

Introduction

Welcome to *American School Board Journal's* Magna Awards. Over the past years, we've featured many excellent examples of school district leadership, and this year is no exception. Again, we found common threads running through many of the winning programs: community, collaboration, and partnership.

As social, political, and financial pressures on public schools increase, school board members and administrators are realizing they can't shoulder their responsibilities alone. As a result, they are reaching out to parents, community members, nonprofit groups, businesses, and other organizations.

Miami-Dade County, the winner of the Magna Awards 2005 Grand Prize, is one of the nation's largest districts. A series of scandals prompted a school board member to call for a mandatory ethics training program for all employees—including school-level and central-office administrators—and board members. The results have been far-reaching and have earned the respect of the community.

Other winning projects feature school board members who are going the extra mile to improve achievement for their students and reaching out to their communities. A board member in South Plainfield, N. J., for example, successfully lobbied state legislators to change the law governing how districts offer preschool programs. The president of the board for the Weldon City Schools in Weldon, N.C., led a community fundraising drive to purchase more books for district students, some of whom come from the poorest families in the state.

This year's Magna winners also include examples of community partnerships and collaboration:

- The boards of two rural Kansas school districts—Highland and Midway—came together when they discovered they could offer more to their students together than they could separately.

- Nevada's Nye County School Board enlisted the help of a retired teacher and board candidate to start a volunteer program. The program's elderly volunteers give the district's transient student population a sense of stability and family.

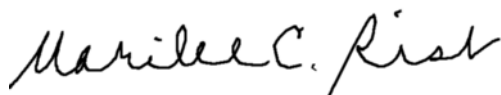
- New Jersey's Bordentown Regional School District's mentoring program for socially and emotionally troubled elementary school students has yielded impressive results. Discipline problems at the elementary school dropped 20 percent, and 16 percent of the children in the program now make the honor roll.

- Catoosa County Public Schools in Ringgold, Ga., paired up with the Catoosa Chamber of Commerce to form a mentoring program for at-risk students. Participating businesses give their employees time off to volunteer in the schools.

These are just some of the award-winning projects that are helping point the way toward success in our schools both today and in the future. You'll find more outstanding programs—plus the names of people to contact for more information—on the following pages.

Each year, as it honors innovation and excellence in school governance, *American School Board Journal* also is pleased to recognize the contribution of its corporate partner, Sodexho School Services. The generous financial support of Sodexho School Services continues to make the Magna Awards program possible.

As we honor this year's winners, we also look ahead to the Magna Awards 2006. Please let us know about programs you believe might bring distinction to your district and that might translate into similar success elsewhere. Fill out the nomination form on pages 27-28, and perhaps we will have the pleasure of recognizing your school district as a Magna Award winner in 2006.



Marilee C. Rist
Publisher

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National Offices
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Publisher
Marilee C. Rist

Editor-in-Chief
Sally Banks Zakariya

Managing Editor
Glenn Cook

Project Writer
Cecile S. Holmes

Project Editor
Kathleen Vail

Magna Coordinator
Margaret Suslick

Project Production
Donna J. Ernst

Advertising Director
Deborah P. Cumbo

**Art Director
and Production Manager**
Michele Sabatier

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In Search of Excellence

A school board for a large, urban district creates an ethics training program for all district employees. Two physical education teachers reach out to their community to help increase their students' health and fitness. A district in a small mountain town establishes an alternative school for its most troubled students. These are among the programs created by the winners of the Magna Awards 2005.

For 11 years, since *American School Board Journal* established the Magna Awards program, our independent judges have continued to marvel at the diversity of the entries from school districts nationwide. This year is no exception: More than 300 programs were nominated from districts across the United States.

Each program was exceptional in some way, but our judges looked for those that stood out in terms of the criteria listed on this page. Of particular importance were, first, evidence that the school board was appropriately involved in initiating and supporting the program, and second, evidence that the program accomplished what it set out to do. The judges spent many hours studying the submissions, and the result of their deliberations is this array of winning programs.

MAGNA 2005 JUDGES

American School Board Journal and Sodexo School Services salute the Magna Awards 2005 winners and the members of this year's judging panel pictured here left to right:

- Brian Perkins, member of the New Haven School Board, New Haven, Conn.
- Jennifer Rogers, assistant director of communications, Michigan Association of School Boards.
- Catherine Belter, member of the Fairfax County School Board in Fairfax County, Va.
- David R. Wittmer, superintendent of the Colebrook Consolidated School District, Colebrook, Conn.
- Panel chairman E. Harold Fisher, state director of the Mississippi Elementary and Middle Schools Committee of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Jackson, Miss., and past president of the National School Boards Association.

The Magna Awards 2005 winners will be honored Monday, April 18, at the *American School Board Journal's* annual School Leaders Luncheon, held in conjunction with the National School Boards Association's Annual Conference in San Diego.

If you cannot congratulate the Magna winners in person, you can still appreciate their good work by reading about their programs in this special supplement honoring excellence in school governance. You might even find an award-winning program that can be tailored to meet the particular needs of your school system—or be inspired to create a future Magna Award winner for your own district.



CRITERIA

To determine the winners of the Magna Awards 2005, the judges looked for programs that are:

- The result of appropriate board involvement.
- Successful in view of the program's primary objectives.
- Developed or actively supported by the school board.
- Important in promoting the district's mission and advancing student learning.
- Capable of being replicated by other school boards with similar conditions and resources.
- The result of collaboration between the school board and others.



Ethics Training for Ethical Lives

Miami-Dade County Schools, Miami, Fla.



PROGRAM

Comprehensive Ethics Program

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To promote integrity, honesty, respect, and accountability within Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Frank Bolaños

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Agustin Barrera
Evelyn Langlieb Greer
Perla Tabares Hantman
Robert Ingram
Martin Karp
Ana Rivas Logan
Marta Pérez
Solomon Stinson

SUPERINTENDENT

Rudolph Crew



All 47,000 employees of the Miami-Dade County School District are required to attend Comprehensive Ethics training.

school district. There was the perception and the reality of corruption and cronyism.”

The nation’s fourth-largest school district, Miami-Dade County serves a diverse, multicultural community. Its annual budget is \$5 billion, providing educational opportunities to 369,578 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 and 64,923 adult students.

Pérez says she supported examining ethics at all levels after being elected to the board in 1998. “First, with the help of many community groups—the League of Women Voters and other people—I proposed that we have a blue ribbon panel to look at whether we needed an ethics committee,” she says. “It was overwhelming when this panel came together. They overwhelmingly suggested that we needed the [ethics] committee and the inspector general.”

