

BUILDING LITERACY THROUGH HOME/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

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"The teachers in the home and the teachers in the school should have a sympathetic understanding of one another's work. They should labor together harmoniously, imbued with the same . . . spirit, striving together to benefit the children physically, mentally, and spiritually." —Ellen G. White.¹

Home/school collaboration is a concept that the Education Department of Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) is eager for its students to experience and embrace. As part of their coursework, senior elementary education students enrolled in Reading Assessment class participate in Reading Buddies, an after-school program for 1st through 6th graders from Helen Hyatt and George Stone elementary schools.² Modeled after a program instituted by Donald Bear at the University of Nevada's Center for Learning and Literacy, Reading Buddies gives seniors a chance to assess the elementary students' reading vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency and make plans to address their literacy needs.

Following the assessment, the seniors use the remaining sessions to read with and to their young buddies, conduct word study, and help them with writing. Besides conferring with the children's classroom teacher, Union students send home parent³ questionnaires, asking what types of interests

and activities the children enjoy, as well as how much time parents spend reading themselves and with their children. One student stated that her buddy's enthusiasm about reading rose significantly when she sought out books about space, one of his interests. She might not have known this without the help of the parent survey.

Another way pre-service teachers and students from other disciplines across Union's campus interact with young students in the greater Lincoln community is through First Book, a nationwide organization that since 1992 has distributed more than 20 million books to disadvantaged children. The parent organization collaborates with the college's local advisory board, First Book-Union College, to get books into the hands and homes of children.

So far, Union College students have donated, raised funds, and received grant monies to place more than 5,000 books into the hands and homes of children. Two examples of the home/school possibilities of such an initiative are the Hispanic Community Center and the Lincoln YMCA's morning program at a local elementary school and community center, respectively. The Hispanic Community Center (HCC) operated the *Adelante* (meaning to advance or progress) after-school program, which Latino youth attended with their parents. Books purchased with funds from First Book-Union College were read in an after-

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school setting. The center's director helped the Hispanic parents learn to create a list of discussion questions that would engage their youngsters at home.⁴

At Elliott School, 100 students start each morning with breakfast, then break into reading groups where they and the YMCA staff read from books provided by First Book-Union College. After the groups finish reading each book, the children get to keep their copies.

"The partnership with First Book-Union College enables the kids to begin building their home library at a very young age and take pride in their literacy," says Benjamin Zink, executive director of the Community Services Branch YMCA.⁵

Union's teacher candidates also distribute information to parents at the college's partner schools relating to reading with their children, as well as lists of books for children. Each of these efforts exemplifies a successful joint venture and strategic alliance, with increased literacy as the goal.

Would you like to increase collaboration between your school and community? It's not difficult to begin. Try some of these ideas:

- **Newsletters:** Send a weekly print or e-mail newsletter to parents.
- **Book Club:** Set up a program like the one at George Stone School, where every student is asked to read one non-fiction juvenile book and one juvenile periodical monthly. In addition, one book, on a chosen theme, is selected for school-wide reading. "This month's theme is the history of Mexico," stated Susan Zimmermann, head teacher, "so we are asking parents to help students check out library books around that theme."
- **Classroom or School Scrapbooks:** Take photos throughout the year and compile a selection of photos of students, together with captions written by the students. Send the book home to various families each night, asking the family to fill out a comment sheet.
- **Book in a Backpack:** Place books and literacy activities in a color-

fully decorated backpack and have it circulate to the students' homes.

• **Local or National Initiatives:** Schools can get involved in First Book, Pizza Hut Book-It, or other types of programs. Local and state reading councils make ideas and materials available to teachers through membership in local chapters of the International Reading Association.

Other ideas include using parents as readers, storytellers, tutors, or volunteers who access books. In her inspiring book, *Conversations*, author Regie Routman shares a letter from a teacher inviting parents to participate in a Read-In. The letter states that the class will adapt its activities to meet the parents' time and work schedules. Parents can read one of their favorite books, or the teacher will have one ready for them to read. A sign-up sheet accompanies with the letter.⁶

The possibilities are endless, as are the benefits, when schools initiate joint ventures and strategic alliances. With so much to be gained, it is important that educators work to strengthen school ties with parents. They will thus

both provide and receive support in developing children's literacy. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1913), p. 157.
2. Helen Hyatt Elementary is an Adventist school in the Lincoln, Nebraska, community; George P. Stone Elementary is Union College's laboratory school.
3. In this article, the word *parent* will include grandparents, guardians, or other authorized caretakers of students.
4. The *Adelante* program operated under the leadership of Holly Burns, formerly the director of the Hispanic Community Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. The current program director for the center is Nate Woods, who continues to collaborate with First Book-Union College.
5. Quote from Benjamin Zink, director of YMCA, in press release, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 22, 2005.
6. Regie Routman, *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2000), p. 136b.

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