



Friends Groups:

Critical Support for School Libraries

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SCHOOL LIBRARY FRIENDS

There are many reasons that school libraries should have Friends groups. First and foremost, Friends groups can help provide the library with high profile within the school community and outside of it as well. As school libraries are becoming increasingly targeted for cuts and closures, librarians must rely on support from those who benefit from them (parents, students, and faculty, as well as the business community that relies on a well-educated workforce) to speak out on the library's behalf. Without this vocal support, school libraries are destined to continue the slide into marginalization (at best) and oblivion (at worst).

Beyond that, school library Friends groups – both student groups and citizen/parent groups – can help enhance your collections and services. Friends groups raise money, raise the library's profile, and can provide invaluable volunteer assistance, stretching your capacity to provide programs, outreach, and education to both students and faculty.

If you agree with any or most of the statements below, you are a good candidate for starting a school library Friends group.

- ✓ **I would like parents to appreciate how significant the library is for their children's development, and be outspoken supporters for library funding.**
- ✓ **I would like students to be more involved in the library and see it as an exciting and fun place to be.**
- ✓ **I could use more help in my library.**
- ✓ **I could use more funding for both core and non-core items in my library.**
- ✓ **I would like the community to think of us as a vital part of the intellectual resources it offers.**
- ✓ **I would like to be able to demonstrate the growth of learning inspired by our library to parents and teachers.**

GETTING TO YES: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO STARTING A GROUP

It's no secret that public libraries have increased the support they get from the community when they have vibrant active Friends groups. Academic Friends groups are being formed every day because it is clear that Friends can be highly successful in raising additional funds, raising the library's profile within the institution, and even raising the library's clout through advocacy.

For many school libraries, creating any kind of a support group must be approved by the principal (who may not be supportive of any group that might advocate for a specific cause – thereby causing conflict for the administrative budget!).

Additionally, many Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) have committees focused on raising funds for the library, or designate a portion of their funds to the library. But is the PTA alone enough to keep your library safe and thriving? Understandably, the PTA has many constituents to serve. Should they pick music over art? Drama over libraries? For what service will they provide the strongest support or will it be equal for all the entities they serve? The PTA is wonderful, of course, but they alone may not be able to save your library if it becomes assigned to the “non-essential” list along with art, drama, and music.

For way too long, school library Friends groups have been few and far between. Probably predominantly for the reasons stated above but also, in part, because school librarians are busy people, and starting a Friends group does take some time.

With school libraries closing across the country, often before parents even know they are in trouble, it’s time for school librarians (those who still have jobs!) to brush aside any concerns they have and figure out a way to get a library support group off the ground. It’s not too much of an exaggeration to say that your job may depend on it.

So let’s look at the obstacles and challenges. First, you may have a principal firmly opposed to your starting a group that may end up agitating on the library’s behalf. If this is the case, it will be important for you to alleviate these concerns from the beginning.

In making the case for support, instead of asking for a Friends group, how about a volunteer corps to help shelve books and read to kids? How benign, right? If even this won’t fly and you work in a middle school or high school library, how about developing a youth advisory committee? A group of young people who can help with the library and help promote the library to their peers? Surely a principal wouldn’t object to that.

Once you have any kind of support – er – volunteer group working for you, you have access to those who can help ensure the library’s safety in these very trying times. If you have no obstacles to starting a group, developing a Parents Friends group for financial support and for advocacy, as well as developing a Student Friends Group to increase student affinity for the library is easier than you think. It’s not a hard sell to parents and even faculty members that the richer the resources in the library, the richer the school experience will be for students.

Step one will be to raise the profile of your library within the institution and within the school community (i.e. parents and area businesses). This should be an ongoing activity, even after you have established your Friends Group and Student Friends Group.

RAISING THE PROFILE OF YOUR LIBRARY

You will have much better luck in developing both a Friends group (comprised of parents, faculty, and interested community members) as well as a Student Friends Group if you can create some energy and excitement around your library. You want to show that you are, indeed, the heart of learning at your school. Creating high profile events and getting the word out about the critical role the library plays in the learning experience will help you when you begin to form such groups and recruit members.

