up. Don't be afraid to **start with small efforts**. Positive feedback from only a few parents helps create a "snowball effect," with **word of mouth circulating among parents**. If one or two parents get involved, it reduces anxiety and the various barriers to becoming more involved at the school.

If your partner schools already have established a parents' group, be sure to make contact with the parent leader(s) right away...and frequently thereafter. Offer help at the same time you ask for help from them.

Your program can also be a vehicle for facilitating **coordination and collaboration** among the **various volunteer programs** in a specific school. You might enlist the participation of an AmeriCorps team, or other community volunteers to plan parent involvement strategies. In some cases they may already have developed **lines of communication** into the community, and may already know what works and what doesn't in reaching and involving parents.

1. General Principles for Getting Parents Involved

- **Start early.** Try to devise methods that involve parents in the decision-making process from day one.
- **Appoint a parent liaison.** Choose someone on the school campus or in the community who will serve as the main contact for parents.
- Show **respect to all parents**, regardless of socio-economic class, education, race, or culture.
- Use **videotapes, cassette tapes, and/or home visits** to reach parents who may experience challenges with literacy.
- Offer **refreshments/healthy snacks** or a light meal during meetings.
- **Keep the lines of communication open.**
- Encourage parents or other family members to take **leadership roles.** Establish a core group of parents who can train or reach out to others.
- **Provide translators** for parents who speak other languages. Produce written materials in the languages represented in your school(s) or area.
- **Make meeting times convenient for parents**, whether in the evenings, after work or on Saturday mornings.
- **Reward parent involvement!** T-shirts, pins, and ceremonies are always good!
- **Provide transportation assistance** if needed.
- **Be willing to listen to a parent!**

2. Strategies that Worked in Getting Parents Involved

During the two-year demonstration period, SFS projects used the following outreach and relationship-building strategies with success:

Strategy:



Have **volunteers** venture out into local communities to **speak with parents.** Encourage volunteers to introduce themselves and **share information about your program** and the types of activities they are doing with the children.

Strategy:



“**Good News Notes**” can be sent home weekly to parents just to report the progress of their children. Parents need not take any action. This is a tactic to **engage parents’ attention** and demonstrate how their children are making progress in reading and school.

Strategy:



Progress reports also can be sent to parents every 2 weeks, consisting of 7-10 clear and simple statements. Parents are asked to sign and return. A “treasure chest,” from which the children can select a prize, is used as an incentive to get signed reports returned. In 100 percent of the sites SFS projects learned that receiving parental permission for a child’s participation was not a barrier. Any difficulties anticipated did not arise, and often parents reacted positively to their child’s involvement with the program from the beginning.

Strategy:



Coordinate a **book fair**. After collecting books, **invite parents** to bring their children to school to pick out books together that they can keep to read and share at home. Be sure when parents and children arrive that you have **snacks** such as muffins, juice or fruit to offer, as well as a **goody bag** filled with important information about your program. This is a **wonderful project for volunteers to coordinate and manage**. It provides opportunities for the volunteers to meet and get to know each other.

In 100 percent of the sites SFS projects learned that receiving parental permission for a child’s participation was not a barrier. Any difficulties anticipated did not arise, and often parents reacted positively to their child’s involvement with the program from the beginning.

Strategy:



“Mother’s Day “or “Father’s Day” **Breakfast**. Have children in your program invite their parent(s) to attend a Mother’s or Father’s Day event. The event does not need to coincide with Mother’s Day or Father’s Day, or even in the month of May or June. Send out written invitations to parents inviting them to come, to be recognized and learn more about the types of programs their child is involved in.

SFS volunteers in Philadelphia who hosted a parents’ breakfast personally made phone calls to invite parents, in addition to sending out letters of invitation. Children should be encouraged to bring a grandparent, older sister or brother, or the person that they would like to invite to the event. Family participation is the primary goal and provides the opportunity to connect with the child’s home.

C. Connecting With Your School's Surrounding Community

A **significant stakeholder** in your program is **the community at large**. Involving local community members helps strengthen the program and can improve and strengthen program impact.

All communities have significant **resources** that can become involved and be appreciated. For example, the school's surrounding community may have local **senior living centers** or **community organizations** that may be interested in partnering with you. Senior living centers may agree to assist in promoting your program and recruiting volunteers. **Local hospitals** may provide free health care screenings and workshops.

Community Mapping

A strategy to help you uncover and explore local resources is **community mapping**. Community mapping involves uncovering, researching and exploring various elements of a community such as businesses, social and civic organizations, schools, colleges and universities.

