

# BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF READERS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS AND TECHNOLOGY

Collaborating with other groups interested in literacy is the secret to this library's success. A coalition that began nine years ago is still going strong, with valuable lessons for others to follow.



In 1989, the Greensboro Public Library launched the Community of Readers, a new coalition to promote reading and literacy in our country. We invited everyone—the school system, the community college, the health department, other literacy providers, bookstores, afterschool tutoring programs, the Y's, local businesses, United Way, a hospital, etc. To our amazement, they all came and they are all still coming nine years later. The success of this coalition underscores the value of community collaboration and non-traditional partnerships.

As communities become more fragmented and literacy funding more scarce, it is very important that literacy work becomes more community-based and more collaborative. The public library is uniquely positioned to create an atmosphere of collaboration among literacy providers and other stakeholders. Partnerships and coalitions not only allow you to reach more learners in your community, but they also bring greater political support, resources and funding to your library.

## SOME USEFUL FACTS

- Many community-based literacy providers do not have computers, software and Internet access for their learners. If your library can offer this technology to the other literacy providers, you will provide a very valuable resource for the learners and the nonprofit organizations of your community.

- There are an increasing number of web sites and software programs for adult learners. This makes your library's hardware investment even more valuable for literacy work. If you have limited funds for software, perhaps you could ask the other literacy providers to purchase the adult literacy software for the library, so that all of the learners in the community can benefit.

- In all areas of education, from preschool to adults, the traditional institutions are struggling to find ways to improve their effectiveness, particularly with "at-risk" learners. This creates the perfect atmosphere for partnerships and collaborations.

## STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

- Map the assets—recognize the strengths that you have to offer (e.g. technology, literacy collections, staff expertise, etc). Then "map" the strengths in your community (nonprofits, community leaders, foundations, etc.). This map will help you find the greatest potential for partnerships. Look for natural partners—those who already recognize the need for literacy programs, because they already see clients every day with literacy needs.

- Know your mission, needs and goals. Before you reach out to form partnerships, be very clear about your own needs. Don't form partnerships that do not help you advance your mission.

- Prepare handouts which describe your program, with an emphasis on what the program can do for the clients and for the organizations you are approaching.

- Select five to ten organizations for your initial group. You may want to target those that have political clout, can connect you with new learners or that have grassroots leadership.

- Write the director of the organization and tell him/her that you would like to explore ways that you can work together. Ask for a brief meeting in his/her office.

- Do your homework. Find out whatever you can about the organization.

- Have an upbeat meeting. Share your passion for what you do. Point out the things you have in common and particularly emphasize how a partnership could be mutually beneficial. Offer to serve on advisory or other committees of his/her organization. Ask him/her if there are other organizations you should approach. Try to leave the meeting with an agreement about a project that you can work on together.

- Repeat this process with other potential partners. Once you have "recruited" several groups, you can call a meeting of the various organizations and thus create the beginning of a "community of readers" or a literacy coalition.

(continued)

ALA American Library Association

Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) is an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

For more information, contact ALA Office of Literacy and Outreach Services (OLoS), 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

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## WORDS OF ADVICE

Partnerships cannot be sustained for long periods of time if all organizations involved do not find it in their best interest. From the beginning of the partnership, help all parties involved realize that by collaborating they can be more effective and efficient (and thus make all of their learners, board members and stakeholders happier!)

For more information, contact:

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