TIPS FOR GENERATING AFFINITY AND EXCITEMENT

- Update the library digital presence enlisting the help and ideas of students. Use all the social media available to you. Tweet new titles, start a blog, get students to like the library on Facebook, etc.
- Get suggestions from the students on favorite books in various genres for different age levels. Publish lists on the library page of the school website, and send home with children on library days once a semester. If possible print them on bookmarks.
- Have students engage in a “letter to the editor” campaign about why the library is important to them.
- For younger children: have a dress-up day as their favorite book character; take pictures for publicity. Have a parade through the school. In areas where dressing up may be a hardship, make a wall decoration of pictures that they draw of their favorites, perhaps enhanced by gluing on pieces of fabric to make them more realistic. Ask older children to help with this project, and let them earn service points, if applicable. Be sure to send pictures and a press release to the local paper – or better yet, ask the local media to cover the event!
- Create an incentive program for reading books in all grade levels. Local businesses will often give coupons good for hamburgers, pizzas, and ice cream for the positive publicity of being associated with a program like this. Ask your vendors for materials that they can donate to the cause. Use parents to ask merchants. The winners’ names should be posted in the library.
- Develop a tip sheet for parents on how they can help their children with homework using the resources available in the library. Post the tip sheet on the library’s website and Facebook page. Post it on Pinterest and send a hardcopy home with students at the beginning of the school year. Include the library’s web address and Twitter handle, and ask parents to like the library on Facebook. If you have resources available online for your students, include the information parents need to access those resources. Be sure you note that the school librarian developed the tip sheet so you get the credit!
- Sponsor an award to be given at an assembly for students in several grade levels that have helped the most, or improved the most in library use, or have helped others in the library most creatively. Ask the principal to present it and publicize the award to parents.
- Ask the PTA/PTO to provide a liaison to the library to keep them updated on the activities they might be interested in, and so you have a means to ask for help when needed. They may be interested in sponsoring mother-daughter, father-son, or parent-child reading groups. These are small discussion groups that meet monthly either in the library or at homes to discuss one book they’ve all read, chosen by the children from a list suggested by the parents with children’s input. Refreshments are always welcome.
- Ask the principal and teachers to support an “everyone reads” program on a periodic basis, where the whole school stops and everyone reads a book, including maintenance, kitchen staff, and administrators.

LONG-TERM HEALTH OF YOUR LIBRARY

Depending on what you are trying to achieve, you have an opportunity to develop two types of groups. The “basic” Friends Group is one that can raise additional funds for your library, provide adult volunteer assistance in the library or for special projects and programs, and can be advocates for ensuring that your library is well supported by the school’s administration. This group should be comprised of parents, faculty members, interested community members, and local business owners. A Student Friends group can do all these things as well (though realistically on a less significant level), more importantly *they* can help establish the library as a “cool” place to hang out and learn. The best of all worlds is to establish both – and you will see that there will be a strong symbiotic relationship between the two.

Support of the school hierarchy is necessary to go ahead even if what you pitch is a volunteer group to help in the library, and they should be made to realize that this is a means of reaching an untapped source of commitment to the school and a way to raise additional funds for the library.

ESTABLISHING A FRIENDS GROUP OF PARENTS, FACULTY, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

If you’ve been doing the work of giving your library high profile, you will probably have gained the attention of parents and faculty. Now is the time to turn that attention into membership. The easiest way to get commitment and involvement is to start with a special project. It can be as simple as raising funds for desired (but un-funded) resources – a special online database, for example, or new furniture. Having a goal to work toward will get parents, staff and others to become involved.

Determine what your goal is, be specific, then set a date and time (evening) for your first meeting. Send flyers home with the students asking parents to join you for an evening of refreshments and discussion. Call those parents who have volunteered in the past or who have been active in other school activities. Post the flyer you send home to parents for faculty to see as well and talk one-on-one with those teachers you can count on to become active. It’s an opportunity for them to help the library and to work with parents who actively care about the academic achievement of the students.

At this first meeting, work hard to generate excitement about accomplishing this initial project that you’ve identified. Be sure to use this opportunity to share with the group the importance of establishing the group as long-term Friends as well. Let them know how they can make a difference for continued fund raising, volunteer activities in the library, and for advocacy. Remind them that well-heelled and supported library directly impact student achievement.

If you can convince a core group to start an ongoing Friends Group, you’ll be well on your way to addressing those issues that keep your library from being healthy and effective. For detailed information on starting your group see Toolkit #1, “Libraries Need Friends: Starting a New Friends Group or Revitalizing the One You Have” at www.ala.org/united/friends.

Ideas for Keeping Your Friends Group Active and Effective

- Develop a plan to approach local businesses for donations and expertise, especially in technology.
- Develop a program for patrons of local bookstores to buy a book as a gift for the school library.
- Create a book/literacy promotion program.
- Hold a special fundraiser: cookbook, book fair, calendar, or rummage sale, to benefit the library.
- Bring in community groups to help with special projects as needed.
- Create opportunities for parents and community members and retirees to volunteer in the library.
- Host literary events for the school: poets, storytellers, authors, or illustrators.
- During the holiday season, raise funds by wrappings books or gifts at local bookstores or malls.
- Develop donation form to benefit library: as a member of the Friends, as a book donation to celebrate birthdays, honor roll, graduation, etc.
- Create a coalition of teachers, librarians, and administration to benefit library enhancements.