This also includes important **community leaders and activists**. Often these institutions and individuals are deeply rooted and committed to making an impact in the lives of children. Chapter VIII, which discusses sustainability of your project, will explore this further.

Begin by identifying all **individuals, businesses and institutions** who you think may be a stakeholder in the community. Think big and broad. As you make your list, jot down ways that you think they could be a resource to your program.

For example, your **local super market** is usually part of a national chain that has a budget for community affairs. They may be willing to provide **free refreshments** for a school event or after school program. Local merchants might be willing to **donate prizes** for events or motivational activities. A store owner might have something on the shelves that doesn't sell well, but that would make a treasured prize at a school function. Remember that merchants can take tax deductions for donations and reap the benefit of positive community relations.

Or think about **local universities and colleges**. A professor or graduate assistant may be willing to provide **training for volunteers**. Some colleges and universities courses actually require public service as part of the curriculum, or offer extra credit for volunteer work.

Try not to put any limits or parameters on this activity. You want to **create a comprehensive list**. This is something that community members can be part of. They also understand the workings of their community better than anyone does.

Always look for opportunities to forge new relationships, but not only when you want to ask for something. **Invite members of the community** to events where they can participate and learn more about your program.

D. Lessons from the Field

A project director for a national service program that provides citizenship classes, legal assistance, and tutoring to refugees learned to identify the community organizations that could strengthen the program's tutoring efforts. During its first year, their America Reads project served more than 40 children from Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Rwanda, and more. To effectively serve such a diverse population, the project drew upon a network of local organizations, partnering with many of the refugee organizations in the area. The **project director was new** to the effort and **sought out those who could provide more expertise** than she had at the time.

“For me,” she says, **“it’s a question of who has been doing this longer than I have and how can they help me?”**

The project also forged strong relationships with **several professors at a local college**. The support of the professors enabled them to recruit a large number of volunteers. One professor arranged for members of the project staff to speak to his classes about volunteering. He even **agreed to offer students extra credit** if they volunteered regularly. The idea caught on and six other professors are now helping the project recruit volunteers.

“They were some of our best volunteers last year,” says the project director. “This step gets them in the door, but after connecting with the children, they keep coming—even after their classes are over.”

The Seniors for Schools project in Massachusetts -- Leaps in Literacy – operates in Boston and Brockton. The project represents an ideal of cross-stream participation in that Senior Corps, AmeriCorps and VISTA volunteers work together to achieve literacy goals. Many of the schools in the Massachusetts project are located in the South Boston area, where the project leaders have been fortunate to establish **a supportive relationship with the City Councilor at Large**. He is a former resident of the area and feels a strong commitment to the community. With his help, **the project has been connected to civic groups throughout the city**. The City Councilor at Large even organized a recognition event for local volunteers, and he comes to all of the project's events.

While it may not always be possible to establish such a positive relationship with a local government official, those who serve their community in the political arena have a great stake in the success of community schools. They may be **excellent conduits in reaching out** and making connections to community groups that will support your project.

The Massachusetts project has also benefited from the participation **of volunteers who are long time residents of the area**, some of whom were even born there. Long-time residents have in-depth **knowledge of the community**, and can help you identify ordinary citizens and citizen organizations who may support your program.

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Kansas City Seniors for Schools project director Kimberly Jordan credits the strength and success of her program to “Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!” **Relationships with the community and funding organizations** provide both financial and technical support for the Senior volunteers. Even before Jordan joined the project in the summer of 1997, a strong foundation for the project had been laid in its relationships with local organizations. A vital relationship that forms the structural base of the senior volunteers’ success is with the project’s sponsor and parent organization, the YMCA of Greater Kansas City. The YMCA Vice President of Public Affairs drafted the proposal that originally brought Seniors for Schools to the Kansas City school system. Before writing the proposal, representatives of the YMCA met with Principal Earl Williams for input. Knowing the schools, he contributed a design for the project, while the YMCA was able to bring expertise in working with volunteers and an understanding of youth development.

The YMCA continues to handle the business-related aspects of the project—stipend payments, screening of potential volunteers, and grant writing. The YMCA also supplies free memberships, Sprint phone cards and movie passes as incentives to bring Seniors into the classrooms.

For other literacy projects seeking support from community organizations or foundations, Jordan suggests, “Invite them to come by, to observe the director, the tutors with the children, tour the schools, talk with the principal. Keep them aware of who you are and what you are doing. Then, when you do seek funding, they will know that your project is a worthwhile program to fund.”

Paraphrased from an article in *The TUTOR*

“The children have to have the connection between home and community in order to succeed in school.”

Angie Taub, Project Director, SFS Portland, Oregon

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 books 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.