Eventually, the panel’s recommendations were applied at all levels of the district. The district’s current Comprehensive Ethics Program, established in 2003, now covers all of Miami-Dade’s 47,000 employees. The inspector general’s office, which handles internal investigations, reports directly to the state instead of the school board.

“I’m so proud,” says Pérez, noting that Miami-Dade is the first district in Florida to establish such a program. “In a practical sense, this is working so well because we have great ethicists whose discussion is intelligent. Their opinions are so reasonable and so practical that they have even influenced board rulings. Perhaps there are always going to be people who are not going to be ethical. But if you concentrate on something, people realize the importance of it.”

The Comprehensive Ethics Program emphasizes strong ethics by showing employees how the principles of character, honesty, and integrity form the foundation for interpersonal and professional relationships.

“Miami-Dade County Public Schools has given employees clear standards and strong direction to meet the complex ethical demands of public sector work,” says Superintendent Rudolph Crew. “Just as important, this program has helped us begin to regain our stakeholders’ confidence in our stewardship of their tax dollars and their children’s education.”

Under the new program, the inspector general is responsible for investigations and internal control reviews. The inspector general reports to the Florida Department of Education, which board members say demonstrates the board’s commitment to promoting the highest levels of integrity throughout the district. The office has investigated 90 cases during its first 18 months.

After a series of scandals, Florida’s Miami-Dade County School Board is working to restore public trust by establishing a districtwide ethics training program and an inspector general’s office.

The board’s public image and policies were in dire need of revamping when the ethics system was introduced, says Marta Pérez, the school board member who led the charge for the project.

“We had had so many scandals,” Pérez says. “The public, I believe, had lost faith in the

**“AS AN EDUCATIONAL
BODY, WE MUST PRACTICE
ON A DAILY BASIS
WHAT WE TEACH
OUR CHILDREN
IN THE CLASSROOM.”**

“Our strategies and programs have been board driven, rather than sent to us for a rubber stamp,” says Frank J. Bolaños, the board’s chairman.

Such a system, he says, holds everyone accountable and models the right sort of personal and professional behaviors for impressionable youngsters. “As an educational body, we must practice on a daily basis what we teach our children in the classroom,” Bolaños says.

Under the Comprehensive Ethics Program, all employees and board members receive ethical training. More than 28,000 employees were trained in the first stage of the ethics project, which covered three different subjects: employee conduct, conflict of interest, and public/private information.

The ethics training is a centerpiece of the board’s initiative, according to district officials. The results of the training are far-reaching and include:

- A workforce that is recognized as exemplifying sound ethical standards.
- A public school staff well-known for being role models with high ethical standards that students want to emulate.
- A staff recognized for its ability to make decisions grounded in knowledge of the laws and regulations governing ethics in the area of education.
- A school system enjoying more trust and respect from the community, media, and government.

The district’s Ethics Advisory Committee was instrumental in developing the district’s Code of Ethics. That code, established by the school board, outlines fundamental principles for employees in governing themselves.

Board policy also requires employees to certify that they have read, understand, and will abide by the Code of Ethics. The policy stipulates that any infraction of the ethics code will be reported to the district’s Office of Human Resources and to its inspector general.

In addition, Crew says, Miami-Dade is the only school district in the nation that requires all of its employees—including the superintendent and school board members—to complete ethics training.

“That sends a powerful message to all stakeholders,” Crew says, “including our impressionable students, that our ethical standards are high and that no one is exempt from meeting them.”

For more information, contact Joseph Garcia, chief communications officer, at (305) 995-4638, or by e-mail at JLGarcia@dadeschools.net. The district’s website is www.dadeschools.net.



Miami-Dade is the only district in the nation to require its employees, as well as the superintendent and school board, to complete ethics training.

Testing Narrows the Gap

Metropolitan School District of Warren Township, Indianapolis, Ind.



PROGRAM

Closing the Achievement Gap

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To increase student achievement in all subgroups despite poverty and diversity issues.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Ann Mead

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Howard Dorsey Jr.
Frank Hancock
Luther Robinson
Susan Switzer
Marlane Tisdale
Jay Wise

SUPERINTENDENT

Peggy Hinckley

After three years of declining test scores, the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township Board of Education decided to find a way to turn things around.

Closing the Achievement Gap is designed to help teachers keep track of students' progress in areas that will be tested. The project leaders examined a wide variety of information and used instructional calendars aligned to the Indiana Academic Standards. The calendars use three-week time windows, which allow teachers to assess the standards and indicators taught over the same period.

Teachers review results with principals every three weeks. They develop plans for remedial help or enrichment, depending on the results. Principals, in turn, report results to the district office and the board reviews them monthly.

The project costs about \$40,000 per year for materials and professional development for teachers. It is the focus of every leadership team meeting and on the agenda at every school board meeting.

"In our country we've used public schools to integrate our society and to make our communities more inclusive and open to people with disabilities," says Ann Mead, board president. "Those have both been worthy endeavors, but the primary responsibility of schools must be effective instruction, and that is best measured by the student achievement outcome."

From the board's perspective, Mead says there is no substitute for test data "and what that tells us about how we are doing with our leadership."

Closing the Achievement Gap has provided the evidence the board is seeking. On the 2003 Indiana State Test of Educational Progress, the district's results were much improved. Seven out of 11 elementary schools had double-digit increases in achievement, ranging from 10 to 34 percentage points. Lowell Elementary School earned Four Star school status from the state, performing in the top 25 percent of all schools in Indiana. Math achievement scores for sixth-graders went up 5 to 8 percentage points at the district's three middle schools.

At the high school, 5 percent more students than in the past met the required standards on the Graduation Qualification Exam.

"Any time a school district has achievement gains, it is a noteworthy accomplishment," says Superintendent Peggy Hinckley. "But Warren is a large, urban district with 45 percent diversity and almost 50 percent of its students on free or reduced-price lunches. Poverty is a negative predictor of achievement, and we have influenced [achievement] in a positive direction."

To have seven of 11 elementary schools achieve double-digit increases in at least one area is notable, she says: "Other school districts reading about our success can replicate this process to achieve similar gains."

For more information, contact Superintendent Peggy Hinckley at (317) 869-4300, or by e-mail at phinckle@warren.k12.in.us. The district's website is www.warren.k12.in.us.



Student test data helps teachers and administrators in Warren Township figure out how to close the achievement gap among their students.

Standards for Parents

San Diego City Schools, San Diego, Calif.

