

# Expanding Students' Potential Through Family Literacy

*When literacy becomes a family affair, the challenges for all concerned may be formidable—but the rewards are immeasurable.*

MARYANN E. NUCKOLLS

Just exactly how long Angie had managed to keep her secret from her children, I wasn't certain. Goodness knows, I had tried to convince her that the whole point was not to keep it a secret.

At long last, the day came when the parents in the new program marched across campus for our first checkout at the school library. Head shyly turned down, Angie tightly clasped her choice in hand: *My Mom Can't Read* by M. Stanek.

"Angie. This is going to be a hard book to read. Why don't we try another?"

Shifting back and forth, her head bobbing in defense, "I looked at the first page like you said, and I can read this book."

"Oh, Angie. That's not what I meant. I know you can read this book." Slowly, I pointed to my chest. "In here, Angie. It may be hard in here. Do you understand what I mean?"

"This book is about me, and I'm going to read it."

As Angie took her book to the checkout desk, I saw Carmen, her 4th grade daughter, coming through the door. My apprehension melted away when Carmen saw her mother and walked toward her with a smile. As she gently tugged at the edge of the book to read the title, their eyes met, and Carmen lovingly wrapped her arms around her mother. All that stood between them was one thin slip of a book.

For Angie, a new world opened when she put her fears away and came to the

new class for parents. For Carmen and her younger brother, Gabriel, a new hope came that day in the library when literacy became a family matter.

## Helping Parents Help Their Children

Three years ago, I was suddenly struck by the policies I had helped promote as a curriculum coordinator for adult literacy 15 years earlier: "Never insult adults with materials tainted by childhood." If only I had introduced them to the rich world of *Brown Bear*, *Goldilocks*, *The Little Engine That Could* . . . the parents would have been given a gift which was never theirs in childhood, a gift they could have shared with their own children by reading the stories over and over again. In retrospect, I can see that the parents in our literacy classes were telling us exactly what they needed. They all had the same story: "I could fake it when they were little, but now I can't help them with their work." Maybe my involvement in family literacy is penance for past sins.

Models of family literacy are as diverse as their participants. Some are home-based; others are located in schools, storefronts, prisons, libraries, and other facilities. All share a common understanding: the best way to get a student involved in literacy is to get the parents involved in their own literacy. Parents, as a child's first teachers, are

uniquely qualified to pass on the richness of a literacy legacy through a shared literacy experience.

The simplistic principle is that children model and value what they experience in their homes. All children come from culturally rich environments. But even well-educated parents may not know how to foster their child's emerging competencies. And when parents are low skilled, they provide a limited model indeed for literacy and limited assistance with schoolwork at home.

Parents and Literacy (PAL) in Tucson, Arizona, began with parent classes in school and has evolved into a home visitation model. Our collaborative curriculum emerges from students' needs and parents' skills. By pushing the limits of the parent's proficiency, we can also push the limits of the student's potential for school achievement.

## An Invitation for Involvement

Those of us engaged in Intergenerational/Family Literacy carry a responsibility for smoothing the way for others. To provide that support, ASCD sponsors a professional network to increase awareness of the issues and to facilitate communication among existing programs. If you are participating in an Intergenerational/Family Literacy program or are interested in exploring this effort, the network's membership is eager to assist you in making connections with programs and people who can help. For more information, contact Maryann E. Nuckolls, Facilitator of ASCD's Intergenerational/Family Literacy Network, 1336 W. Knox, Tucson, AZ 85705, 602-292-9676.

## Challenges of Literacy Programs

Although family literacy programs exist as aberrations within conventional educational systems, problems are often easily addressed through creative use of traditional administrative tools.

*Ownership, involvement, and understanding* on the part of other staff in the facility are crucial elements in developing a successful program. Fifteen minutes at the fall staff meeting isn't enough to promote these critical elements. Ideally, a semester of staff development prior to initiating a program is a vital asset—even if the target population is not from the school population.

When I finally realized that the promised hour of staff development time at my school was never coming, I began a series of 20-minute buzz sessions for faculty members who really cared and wanted to know more. What began as a

group brainstorming issues and answers soon changed. We began celebrating the good things that happened for children when teachers questioned parents and really listened to what they had to share about their lives and their children. First grade teachers held an evening workshop, which was attended by nearly half of the parents. They designated funding in next year's budget to increase the 1st grade workshops and expand to kindergarten through 3rd grade. While the school needs assessment still shows family literacy to be a low priority compared with other programs, half of the teacher comments dealt with its importance and the need for programmatic expansion.

With appropriate planning, family literacy can exist symbiotically with other programs in the facilities. PAL parents went into classrooms to read stories in both Spanish and English. The school Book Fair proved to be a wonderful showcase of all they had learned as they helped children select books to buy. Some parents began volunteering, and others began to see job potential they had never imagined. Programs in public libraries can use parents as readers. Collaboration with the business community can open a wide range of opportunities for work and for compensation to participants, such as utilities credits, additional food stamps, or coupons for goods and services. The main constraints are the creativity and willingness of the staffs and programs involved.

*Recruitment and retention* are other challenges. Family literacy programs do not enjoy the captive membership we take for granted in public schools. Getting parents into the program and keeping them there are the key problems facing staffs. Recruitment, an unrelenting daily process, demands continual attention. Pressure to mail out flyers, encourage teacher referrals, and follow up on any lead is ongoing. There is never closure on recruitment. The innate problems of parenthood preclude guarantees that membership will mean regular attendance, which is necessary to get the most from the program.

*Evaluation* is an additional program concern. Success cannot be measured entirely in terms of numbers. For example, at varying times, Angie was one of five moms, as well as the only mom, in the program. Her son, Gabriel, was a nonreader repeating 3rd grade who bullied and threatened others and generally disrupted learning opportunities for his class. After his mother had been in the literacy program only two months, Gabriel asked to please share his very first book with his class. This was only one indicator of a complete turnaround in his attitude, behavior, quality, and quantity of work. His teacher said that she "could mark the calendar by when Angie began coming to school." The mood and the dynamics of that classroom were changed by one mother with the courage to grow with her children.

Family literacy programs, unfortunately, are not compatible with traditional forms of discrete measurement. But regardless of numbers, we know our programs' effects have reached far beyond the enrolled families.

## Would We Do It Again?

Those of us involved in family literacy programs have been challenged in ways which have pushed our own limits. Would we do it again? In a minute, to hear the pride in Joaquin's voice when he said, "I am my mother's teacher." In a minute, to see Maria become an American citizen. In a minute, to hear teachers ask why parents aren't sharing books in *their* classrooms. In a minute, to serve as advocate for a child denied special services. In a minute, for the parent who said, "I am an important part of this school. The children need me, and the teachers need me too." In a minute, for the mother who said, "This program is the best thing that has ever happened to this school and to my family."

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## Family Involvement for a Brighter Future

The advantages of involving family in the education of their children are well known; for at-risk kids, the gains may be even greater. Educators looking for answers in this area will find them in *Involving the Families of At-Risk Youth in the Educational Process*, a 38-page report in the "Trends and Issues" series published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. Author Lynn Balster Lontos explores reasons why at-risk kids in particular need participation from their families, why schools need to take an aggressive approach, what types of programs work, and how to overcome barriers to success.

Available for \$6.00 from ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1787 Agate St., Eugene, OR 97403. Make checks payable to ERIC Clearinghouse/University of Oregon. A \$2.50 postage/handling charge will be added to billed orders.

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