The TUTOR, Fall 1998

E. Connecting With the Media

Getting publicity and media coverage for your project is one way to generate community interest in the good work that you do, and promote the support of your activities by community leaders, local organizations, and private corporations that may provide future funding. It is also an excellent means of attracting potential volunteers for your project.

Dealing with the media is pretty straight forward. You provide them with information about the program and they present it to the public. However, careful preparation of information released to the media is critical, and timing and good relationships with the media are very important, too. Here are a few tips for promoting your project and project events:

Timing. ...is everything when it comes to attracting coverage, especially from TV. The best time to stage your events, or invite press to them, is **between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.** The later it gets, the less chance there is that new directors will have time to roll a camera crew, edit the coverage and get a story on the evening news. After 3:00 p.m., TV coverage is usually lost unless you have breaking news. Newspaper reporters also need time to gather and file their stories.

Visual Impact. When possible, attach media to an activity site, not to situations where folks stand around. TV cameras and newspaper photographers like sites where they **see people in action**. Staged ceremonies with well-known presenters can also work for you, but in general they are less dramatic visually than service people on the job.

Do a Fact Sheet. Make it easy for reporters to get things right about you and your project—do a short, simple list of facts and important names, plus a clear, brief description of your goals and activities. Be sure your **facts are correct**, and double check the **spelling** of names. Some people and groups are very sensitive to the accurate representation of their names and connections.

Select a Spokesperson and Practice Sound Bites. Identify one or two individuals who will articulate your message. Capsulize your message and get it down cold. **Practice doing interviews.** Think sound bites—you probably will be on the air for a matter of seconds—make the most of them. And have your **spokesperson on hand to greet the media** when they show up—don't leave press wandering around trying to figure out what's what—they usually have more stops to get to and won't hang around waiting for things to happen.

Use the “Daybooks”. Most larger cities have an office of the Associated Press or Reuters News Service, and every state has at least one AP office. These news wires transmit daily calendars of events, called “Daybooks.” Reporters and assignment editors check the daybooks for leads. The AP offices in large cities and state capitals often run a daybook of events throughout the state. Some AP offices run a weekend calendar of the coming week's events. Nearly all run a daily calendar. Put your event on it—call and say, **“I've got an event for the Daybook** for next Tuesday,” and find out where to fax your press release or information.

Seniors for Schools Effective Practices Guidebook

Try an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor. The editor of the editorial page is always looking for material and it is also one of the most widely read parts of a newspaper. An op-ed that explains how **your project offers a solution to problems facing the community**, and how the public can support your efforts, often will interest editors. Op-eds on service are often easy to place during the holiday season with the theme that your volunteers have the spirit of giving all year long.

Phone Follow-Up. You may fax or mail material so it arrives several days before your event, but always follow with a phone call a day or two before. Ask for your newspaper's **city desk**—at radio and TV stations, ask for an **assignment editor in the news room**—but make sure you talk with someone—news rooms get lots of faxes, so your release or advisory may not be on their radar screen. Improving our schools is a solid news peg and media will want to know what you are doing.

Find Friends in Media. Begin watching news shows and newspapers with an eye out for reporters who buy into what you are doing—who cover service, education, child and youth issues and related activity. Then make sure these folks are alerted to your events. It is good to **call reporters or broadcasters** to say you found a story of theirs interesting and that you have a project that might be of interest to them in the future.

It is also good to have media representatives on your program's council or advisory board. If your program has a newsletter, be sure to send it to editors, radio and TV news directors and reporters who cover efforts like yours.

Dealing with Reporters. Remember that you are never compelled to answer a reporter's question. If you are uncomfortable with a question, simply say that you don't know the answer, but will find out and get back to them. Avoid responding to political questions about AmeriCorps or the Corporation for National Service. If asked a political question, you can say that your program is about service to the community and go into all that you are getting done.

Refer political questions to the Public Affairs Office at the Washington, DC, headquarters.

“Project Director Rob Tietze (Seniors for Schools, Philadelphia) said his program put a ‘bug in the ear’ of one of the feature writers at the Inquirer, and the resultant article generated about 25 to 30 responses from interested older adults. Even better, the article grabbed the interest of two local television stations, which are now doing news stories on the program.”