Involving parents to enhance student achievement has produced a partnership founded in trust and understanding in the San Diego City Schools.

The partnership, Parent Communications and Involvement Standards, dates to 1995 when the San Diego School Board adopted a one-page policy acknowledging the necessity and value of parent involvement. Today, that policy is a districtwide effort linking parents to educators and the schools at classroom, building, and district levels.

“Parents have been shut out of the education culture for a long time,” notes board member Katherine Nakamura. “We’re told to help our kids with their homework and it’s our fault when they fail, but we’re not asked frequently enough what our priorities might be and how we are willing to help.”

From the original one-page policy, San Diego established a 25-member work group to write districtwide standards in 2002. Members included the school board, superintendent, staff, principals, teachers, and PTA members and other parents.

Copies of the standards were mailed to more than 50,000 people identified as stakeholders in the project, including parents and school employees. Their responses—plus the results of a needs assessment survey—helped shape the current involvement standards, which affirm the value of parent involvement and establish effective strategies for parent involvement.

A district of 202 schools with 138,000 students, San Diego is California’s second-largest school district and the eighth largest in the United States. It serves a diverse population that is 41.9 percent Hispanic, 25.9 percent white, 16.2 percent Asian American, and 14.5 percent African American. Within that breakdown are even more ethnic groups including Laotian, Cambodian, and Somali families.

Superintendent Alan Bersin says the standards aim to ensure that all parents—regardless of income, ethnic background, or language—can expect and experience high-quality communication and interaction with schools and school leaders.

Every school system and every school reform movement cite parent involvement as a critical factor in student learning and in improving student achievement, Bersin says. “The difficulty is after elementary school. Parent involvement falls off dramatically in middle school and virtually disappears in high school.”

The San Diego plan has been so effective that, in October 2003, the California Department of Education Family Network notified the district that its system will be the template for creating the first statewide parental involvement standards.

For more information, contact Victoria Hilton, consultant, parent communications, at (619) 725-5568, or by e-mail at vhilton@tns.net. The district’s website is www.sandi.net.



San Diego’s parent involvement policy links parents to educators and schools at the classroom, building, and district levels.



PROGRAM

Parent Communications and Involvement Standards

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To dramatically enhance two-way communication among districts, schools, parents, and students.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Luis Acle

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

John de Beck
Shelia Jackson
Mitz Lee
Katherine Nakamura

SUPERINTENDENT

Alan Bersin

Healthy Habits, Healthy Lives

Bay Shore Union Free School District, Bay Shore, N.Y.



PROGRAM:

Bay Shore
Wellness Alliance

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE:

To motivate students and community members to pursue a lifelong commitment to healthy lifestyles and disease prevention.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Jerry Berka

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Andrew Arcuri
Mary Louise Cohen
Randolph Kirchner
Gregory Nardone

SUPERINTENDENT

Evelyn Blose Holman

Long before childhood obesity became a top news story, two physical education teachers at the Bay Shore Union Free School District recognized in the 1990s that students were getting heavier and their physical fitness was declining.

Middle school teachers Judy Cummings and Ted Nagengast saw that students needed to learn how to maintain a healthy lifestyle as youngsters and throughout their lives.

Traditional physical education programs apparently were not providing students with the knowledge to reach that goal, so the two teachers developed a wellness program. The Bay Shore School Board backed the effort, and Bay Shore Wellness Alliance, a consortium of educators, hospital officials, colleges, community health-care professionals, and the county health department, was born.

In 1998, a wellness center opened at Bay Shore Middle School. Today another is under construction at the high school as part of an \$87.3 million bond referendum. The school board also approved and supported the construction of a walking trail, sponsors an annual community summit on healthy families, and promotes an annual nutrition fair.

In addition, the board has approved a nutrition policy to promote healthy eating habits within the schools.

“As a board of education member for the past 36 years, I recognize the importance of our children’s health,” says Jerry Berka, board president. “Twenty-first century technology now enables us to create an exciting, state-of-the-art learning environment to promote wellness at Bay Shore.”

The community’s Good Samaritan and Southside hospitals teamed up with the school board to launch the wellness alliance. Together, the three groups developed the wellness center, which uses heart monitors and computers to provide students with direct feedback on the positive effects of daily exercise. Students use the feedback to learn more about physical fitness and what works for them.

The wellness facilities now are part of an interdisciplinary physical education curriculum. Besides classroom workouts, students can participate in after-school exercise.

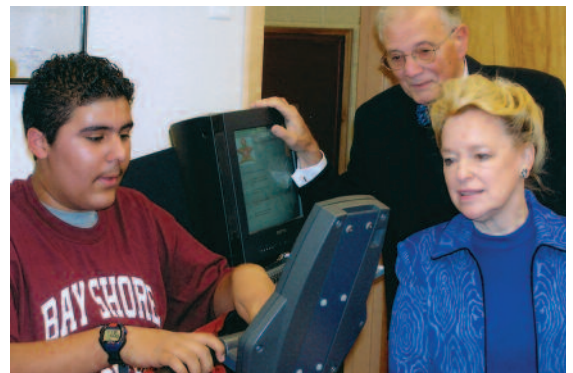
“Our state-of-the-art facilities, coupled with a dynamic teaching staff, ensure the students have strong minds and healthy bodies,” says Evelyn Blose Holman, Bay Shore superintendent.

District funds, grant money, donations, and endowments fund the alliance’s work. The wellness alliance is run by a board of directors and more than 15 volunteers.

Today, wellness programs begin in kindergarten. Policy changes with the help of partners such as Stony Brook University Hospital have created new ways to combat childhood obesity. Several different activities, sponsored by the alliance throughout the year, encourage students, family members, and community members to adopt healthy lifestyles.

For more information, contact Evelyn Blose Holman, superintendent, at (631) 968-1115, or by e-mail at holman@bayshore.k12.ny.us. The district’s website is www.bayshore.k12.ny.us.

Students and adults at Bay Shore focus on creating healthy lifestyles through exercise and good nutrition.



Connecting with Kids

Bordentown Regional School District, Bordentown, N.J.

Mary travels the world and enjoys a full family life, but her young friend, Sue, has never been outside her hometown, and her single mother sometimes disappears on alcoholic binges. The two, whose names are changed to protect their identities, would never have found each other without the Connections Mentoring Program at Bordentown Regional School District.

When Mary met Sue, the girl was throwing temper tantrums in class, fighting with fellow students, and trying to control anyone and everything in her path. Mary started visiting Sue at school, spending at least a half-hour a week with her and putting herself on call if Sue had a flare-up.