CREATING A STUDENT FRIENDS GROUP

The students who participate most enthusiastically in library activities are the perfect group to form the nucleus of the Student Friends Group. Incentives to join the group are generally modified for each age group. The social aspect is important, refreshments, however minimal, add to the feeling that this is a special event. Guest speakers from outside the school community, sharing life experiences relevant to the age group about careers, local history, special hobbies, local attractions, will make unique impressions for the group. The main thing to remember is that the students should have fun!

Along with having a good time, many schools require that their students include public or school service in their activities. Certainly, membership in the Student Friends Group should qualify them for service points for participating. In addition, if run like any “sophisticated” organization, the students will learn correct parliamentary procedure, gain leadership and planning experience, enhance their social skills in terms of working with a team, and learn how to get along with a group.

To start a Student Friends Group, ask a small core group of active library users to join you in a brainstorming session. Let them work with you in designing a first meeting that will be enticing for others. It may include a program or a special project but it should have a meeting component with an agenda geared to growing participation in the group and keeping it active. Have the core group work with you in promoting the first meeting and again, be sure refreshments will be part of the event!

Ideas for Keeping a Student Friends Group Active and Effective

- Hold library-themed contests for the whole school.
- Develop reading lists of peer favorites for each grade.
- Give Student Friends “special” volunteer jobs in the library.
- Create floats for local parades with library themes.
- Create drill teams for local parades or homecoming (book cart drill teams have been very popular).
- Develop book exchanges at the school.
- Collect book donations for homeless shelters or social service agencies.

YOU CAN DO IT!

School libraries have traditionally faced significant challenges. In addition to being chronically under-funded and under-staffed, they often do not share a place of prominence within the institution and within the school community. Too often, school librarians are not treated with the same respect for their contributions to the learning experience as are teachers, even though many school librarians have higher levels of education and training.

The more parents, faculty, and students become involved as Friends, the more they will understand the role and importance of the library in the school environment. This, in turn, will make it far more likely that administration will take notice and will work towards ensuring that the library is well funded. In addition, your work in raising the profile of the library and engaging parents, faculty, and students in its continuing well being will bring you more professional cache and credibility in the eyes of all of those you work with. Good Luck – your students are counting on you!

Appendix A

Recommended Additional Reading

Books:

- 101+ Great Ideas for Libraries and Friends* by Sally Gardner Reed, Beth Nawalinski, and Alex Peterson (available to United for Libraries members* in the Friends & Foundations Zone).
- Even More Great Ideas for Libraries and Friends* by Sally Gardner Reed and Beth Nawalinski (www.ala.org/united/products_services/publications).

Toolkits (www.ala.org/united/friends):

- Libraries Need Friends: Starting a Friends Group or Revitalizing the One You Have*

Fact Sheets for Friends & Foundations (www.ala.org/united/friends/factsheets)

- #2 Fundraising Campaigns
- #3 Checklist for Planning Successful Programs
- #5 How to Organize a Teen Friends of the Library Group
- #6 How to Organize a Friends of a School Library Group
- #7 Holding a Read-A-Thon

*See Appendix B for information about United for Libraries membership.

Appendix B

United for Libraries Member Benefits

Join today to receive the following:

FREE Newsletters!

- A subscription to *The Voice for America's Libraries*, a 24-page newsletter chock full of best practices and great ideas for Trustees, Friends, and Foundations.
- Digital access to all archived issues.

FREE Toolkits!

Access to eight in-depth toolkits (value of more than \$120), including:

- *Friends and Libraries Working Effectively Together*
- *Incorporating and Tax Exempting Procedures for Friends*
- *Tapping into the Baby Boomer Volunteers*

FREE Digital Publications!

Access to digital publications (value of more than \$150), including:

- *Making Our Voices Heard: Citizens Speak Out for Libraries*
- *Getting Grants in Your Community*
- *101+ Great Ideas for Libraries and Friends*

DISCOUNTS!

- Save \$100 on the three-part webcast series “Engaging Today’s Volunteers for Libraries and Friends.”
- Save \$10 on The Book Lover’s Calendar (buy in quantities of 30 for \$2.50 each, plus 5% for shipping and handling) and sell for the retail price of \$12.99 to raise money for the library.
- Save 10% on eligible purchases from the ALA Store.
- Save \$200 when designating a Literary Landmark in your community.
- Special registration opportunities to attend only United for Libraries programs at the ALA Annual Conference, a savings of more than \$200 over full conference registration.

AWARDS!

Members are eligible to apply for several United for Libraries awards, including the:

- Major Benefactor Award.
- Three \$1,000 Baker & Taylor Awards for Friends.
- Two \$250 National Friends of Libraries Week Awards.

Group memberships begin at \$50 per year; Friends groups pay \$50-\$125, depending on the number of members in the group. Current personal and organizational members of ALA may add United for Libraries divisional membership for \$50. For more information about membership, please visit <http://www.ala.org/united/membership>.