The TUTOR, September 1997



Sample Tools and Materials:

Parent and Community Outreach

LIST OF TOOLS AND MATERIALS

1. A Letter from Tutor to Parent
2. Sample Progress Reports to Parents
3. Reading Challenge Book Form
4. Reading Confidence Survey – Parent’s Assessment
5. Parent Outreach Activities
6. Letter From Child to Parent
7. School Home Links – Help With Reading at Home
8. School Home Links – Pasting the Parts of a Flower
9. Student Book Log
10. Getting Parents Involved
11. Building a Winning Team: Effective Connections with Parents
12. Learning How to Reach Out to Parents
13. Making Connections in a Rural Community
14. Integrating Community into Training

**Seniors For Schools
Crispus Attucks School
1400 Prospect
Kansas City, MO 64127
816.418.3918**

October 1, 1997

Dear Parents(s)

I am writing to introduce myself as the new Reading Tutor for your child. I will be working with your child three days per week, for 45 minutes per day.

We will begin with testing and continue until Friday, October 10. I will be sending progress reports home every 2 weeks, as well as letters concerning up-coming events at school.

I look forward to talking with you soon. If you have any questions, I can be reached at the number above.

Sincerely,



Read to Succeed

Seniors for Schools Student Progress Report

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Volunteer Name: _____

Teacher Name: _____

What I've been working on with your child: _____

Volunteer Comments: _____

Parent Comments: _____

Please return to school with your child. Thank you.

Seniors for Schools Student Progress Report

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Volunteer Name: _____

Teacher Name: _____

What I've been working on with your child: _____

Volunteer Comments: _____

Parent Comments: _____

Please return to school with your child. Thank you

YMCA of Greater Kansas City
Seniors for Schools
Student Progress Report

Student Name _____

Tutor Name _____

Date _____

Dear Parent(s):

Regarding your child's progress in reading...

_____ (Has) or (has not) worked cooperatively with tutor

_____ (Has) or (has not) followed directions

_____ Has good work habits through neatness
and/or trying very hard

_____ Has shown academic improvement

_____ Has shown improvement in _____

_____ Likes learning new words, ideas or concepts

_____ Participates in oral language development and exchange
with tutor

_____ Student arrives at sessions ready to work and learn

Tutor comments:

Parent comments:

Parent Signature: _____

**Seniors for Schools Progress Report
Crispus Attucks Communications and Writing Magnet**

Child's Name: _____

Teacher's Name _____

Tutor's Name _____

Date: _____

Dear Parents:

Regarding your child's academic progress in reading...

- _____ has _____ has not completed assignments
- _____ has _____ has not participated well in learning activities
- _____ has _____ has not worked cooperatively with tutor
- _____ has _____ has not completed home work
- _____ has _____ has not followed directions
- _____ has _____ has not listened attentively
- _____ has good work habits through neatness
- _____ has good work habits through trying very hard
- _____ has shown improvement
- _____ other _____

Comments: _____

Teacher's signature

Program Director's signature

Parent's signature

Parent's Comments: _____

Reading Challenge Book Form

Name: _____ **Room #:** _____

Date: _____ Title: _____

Author: _____ Illustrator: _____

of pages: _____ Characters: _____

What happens first? _____

What happens in the middle? _____

What happens last? _____

Parent Signature: _____

Reading Challenge Book Form

Name: _____ **Room #:** _____

Date: _____ Title: _____

Author: _____ Illustrator: _____

of pages: _____ Characters: _____

What happens first? _____

What happens in the middle? _____

What happens last? _____

Parent Signature: _____

**YMCA of Greater Kansas City
Seniors for Schools
Reading Confidence Survey- Parents**

Pre or Post- (Circle)

School _____ Date _____

Child's Name _____ Grade _____

Parent Name _____

Teacher _____

Tutor _____

Dear Parent:

Your child has been working with a Seniors for Schools Reading Tutor. Let us know how the tutor is helping your child with reading. Please take a moment and answer the following questions.

How is your child doing on:	Low -----High			
1. Interest in books (looking at pictures, selecting books to read)	1	2	3	4
2. Participating in reading (reading to his/her self, reading to siblings, and reading to parents, or being read to).	1	2	3	4
3. Interest in learning new skills (word lists, vocabulary, spelling, writing)	1	2	3	4
4. Finishing homework	1	2	3	4
5. Grades in spelling, language, and writing	1	2	3	4
6. Overall confidence in reading	1	2	3	4
7. Other comments:				

from the Parent Outreach Handbook

Experience Corps, Philadelphia

Developed by Temple University
Center for Intergenerational Learning
1601 N. Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19122
215.204.6970

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

PARENT BREAKFAST DAY: Three times a year (November, March, and June) we will schedule a parent breakfast. Parents and volunteers will meet and share news about the Experience Corps children.

PARENT LETTER (written by children): At the end of every month we will send home a letter telling the child's caretakers, in the child's own words, how he or she is improving. This goes home in their homework book. Keep it simple and fun. Add pictures. Let them decorate a letter!