Mary persevered. Grade after grade, Sue improved, making friends and eventually landing on the honor roll. The girl's success is just one of many that have emerged from the mentoring program, which is a partnership with the school board, the Clara Barton Elementary School, and the Bordentown community.



Clara Barton Elementary School students benefit from having extra adult support in their lives.

Since the program began in 1998, disciplinary problems at Clara Barton have plummeted 20 percent, and 16 percent of third- through sixth-grade students who have a mentor make the honor roll. Thirteen percent of the mentored elementary students have been recognized as “peacemakers,” a designation the school gives to students who create a positive and peaceful environment in the school and classroom.

“For me, the ultimate reward is the satisfaction in knowing that the school has been able to mobilize a cadre of caring faculty and community members to provide a great deal of needed support for students,” says Berenice Blum-Bart, Clara Barton Elementary School principal.

Mentors have devoted more than 6,000 hours to the program at Clara Barton. Though the Bordentown school district is relatively small and strapped for cash, the school board embraced the idea as a way to counteract the negative impact of societal problems on its children.

“There is no doubt that mentoring is a key part of the safety net of support essential for our students to experience success and to achieve their potential,” says Superintendent John Polomano.

The school board has consistently paid for the program with an annual budget of \$750. The elementary school uses that money to purchase interactive toys and games, plus recognition pins and certificates for mentors. The school hosts two annual breakfasts, one just for mentors and another for mentors and their charges.

The elementary school tailors individual plans for each mentor and child. Each mentor goes through a training session, using a manual created by the principal, the counselor, and the district's volunteer coordinator. They also are required to fill out weekly evaluation sheets.

“The program truly serves the needs of our children,” says Pauline Glenn, board president.

For more information, contact Berenice Blum-Bart, principal of Clara Barton Elementary School at (609) 298-0676, or by e-mail at bblumbart@bordentown.k12.nj.us. The district's website is www.bordentown.k12.nj.us.



PROGRAM

Connections Mentoring Program

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To give students an opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with a caring adult.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Pauline Glenn

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Nicholas Binder
Joann Dansbury
Anthony DiLemme
Joseph Gore III
Kevin Hirschfeld
Brian Lynch
Gerald Nicholls
Richard Slater
Christine Trogdon

SUPERINTENDENT

John Polomano

Helping Kids Say No

Capistrano Unified School District, San Juan Capistrano, Calif.



PROGRAM

Voluntary Drug Testing Program

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To reduce drug use by teens by providing them a tool to say No to drugs and by giving parents an opportunity to speak with their children about drug use.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Marlene Draper

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Sheila Benecke
John Casabianca
Mike Darnold
Shelia Henness
Crystal Kochendorfer
Duane Stiff

SUPERINTENDENT

James Fleming

How do you sell parents on drug testing for students, overcome legal concerns from the American Civil Liberties Union, and convince students that participating in the program can ward off peer pressure?

The answers are in the Capistrano Unified School District's voluntary drug testing program. The school board started the program in 2002 at the district high school with the lowest academic performance levels. Today, more than 50 percent of San Clemente High School students participate in the program, and numbers continue to climb. This past year, the program was extended to the middle school.

Since the inception of testing, the number of students taking the SAT has increased 73 percent, the number of students completing the most rigorous college requirements has jumped 38 percent, and the number of students taking the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exam has risen 90 percent. In addition, the pass rate for the Advanced Placement exam has skyrocketed from 4 to 81 percent.

"With the prevalence of illicit drugs on the campuses of our secondary schools in America, it is incumbent on us as educators to provide all the support and education we possibly can to our students and their parents," says board member Mike Darnold. "The voluntary drug testing program created by SCHS does just that."

The original notification to parents and students paves the way for families to discuss the dangers of substance abuse and opens dialogue. "This gives students a tool to use in their effort to stay away from drugs and alcohol and yet still remain very socially active," says James Fleming, Capistrano superintendent.

Before they embarked on the program, school officials checked with the ACLU and found that voluntary programs do not violate civil liberties. The board decided the program was important because federal data shows that drug testing is effective at deterring school-age children from taking drugs.

The program costs \$7,000 a year and is paid for by student parking fees. At registration, each student must turn in a card, signed by the student and a parent, indicating whether that student will participate in the program.

An independent drug-testing company conducts 30 random tests a month. Negative results are mailed to the student's home. Company counselors contact the parents of students who test positive (only 2 percent have fallen into this category) and offer counseling options. At no time does the independent drug testing company contact school officials or police.

Parents and students offer positive feedback. "My son is able to tell his friends he does not do the drugs offered because of the drug testing, and I know friends of his who use the same excuse," says one.

"As a family, it gave us the opportunity to talk about drug use without sounding like overbearing parents," another parent says.

For more information, contact Kristen Nelson, director, state and federal programs, at (949) 489-7257, or by e-mail at knelson@capousd.org. The district's website is www.capousd.org.



About 50 percent of high school students participate in Capistrano's voluntary drug testing program.

Partners for Success

Catoosa County Public Schools, Ringgold, Ga.

A school sponsorship program that partners the business community with the Catoosa County Public Schools is paying off in big dividends for students. Partnership 2000, a joint effort between the Catoosa County Board of Education and the Catoosa Chamber of Commerce, began more than a decade ago to help students overcome barriers to success.

Today, the partnership encompasses student and teacher enrichment, community awareness and support, the promotion of volunteerism and community service, and leadership development and active involvement in governance.

All these things work toward one primary goal: helping students achieve their potential.

“As our superintendent always reminds us, it takes a community to educate and raise a child,” says Don Dycus, school board chairman. “Aligning local businesses with individual schools gives ownership and relationship rather than distance and distrust. This is a win-win for our community—especially the children.”

The program also has expanded beyond the chamber, involving several community groups and organizations.

Board member Jane Everett belongs to the Ringgold Kiwanis Club, which has formed a partnership with Ringgold Elementary School. “We feel a strong sense of ownership about the school and pride in its achievements,” she says.

Businesses give their employees time off from work to mentor students. The project began with targeting at-risk students in the high schools. Now, some of those same students mentor elementary school children.

That model gives younger children “a big brother or sister and gives the high school students the responsibility of being role models,” says Beth Kellerhals, Catoosa superintendent.

In 2000, the school board created a full-time coordinator position for the program, which is paid for by the district and its partners. Since then, the program has more than doubled in size, with 180 partners from the business community participating in the effort along with social service agencies, local organizations, and churches. Nearly 300 adults and teens serve as mentors.

In the 2003-04 school year, partners contributed 21,000 volunteer hours and \$1.5 million. Activities they helped to fund include a leadership academy for students and events to reward students and parents for their improvements.

“Business and community members are more informed about our success and challenges and better equipped to encourage funding initiatives,” says Kellerhals. “At the same time, parents and school system employees are inclined to use the services and goods of those faithful partners.”

For more information, contact Beth Kellerhals, superintendent, at (706) 965-2297, or by e-mail at bkellerhals@catoosa.k12.ga.us. The district’s website is www.catoosa.k12.ga.us.



PROGRAM

Partnership 2000

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To engage the community in working together to promote student success.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Don Dycus

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Melvin Edwards
Jane Everett
Billy Joe McDaniel
Garland Nance

SUPERINTENDENT

Beth Kellerhals



Ringgold, Ga., businesses and the school district hold an annual picnic for mentors and their students.

It's All Happening at the Zoo

Delaware-Union Educational Service Center, Delaware, Ohio, and
Franklin County Educational Service Center, Columbus, Ohio



PROGRAM

Columbus Zoo and
Aquarium School

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To provide high school juniors and seniors with hands-on learning and career exploration opportunities in an academically rigorous and research-based educational program.

BOARD PRESIDENTS

Jack Emrich,
Delaware-Union
Robin Reid-Pleasnick,
Franklin County

BOARD MEMBERS

Delaware-Union
Ed Bischoff
Barbara Cape
Gene Wiley
Tom Zimmerman

Franklin County
Joyce Galbraith
Richard Helsel
Betty Klamfoth
Mary White

SUPERINTENDENTS

James Crawford,
Delaware-Union
Bart Anderson,
Franklin County

The governing boards of the Delaware-Union and the Franklin County educational service centers in Ohio don't mind if people call their collaborative project a real zoo. In fact, they're proud of it.

"The Zoo School is unique," says Jack Emrich, president of the Delaware-Union Educational Service Center Governing Board. "In my 30 years of education, this is the most exciting program I have been involved with."

The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium—the largest municipally owned zoo in the country—sits in the service centers' backyard. Marie Ward, the assistant superintendent of Delaware-Union, proposed that the governing boards provide an academically challenging program for students in conjunction with the zoo.

In 2002, the two boards, which serve 26 central Ohio school districts, created an advisory board with representatives from the two service centers and the zoo. A year later, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium School was up and running. "The high school at the zoo is a great opportunity to make all the zoo's resources a more formal part of public education," says zoo director Jerry Borin.

Students apply and are chosen by the advisory board. "Students selected for the program must be strong in math and science, technology literate, dependable, responsible, and have a keen interest in a zoo-related career," says Ward. "They must also share a deep love and respect for wildlife."

Students—all juniors and seniors—take three classes each day at the zoo, earning two science credits and one elective credit through the program. They not only receive hands-on experience, but also are actively involved in research projects at the zoo and aquarium.

"To try to explain to you everything I've received from this program is impossible," one student says. "I went from an OK student to an all A's searcher for knowledge."

"This is the ultimate multitasking class," adds another student.

Ninety-three students have completed Zoo School courses, and all have gone on to college. More than half the students are hired by the zoo staff for special assignments and off-season work, and some graduates have presented and published research papers. In addition, Zoo School students and a teacher have developed their own website, www.columbuszooschool.org, which includes a movie of student activities at the zoo.

"The Franklin County Educational Service Center is delighted and proud to be involved in such an innovative venture that benefits our students," says Robin Reid-Pleasnick, governing board president.

This year, Zoo School will expand from a classroom to an entire building. The zoo provides its facilities for free, and all other costs are paid through tuition from districts.

For more information, contact Marie Ward, Delaware-Union assistant superintendent, at (740) 548-7880, ext. 4370, or by e-mail at Marie_ward@duesc.org. Delaware-Union's website is <http://duesc.org>. Franklin County's website is www.fcesc.org.

Students attending the Zoo School participate in special research projects, such as tracking the raccoon population with telemetry equipment.



Excellence for All

Hesperia Unified School District, Hesperia, Calif.

While most academic intervention programs strive to assist the least capable students, the Hesperia Unified School District picked an approach aimed at both the academically challenged and the gifted.

Hesperia's ExCEL: Excellence—A Commitment to Every Learner really is a process, not a program, says Cara Bergen, its executive director.

"When 56 percent of your students are below the poverty level, 33 percent have an original language other than English, and 40 percent are in single-parent homes, aiding only 10 percent of the students through special education" doesn't do enough, Bergen says.

The district's educators and the school board were unwilling to ignore the best students who were "capable of accelerating their learning," she says.

Instead, Hesperia—a district of 17,000 students in southern California—set out to create a districtwide program. Its tasks were to cover state standards of instruction; address the needs of all students, including those academically advanced and those at risk; use a collaborative approach; and use existing resources.



Hesperia's ExCEL program seeks to help students who need extra academic help as well as students who are academically gifted.

The resulting statistics tell an amazing story. The percentage of Hesperia students performing at or above grade level has risen four-fold. Student attendance is now as high as 98 percent during the school year, with teacher absences as low as 1.1 percent. On average, the academic performance index of the 17 schools using ExCEL has improved by 145 points in the past four years. In addition, the number of students in special education

classes has decreased 67 percent.

ExCEL reaches students in need without labeling them, Superintendent Richard Bray says. "It serves them before they would be identified. We use our special ed staff to intervene early. There's nothing in the law that precludes that.

"We catch them before they fall," he adds.

ExCEL works because it "uses resources in a different way," Bray says. "Any school could do this. It doesn't require any new people, any new textbooks. You use resources but you use them in a ... more effective way. And it works. We've got the years of data to show that it really works."

Some of that data goes to the heart of what it means to a child to feel he is learning, not foundering. Bergen tells the story of Billy, whose name has been changed to protect his privacy.

Billy entered special education in the third grade. By fifth grade, his reading ability had not improved, and he was falling behind in math. But by sixth grade, Billy was an ExCEL success story. Immersed in the process for two years, he wrote a thank you letter to his principal. "And thank you for helping me out of the dumb kids' class," Billy wrote. "I can read now and know I'll be OK in school."

For more information, contact Cara Bergen, executive director of ExCEL, at (760) 244-4411, ext. 297, or by e-mail at carabergen@hesperia.k12.ca.us. The district's website is www.hesperia.k12.ca.us.