PARENT INVITATIONS: In conjunction with our Post Office Program, we will send letters home at the time of the Parents' Breakfast, written by the child inviting parents to come out to the breakfast. These letters will be sent through the US Mail! (We will provide envelopes and stamps).

This will be done three times a year: November, March and June.

DECEMBER - "Welcome to Winter" Festival:

- ❄️ Parents invited to various Cluster Schools or their local Library.
- ❄️ Corps Members will model how to read to children.
- ❄️ A book prize will be given to all parents that attend Festival.
- ❄️ Parents will receive a certificate upon completion of the program.
- ❄️ Parents will select books and take out library cards for themselves and their children.
- ❄️ Refreshments will be served.

The following letter is a sample of the monthly Parent Letter children will write. Parents are an important part of our program.



Parent Letter

Dear _____

Look what I am learning at school!

I can _____

I know _____

We read _____

I am happy to be learning!

Love,

Developed by Temple University
Center for Intergenerational Learning

School Home Links

Child's name _____

Dear Family: Your child is learning that English reads from left to right and top to bottom.

Read the story "I Like to Play" (below) to your child.

Put the eraser end of a pencil or your finger under each word as it is read.

I Like To Play.

I like to run

I like to skip.

I like to hop.

I like to jump.

I like to play.

Child's signature _____

Parent's (Learning Partner's) signature _____

School Home Links

Dear Parent:

Your child is learning about plants at school. For fun, cut out these words and paste them next to the parts of the plant.

FLOWER

STEM

ROOTS



Parent's signature _____

Child's signature _____

Getting Parents Involved

by Gale Greenlee

from *The TUTOR*, Winter 1998

Whether your program focus is early childhood literacy, middle level, or secondary school education, parent involvement is critical. Connecting with parents allows programs to better meet the needs of students and the community. But how do you get parents' support and engage them in your program?

"The first thing it takes is personal communication," says Janet Mason, Director of the University of South Carolina-AmeriCorps program. "Parents need more than just letters sent home—especially if you work with poor or disenfranchised communities."

While assistant principal at Lindbergh Middle School in Long Beach, California, Mason worked with approximately 1400 students, representing more than 17 languages. Mason's school provided translators during meetings to keep all parents abreast of important information and to allow them to have a voice in voting on key issues in the school.

Mason also stresses the importance of parents taking an active role in any program involving their children. "It really empowers parents when you say to them, 'I need your help.'"

Hope Wallace, in New Haven, Connecticut, agrees. As parent coordinator for LEAP (Leadership, Education and Athletics in Partnership), it is her job to reach out to and involve parents in the program. In the past

year, LEAP, an organization that serves children ages seven to fourteen living in urban areas of Connecticut, conducted a survey of parents' attitudes and interests. "The parents were eager to get involved to empower themselves and to become change agents and advocates for their children," she says.

Following the survey, LEAP, which utilizes AmeriCorps members as junior and senior counselors for younger students, started weekly workshops for parents in New Haven. Some sessions focus on the politics of the school system, while others may center on leadership development. Parents meet every Thursday and graduate after eight weeks. Other LEAP sites hold monthly meetings to update parents on their child's progress.

While responses to the parents' activities have been positive, actually attracting parents hasn't been easy. "It's a great task to pull parents out of their homes or jobs to be involved [in the program]," Wallace remarks.

As a result, LEAP provides incentives for parents to participate. Parents who complete the eight-week program participate in a graduation ceremony, and even took a field trip to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in New York City. Enthusiasm among the first group of graduates who completed the program in 1998 was so high that the parents chose to continue with further parent advocacy training.

Building a Winning Team: Developing Effective Connections With Parents

by Sarah Torian

from *The TUTOR*, April 1998

“Trying to educate children without the involvement of their families is like trying to play a basketball game without all the players on the court.”—New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley

Parents are a primary influence in a child’s life. They are the first educators that children encounter and they remain after teachers and tutors leave. Parents hold the potential to provide children with a wonderful example of the importance and value of reading in daily life.

A partnership between tutors trained in teaching literacy and **parents who are experts on their own children** holds the potential to enhance any tutoring program. For these reasons, making strong connections with parents is an ideal part of successful tutoring.

Home Visits

The AmeriCorps members at Casa de Amigos, an organization providing health, dental, education, and social services to over 11,000 people each year in Midland, Texas, have made working with parents and families a priority in their literacy and education programs.