PROGRAM

ExCEL: Excellence—
A Commitment to Every
Learner

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To meet assessed needs of
all students, whether they
require remediation or
acceleration.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Jack Hamilton

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Nellie Gogley
Bruce Minton
Helen Rogers
Eric Swanson

SUPERINTENDENT

Richard Bray

Achieving Together

Highland USD 425, Highland, Kan., and Midway USD 433, Denton, Kan.



PROGRAM

Sharing Schools Through InterDistrict Contracting

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To improve the educational opportunities for students with limited resources.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

Bill Hargis, Highland
Doug Johnson, Midway

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Highland USD 425
Mike Blevins
Rod Carwell
Brad Gilmore
Tim Nuzum
Ron Schneider
Scott Twombly

Midway USD 433
Mary Becker
Al Fuhrman
Tom Halling
Vicki Jones
Miriam Scholz
Galen Weiland

SUPERINTENDENT

Steve Adams

The one-room, rural schoolhouse where one teacher taught first grade through high school is an American icon. But in an era of stringent demands for high test scores, rural school districts are finding new ways to help their youngsters compete academically.

Two school districts—Highland USD 425 and Midway USD 433—turned to interdistrict teamwork to offer more academic opportunities to their students. Tucked in the northeast corner of Kansas, the two districts suffer from inadequate state funding and declining enrollment. But working together, they have created an educational program beyond their reach as independent districts.

The two school boards hired a superintendent to serve both districts and worked with him to develop an interdistrict contracting model. The model protected both systems' funding, while allowing them to share services efficiently and effectively. The districts share middle and high schools but maintain their own elementary schools.

"By contracting with one another to provide a shared high school in one district and a shared middle school in the other district, we have been able to offer schools with the variety that only larger districts can offer," says Steve Adams, superintendent for both districts.

In addition, contracting for shared schools allows each district to maintain its "low-enrollment weighting," a move yielding more general state aid funding than if the districts consolidated, Adams says. Together, the two districts serve 462 students.

For Highland, the interdistrict contracting allows the district "to keep elective course offerings that may have been lost due to declining enrollment and falling revenues," says Bill Hargis, president of the Highland board.

Their creative arrangement meant a lot of work for each district and its board. The to-do list included deciding where to put the high school and middle school; aligning programs and curriculum; and creating staffing agreements that minimized staff displacement and maximized flexibility to match staff talents to work assignments.

"Our two boards have worked very hard to increase the educational opportunities for our students," says Vicki Jones, vice president of the Midway board. "We have made very good progress and our patrons, community, and students are all excited."

Indeed, students are benefiting, Adams says. "We are virtually the only districts in the state of Kansas, or any other state that I know of, that have entered into such an arrangement."

For more information, contact Steve Adams, superintendent, at (785) 442-3286, or by e-mail at sadams@highlandusd.k12.ks.us. The joint website for the two districts is www.doniphanwest.org.



The boards of Highland and Midway districts collaborate to share services and offer more academic opportunities to their students.

Seniors Lend a Hand

Nye County School District, Pahrump, Nev.



Nye County's Volunteer Program draws residents from the community to help out in school programs such as Even Start, after-school programs, science fairs, and field trips.

Nye County School District—geographically, one of the largest in the lower 48 states—turned to its older residents to build a volunteer program that meets a range of student needs. The Nye County School District Volunteer Program serves many of the 5,700-plus students who attend schools in the 18,000-square-mile district.

The school board, intent on furthering its mission of “Every Child A Success,” long had sought ways to increase community involvement in schools. Yet that proved a tough goal in a community made up largely of senior citizens and working parents commuting long distances and working variable shifts.

“We have probably a 40-percent transient rate in our school district,”

says William Roberts, Nye County's superintendent and Nevada School Superintendent of the Year. “In our nomadic society, oftentimes children don't have the benefit of grandparents or extended families. They often miss out on that relationship with an older person.”

Many in the district's program are senior citizens. The project's oldest volunteer is 86-year-old Alysmae Shultz, who works with children who need one-on-one attention in such areas as reading, challenging them to improve their academic performance.

The Volunteer Program's roots can be traced in part to the November 2002 run for the board by Jewell Burton-Avery, 72, a U.S. Navy veteran and retired schoolteacher. Burton-Avery narrowly lost her bid for election, but that didn't keep her from responding when the board put out a call for someone to recruit and coordinate volunteers.

Working with the board and the superintendent, Burton-Avery met with school administrators to evaluate each school's needs and how volunteers might help. An immediate barrier was the \$65 fee required for the fingerprinting and processing of each prospective volunteer. Determined to see the idea through, Burton-Avery recruited Catholic Charities, the United Way, and the Kiwanis Club to pay the fee for volunteers who could not afford it.

To recruit volunteers, Burton-Avery placed newspaper ads and visited the community senior center, area civic groups, retired employee groups, and other organizations. A cadre of 116 volunteers soon went to work.

In the 2003-04 school year, volunteers gave 9,000 hours of service to Nye County students, tutoring, helping school nurses, doing filing and paperwork, and playing important roles in after-school programs from science fairs to field trips.

The project has encouraged overall community awareness, says Burton-Avery. “This, in turn, has stimulated many parents and community members to get involved in their schools. The awareness of the community has then translated into support and financial assistance from organized community groups.”

For more information, contact Jerry C. Hill, coordinator of secondary curriculum and instruction, at (775) 727-7743, ext. 228, or by e-mail at jhill@nye.k12.nv.us. The district's website is www.nye.k12.nv.us.



PROGRAM

Nye County School District Volunteer Program

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE:

To enlist community volunteers to help the children of the Nye County School District.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Deborah Wescoatt

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Nicole Genet
Shawn Hall
Dennis Keating
Cindy Marcotte
Dawn Murphy
Tracie Ward

SUPERINTENDENT

William Roberts

Beyond Test Scores

Oregon School District, Oregon, Wis.



PROGRAM

Accountability for Student Achievement

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To define what constitutes educational success in Oregon schools and establish how it will be measured.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Douglas Kornetzke

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Deedra Atkinson
Jacy Boldebuck
Cynthia DiCamelli
Scott Flanagan
Nancy Halford
Steve Zach

SUPERINTENDENT

Linda Barrows

The Oregon School Board views success as much more than doing well on standardized tests. With that in mind, the board undertook a multi-year study to better serve the 3,400 students of the Oregon School District, in the suburbs 10 miles south of Madison, Wis.