The six full-time and eight part-time Members who work at Casa de Amigos **conduct home visits to inventory the kinds of reading materials** available there, lead weekly parenting sessions that involve both parents and children, and offer one-to-one tutoring.

AmeriCorps Program Director Ludi Navarro says, “The children need to know that the parents are supporting

them and encouraging them in their learning. But **the parents gain as well.** They gain respect for the children as well as themselves, and self-esteem and pride.”

Various **barriers** stand in the way of successful tutor-parent connections. Frequently, **parents are intimidated** by schools and school personnel, need to focus their concentration on the basic needs of survival, and/or **do not have access to transportation** to attend meetings with teachers and tutors.

Navarro views the parents’ **low education levels** as the greatest barrier to successful parent connections.

“When the parents have not attained a high level of education,” she says, “they don’t emphasize it in their own lives or in their children’s lives.”

Reaching Out to Parents

To overcome these barriers, it is important for the tutors to constantly reach out to the parents. **Writing personal notes and progress reports** to convey **good news** can help to alter an impression of school personnel only being there when a child gets in trouble. The Seniors for Schools volunteers in Kansas City send personal notes home each Friday, with the teacher’s note, informing the child’s parents of events at school and their child’s progress.

Taking the time to call to report progress and good news also helps to break down barriers.

West Virginia's APPALREAD program is a partnership organization of AmeriCorps, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, local schools, Head Start centers, and non-profit organizations. APPALREAD members **schedule weekly visits to the homes of tutees** whose teachers feel could benefit from increased interaction with tutors. The **tutors bring books and activities** that the parents can do with their children and encourage the parents to make reading and learning a fun and interesting activity. They listen to parents describe interests of their children, and teach the parents how to **create literacy friendly environments** in their own homes.

The APPALREAD volunteers are members of the communities they serve and, therefore, can connect with parents more easily than teachers. During their first family visits, the volunteers concentrate on **developing a relationship with the parents and the whole family**. "We don't go in with any agenda," says reading coach Susan Cassell. "Without building a relationship first, you can't **get across to the parents the importance of reading.**"

Building Parental Networks

Holding **meetings** at the schools or local community centers is also a good way to break down the barriers between parents and tutors and teachers. Forum **topics** range from **effective parenting** and **job training** to available community services and **stress and anger**

management. Tutors can use these meetings to teach parents, who frequently have limited reading skills themselves, **how they can help their child increase her literacy skills**. And they can **listen to parents** describe the ways they help their children. It is important to hold these meetings in **locations and at times that are convenient** to the parents.

Focusing these meetings around social activities ensures an informal, relaxed atmosphere. **Potluck dinners**, for example, featuring various ethnic and cultural foods, can be both educational and fun. **Wearing name tags**, identifying the parents by the names of their children, and scheduling time to share information about themselves and their children help to break the ice.

Providing **transportation and child care** for parents demonstrates that the volunteers value the presence and involvement of all parents.

A "**community walk**" by teachers from Bowie High School in El Paso, TX proved very effective in reaching out to the families of students. Teachers, many of whom did not live in the neighborhoods around the school, **demonstrated their interest in the community** by walking approximately thirty city blocks through housing projects and past community centers, social service agencies, and local landmarks, stopping along the way to interact with parents and residents. The walk culminated in a **lunch** for parents, teachers, staff, and administrators at the high school where they discussed ways to continue and strengthen the relationships developed that day.

The one-on-one tutoring project at Casa de Amigos, which is in its second year, had difficulty persuading parents to embrace the project initially. Even though they were referred to the program by their children's teachers, the **parents were frequently hesitant about becoming involved.**

By **visiting the children's homes** to discuss with the **parents on their own "turf"** what the program could offer their children and the importance of one-on-one support, the tutors alleviated much of this initial hesitation.

Of course, **witnessing the effects in their children's reading skills and attitude was probably most instrumental** in changing the feelings of hesitation to feelings of enthusiasm, resulting in the majority of the tutees in the second year of the program being referred by other parents.