The board's intent was to respond to external pressure to equate academic accountability with single test score reports. Accountability for Student Achievement, the board's position paper outlining the district's strategy, defines success for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. District leaders believe four indicators—competency, culture, character, and community—should be considered in gauging a student's success.

"We believe that outside forces are acting in a manner to tell us how to define whether we have been successful in meeting the requirements of No Child Left Behind," says board member Steve Zach. "We felt a need to counter those forces and identify for ourselves whether we are successful and thus create a mechanism by which we can communicate that to district residents."

In Oregon, Zach says, a successful student is a "whole person" who shows more than academic competency. The position paper adopted by the Oregon board will shape the evaluations of students, schools, and teachers, and measure the performance of the board itself.

"The paper will serve as a policy guideline for the essential operations of our district henceforth," Zach says. "When fully implemented, it will serve as the basis for district building and budgeting."

While units within the district are working to define the criteria to measure their success, the board is building its own criteria to assess board performance.

The board has identified components of competency (finance, policy, and student achievement), culture (boardmanship), communication (relationships), and character (dedication to board and district work) and is working on creating data-based measures for each, Zach says.

Test scores should not be the only factor defining student success, says Douglas Kornetzke, board president. "We have gone far beyond the typical 'test score mentality' that normally makes the local paper," he says. "While test scores have their place, they are part of a much broader methodology for defining what a successful student looks like."

In addition, Kornetzke says, the board has established a road map to guide its decision making on matters ranging from policy to resource allocation.

"This document is visionary," he says. "It helps to set clear standards for student performance (more than just test scores), establishes a strong assessment and accountability process, and demonstrates our commitment to continuous improvement."

For more information, contact Linda Barrows, superintendent, at (608) 835-4003, or by e-mail at lkb@oregon.k12.wi.us. The district's website is www.oregon.k12.wi.us.

Successful students show more than academic competency, the Oregon School Board decided. It developed ways to gauge success in addition to standardized tests.



Improving School by School

Parma City School District, Parma, Ohio



School-level teams at Parma City School District work to set academic goals for their schools. The teams are made up of parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators.

Realizing that not all school needs are equal, the Parma City School Board devised a plan to individualize success. The result—Rx for Student Achievement—created teams to develop a Continuous Improvement Plan, or CIP, for each of the district’s 22 schools.

“Having each school develop its own CIP gets people involved at their neighborhood school level,” says Rosemary Gulick, the school board vice president. “The CIPs become more site specific, which helps the community to take ownership in the process and the goals.”

Teams include parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators. They meet several times a month after school to make sure the academic goals are on target.

Each school team develops a plan for student achievement in all content areas. They must identify four primary goals. Each goal is then broken down into objectives and activities.

In their first effort, the teams presented the plans for approval to the school board over a six-month period. There also are teams for each district department. The plans are revised each September.

Already the effort is paying off. The state has recategorized the school district from one that needs “continuous improvement” to “effective.” District math and science scores have increased significantly in grades four and six.

One thing the teams discovered was that math and science instruction did not match the national and state content standards. To remedy that, the school district’s staff development coaches are training teachers to align instruction to the standards.

Activities also are planned for the entire district. For instance, each school has a literacy program that encourages parental involvement. A districtwide family literacy picnic in the football stadium drew more than 400 parents, children, and faculty members.

“The school and district team members enjoy being architects of their own future,” says Christina Dinklocker, the district’s deputy superintendent of operational services. “They understand the best way to predict and steer schoolwide initiatives is to be active participants.”

Sarah Zatik, superintendent, says the program ensures that everyone is working on the same page.

“The CIP process has been successful in providing a focused vision for all our building staff and departmental staffs in the district,” she says. “Similar to a strategic plan, our CIP process has been successful in providing direction, feedback, and evaluation of our district mission and belief statements.”

Gulick adds that “the input truly comes from people who are most directly involved in and impacted by the educational process.”

For more information, contact Christina Dinklocker, deputy superintendent of operations, at (440) 885-8759, or by e-mail at ChristinaDink@parma.k12.oh.us. The district’s website is www.parmacityschools.org.



PROGRAM

Rx for Student Achievement

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To create a structure of accountability to improve student achievement.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

J. Kevin Kelley

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Karen Dendorfer
Rosemary Gulick
Kathleen Petro
Richard Ress

SUPERINTENDENT

Sarah Zatik

Second-Chance Academy

Pocono Mountain School District, Swiftwater, Pa.



PROGRAM

Pocono Mountain Academy

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To provide at-risk students with an educational environment that stimulates long-term growth in academic and social areas.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

David Pollack

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Henry Bockelman
John Davis
Meg Dilger
Jane Niering
Stephen Sheloski
Rick Smith
Jeffrey Snyder
Stanley Storm

SUPERINTENDENT

David Krauser

Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountain School Board decided to make "alternative school" synonymous with "successful students." It did so by creating an academy that offers personalized attention, job opportunities, and a broad academic curriculum.

"Students who were once predictable dropouts are employed, going to college, and making positive plans for their futures," says Kathleen Fanelli, principal of the Pocono Mountain Academy, which serves grades nine through 12.

The school is voluntary for both students and faculty and is paid for through district funds and grants. There are 150 students and 12 teachers, a reading specialist, school nurse, and school counselor. Classes are kept to fewer than 15 students. A school-to-work coordinator provides instruction and helps find employment opportunities for students, and the reading specialist provides intensive reading instruction to students who read below grade level.

"The Pocono Mountain Academy was developed to be small, intimate, collegial, and supportive," says Superintendent David Krauser, noting that the school allows students to grow and mature through personal relationships with teachers.

The academy's curriculum includes cosmetology, protective services, graphic arts, and automotive technology programs. Students also may attend a technical institute. An occupation program allows students to attend school part-time and work outside school. Employers work with the school, allowing site visits by academy staff and participating in grading students' job-related skills. Under the academy's internship program, some seniors go to work full-time and some attend college classes.

The school board has consistently provided enough support to keep the academy tuition free and fully staffed. The board's commitment to the academy is what makes it a success, Fanelli says.

The board has seen its commitment pay off. The academy, which began in 1998, boasts a 90 percent graduation rate.

"Although the population of the academy represents approximately 5 percent of our high school population, [these students] were responsible for a much larger percentage of disruptions in the buildings," says David Pollack, board president. "They also were not meeting the educational requirements for graduation."

Stephen Sheloski, board vice president, said the turnaround in students is amazing. "Each year, during the academy's graduation ceremony, board members and parents hear very moving testimonials from the graduating students on the difference the academy has made in their lives," he says. "Many of the graduates go on to colleges, trade schools, the military, or directly into the workforce."