Learning How to Reach Out to Parents

Service-Learning and Family Literacy
by Andrae England and Bob Seidel
from *The Tutor*, Winter 1998

Effective service-learning strives for both **positive outcomes** for community members and **quality learning** for program participants. **Each reinforces the other:** relevant and constructive preparation and reflection activities for participants can help maximize benefits for the community, while such positive outcomes reinforce meaningful learning for participants and keep them coming back. This is certainly true in tutoring relationships. Since involving the student's family in the learning process will likely increase tutoring effectiveness, **tutor preparation and reflection should include a focus on the role of the student's family.**

The following points and questions may help programs plan tutor preparation and reflection, taking family issues into account:

- **Winning the respect** of parents and guardians for the tutoring program will depend on the program showing respect for the culture and circumstances of all involved.
- Such a tutoring program nevertheless always **keeps the child's education in the forefront** of program planning and implementation.
- Being **"family friendly"** is essential for an effective tutoring program.
- Parents and guardians must feel welcome and supported if they are to be supportive.
- **Children pay attention** to the program's interactions with their parents or guardians.
- Tutoring programs often bring together people from **different classes and cultures**. Tutors need to become as aware as possible, starting with preparation activities prior to meeting the children, of the pressures and circumstances of the children's households and communities. Time availability—to read with children as well as to meet with teachers and tutors—varies considerably across classes. The very meaning of "time"—what it means to "spend time" or to be "on time"—differs across cultures. We all need accountability on our commitments, but the same words may have different meanings to people with very different backgrounds and experiences.
- Tutors and program administrators should **respect any skepticism** that they encounter and develop ways to encourage parents and guardians to trust that tutoring can yield real learning even when conducted outside of school without a fully-licensed teacher.

- **What does it mean** to be a parent or guardian in different class and cultural contexts? Programs that have tutors who are parents may find it helpful to have them share experiences with tutors who are not parents.
- Calling parents or guardians to a “meeting” or “appointment” can prove challenging. These two words may themselves **seem threatening rather than inviting** to some. It may be helpful, especially initially, to **meet in a familiar place** in the community, such as a church or neighborhood library, rather than on an unfamiliar college campus or even, in some cases, the children’s school. The initial meeting should perhaps include explicit discussion of the relationship between school and family.
- **Demonstrated tutor engagement**—commitment to regular tutoring sessions for at least a semester—is crucial to winning parent or guardian support and involvement.
- Tutors need to be ready to address challenges presented by **dialects spoken** in the children’s homes that may be unfamiliar to them. Tutors need to develop skills to promote children’s ability to read standard

English effectively without attacking, belittling, or challenging their culture and traditions.

- **When the children’s first language is not English**, tutors need to respect the tension between helping them to have a broader range of opportunities by mastering English and maintaining their cultural traditions.
- If tutors find themselves in situations where they want to **ask the children to translate** in a conversation with parents or guardians whose English mastery is poor or nonexistent, it is especially crucial to support the children as active, conscious participants in the conversation.

This list of issues and ideas is not exhaustive. We intend it to suggest some of the kinds of concerns that tutor preparation and ongoing reflection should address in order to make the program effective for both tutors and their students.

from *The TUTOR*, Winter 1998

Working in a Rural Community: Florida Seniors for Schools

The Leesburg (Florida) Seniors for Schools project is unique among the nine projects in that Leesburg is not its focal point of operation. “Although the project is called Leesburg Seniors for Schools, Leesburg is only one of the locations in which we work,” explains (Project Director John) Fuller.

“We like to think of this as a county project since we are trying to make **an impact in the schools of the entire county** and not be limited to one small city.”

Being stretched throughout the large rural Lake County area provides a challenge because of the absence of a centralized framework in which to provide the tutoring services. Rather than one large metropolitan school system within which to work, Lake County has numerous small towns. As Fuller explains, “Being scattered in these various towns makes it difficult because there is less ownership of the work. ”

The Lake County project has responded to this challenge by devising a recruiting plan in cluster areas around the schools. They focus their recruiting efforts for each school to the area around that school. This strategic recruiting also applies to VISTA selection. By recruiting and selecting volunteers who live in the communities surrounding the schools, the project is, again, increasing its sustainability. **If serving at the schools is convenient and if the seniors view the students and schools as a part of their own community, they are more likely to continue their efforts year after year.**

In a county with such a large percentage of seniors like Lake County, nurturing the involvement of its older citizens is a double bonus. Not only are we providing successful, skilled tutors to fill in the gaps of crowded schools, but we are also keeping a group that may not have personal connections to the local school systems informed, aware, and involved.

“We are building advocates for education,” Fuller asserts. “They see how tough it is for teachers and kids. They buy into it and want the schools to be better and be better supported. It provides more support for the schools when issues come up—like on the ballot.”

Integrating Community into Training

by Dan Balón

Taken from: Training Briefs

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MOSAICA

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NOTE: In *Training Briefs*, MOSAICA uses the term *member* to refer to individuals providing service in National Service programs.

Community involvement and partnership are key to the success of National Service programs. The best way to show members -- and the community -- the importance of working with the community is to incorporate the community into every aspect of your program, including your training -- from pre-service training and continuing through in-service and close-of-service activities.

Members are adult learners who need training that is practical, realistic, and relates to their service in the community; members also need opportunities to learn about and to build trust within the community. Incorporating the community in your training improves training effectiveness and enriches your program's relationship with the community.

Members will see the natural link between training sessions and practical connections to the community, feel strongly invested in the communities they serve, and genuinely appreciate the value and assets inherent in the community. Show members your respect for the community in one easy way: demonstrate it! Read on for some reminders on how to integrate community into training.

- **Invite guest trainers from the community.**

Always look first to local experts — agency staff, community volunteers, community residents, etc. — who have relevant knowledge and experience to provide skills training for your members. For example, ask a public official or local leader to take the lead on topics such as where to access services [in support of your program, such as transportation for volunteers, or how best to approach parent and community outreach].

- **Involve community resource people.**

Beyond your program's training sessions, identify local residents (i.e., people within the community) and community service providers (i.e., people who serve the community) to serve as resources for additional skill-development opportunities that expand on topics of interest to members. For each training topic provide a list of local experts to serve as "resource people."

Consider a variety of individuals with specific experience and skills and ensure that they are willing and able to serve this role. Ask local leaders and resource persons to assume visible roles (e.g., keynote speaker, graduation guest, brown bag lunch participant) at your kick-off ceremony, in-service training, and continuation-of-service events. Throughout the year, they can serve as resource people and role models for members for continued community service.

- **Incorporate the community into training activities.**

Throughout the year, use community-based examples in your training sessions. While including these examples makes sense for some content-specific skills training topics (e.g., parent outreach, public safety skills), also consider community-based examples for general skills topics (e.g., group problem solving, professionalism). For example, with the topic of conflict resolution, create a role-play scenario that builds conflict resolution skills based on a situation that may arise in working with community residents or can access services or local demographics.

Fantastic guest trainers can be found “right in your own backyard” if you know where to look. Think creatively about where community-based experts may be and be resourceful about how to find them. Of course, after locating effective trainers, you need to actively manage the planning process and set clear training expectations (see the April 1998 *Training Brief*, *Guest Trainers: Ensuring Success*).

Below are some places where National Service programs have found effective guest trainers.

- **Your Own Sponsor Agency.**

Potential guest trainers may already be within your parent agency staff. Do you need a trainer to provide site-specific information and resources (public safety procedures, child care laws, literacy techniques, etc.) to members? Use the expertise within your agency; colleagues can be excellent sources of knowledge and are more likely than outsiders to understand the service needs of your sites. Seek out a seasoned staff person or perhaps ask a board member who can speak from real-life experience and understands community-based activities.

- **Community-Based Organizations and Leaders.**

Within the neighborhood, look to nonprofit community-based organizations that provide services (tutoring, after-school programs, job training, housing, etc.) and/or community advocacy (on the environment, AIDS, health promotion, etc.). Service providers have staff with varied skills and lots of experience working with particular populations and institutions, such as schools. Advocacy groups frequently have skills in community organizing, volunteer generation and management, and working with the news media. Service clubs (Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, etc.) may be able to supply personnel with expertise in general skills such as communication and the ethic of service. Religious organizations — churches, synagogues, service groups — often provide social services (food banks, counseling, child care, etc.) and can share their experiences and provide suggestions on reaching the populations they serve. You can also ask these organizations to identify community leaders with expertise in topics important to your program.

- **National Service Community**

The National Service community can be a training resource gold mine. Look to Corporation for National Service staff, your program officer, and staff from other National Service programs in the area. National Service colleagues offer an understanding of the Corporation structure and policies (history, goals, member professionalism, etc.); they may also have direct community-based experience with particular service needs — as former program staff of community-based agencies or National Service members. They are familiar with national service program approaches and tend to know experiential training techniques that maximize participant learning

Also, keep in mind former members and volunteers, who bring field experience and first-hand knowledge of program sites (community leaders that are willing partners, volunteer recruitment lessons learned, political issues that promote community buy-in, etc.).

- **Government Agencies**

Public agencies at all levels house experts in various disciplines who may have a stake in connecting with community programs. Good examples include police departments and housing authorities. Your regional Census office can provide an expert to train members in finding and understanding demographic statistics. The mayor's office can speak about the area or community "master plan," which may include growth, change, or rejuvenation, such as new schools or school repair, housing developments, service programs, etc.

- **Local Schools**

Local community colleges, adult education centers, vocational schools, and secondary high schools offer varied educational and training opportunities and skilled presenters. College and university faculty and staff have access to the newest research and information (family literacy methods. In addition to trainers for your program, many of the resources listed above can also provide access to free or low-cost training facilities!