For more information, contact Kathleen Fanelli, principal of Pocono Mountain Academy, at (570) 839-7121, ext. 70400, or by e-mail at kfanelli@pmsd.org. The district's website is www.pmsd.org.



Small classes, caring adults, and internship programs at Pocono Mountain Academy help students who were failing in their traditional high school.

Changing the Law for Preschool

South Plainfield Public Schools, South Plainfield, N.J.

When New Jersey state officials told South Plainfield Public Schools to close its preschool program because it violated the law, the school board had another idea: Change the law. The South Plainfield Future Stars Preschool Program was deemed illegal because the state prohibited fee-based programs in public schools. But the school board believed the preschool program was a valuable and necessary tool to give children a head start on education and to aid in early childhood development. The board's efforts, combined with the help of parent organizations and community leaders, led to changes in the law in 2004.

While the district charges for the program, fees are nominal to make it affordable for most parents. "Affordable preschool programs should be available to all children," says Superintendent Robert Rosado. Children can attend two or three days a week; the district charges \$113.50 a month for the two-day program and \$170 a month for the three-day program.

Susan Peck, then-vice president of the board of education, wanted to pursue changing the law. The board unanimously agreed. "When faced with the probability that the program would end because the district could not afford to fund it, I looked at the basic foundation of the program, which provided an education to an age group that wasn't required by law," Peck says.

"I compared [the preschool program] to the adult GED classes we charged for and asked the question, 'Why can we charge those who are over the age requirement and not those who are under the age?'"

Despite hearing legal advice that it would be almost impossible to change the law, the school board decided to move forward. Peck contacted the board's state assemblyman and senator, who agreed to cosponsor a bill. She also talked to key legislators and the state Department of Education.

The school board asked the Garden State Coalition of Schools as well as a number of parent organizations to support the bill. Board members worked tirelessly for its passage and even testified before a state senate committee.

"Research clearly shows that high-quality preschool programs for prekindergarten students are a means of enhancing student performance," Rosado says. "Our school district's preschool program entails working on readiness in areas that give children a leg up when they enter kindergarten."

The 2004 New Jersey Legislature passed the bill, which gives every school in the state the right to run a nonprofit, fee-based preschool program. The governor signed it into law.

"With so many mandates and so few resources, school districts have to begin thinking out of the box in terms of funding programs and initiatives," Peck says. "Maybe it's time to look at laws that were established to reflect a different society and make changes to meet today's needs."

For more information, contact Robert Rosado, superintendent, at (908) 754-4620, ext. 225, or by e-mail at rrosado@spnet.k12.nj.us. The district's website is www.spnet.k12.nj.us.



PROGRAM

South Plainfield Future Stars Preschool Program

OBJECTIVE

To aid in childhood development and prepare children for school, giving them a better chance for academic achievement in later years.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Pio Pennisi

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Terry Alexa
Steven Bohn
Michael English
Patrick Kelly
Ken LaFreniere
Timothy Morgan
Susan Peck
Daniel Smith

SUPERINTENDENT

Robert Rosado

**"OUR SCHOOL DISTRICT'S
PRESCHOOL PROGRAM
ENTAILS WORKING ON
READINESS IN AREAS THAT
GIVE CHILDREN A LEG UP
WHEN THEY ENTER
KINDERGARTEN."**

Bringing Books to Students

Weldon City Schools, Weldon, N.C.



PROGRAM

Books Operation

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

To solicit funds or donations to supply the district's media centers with a diverse selection of books.

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Pattie Cotton

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Barbara Balmer
Jackson Brown
Stanley Edwards
Timothy Green
Edith Jenkins
Edna Weeks

SUPERINTENDENT

Kathi Gibson

Board President Pattie Cotton knew there had to be a way to make it easier for students in the Weldon City Schools to “Drop Everything and Read.”

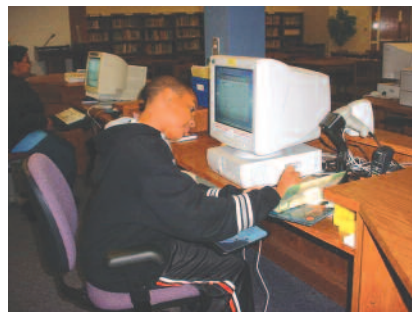
Cotton and other board members were disturbed to find that their schools did not have enough books or selections of a particular genre to allow students to indulge in meaningful reading, the goal of the widespread Drop Everything and Read program. So Cotton turned to two directors in the school system's central office.

In July 2002, the three sat down for a brainstorming session. They identified key players in improving reading selections available to Weldon's 1,046 students. Out of their work came Books Operation.

Short and simple in title, the program also has a straightforward goal: soliciting funds or book donations to supply Weldon Schools' media centers with a diverse selection of titles. The monetary goal was securing \$70,000 for the project and launching the first phase by October 2002.

Over the next 13 months, posters and banners announcing the project were displayed, board members were alerted to the action plan and time line, and committee and board responsibilities were assigned. Accounts were set up with Food Lion to encourage parents to shop at local stores, teachers were given incentives to donate, and letters went out to alumni, parents, businesses, teachers, and staff. Finally, a Books Tea launched the project in November 2003.

The success of Books Operation is especially noteworthy, school officials say, given the realities of life in Halifax County. Weldon is one of several small communities in the county, where 28 percent of the population live in poverty and 34 percent are school-age children. Only 46 percent of the county's residents have high school diplomas, 42 percent of households are single-parent families, and the unemployment rate is 12 percent.



Through the efforts of the school board and community, Weldon City Schools students can now take advantage of many different genres of books.

Books Operation opened new horizons for students, says Cotton. “Being in a disadvantaged area, our students were able to explore new genres,” she says, noting they would not have had that opportunity otherwise.

Cotton says the project has earned accolades because parents, teachers, staff, and other community members now “realize the reality that any goal may be achieved if it is conceived.”

Weldon City Schools was fortunate to have a cohesive board focused on children, not personal agendas, says Superintendent Kathi Gibson. “I came to Weldon in 2003 and found a community and board ready to move to the next level.”

Weldon takes pride in its schools and is willing to do “whatever it takes” to improve education, Gibson says. “The secret is the leadership, including the school board, and the community's focus on improving teaching and learning for all children.”

For more information, contact Harriett Walker, director of district administrative support services, at (252) 536-3515, or by e-mail at walkerh@weldoncityschools.k12.nc.us. The district's website is www.weldoncityschools.k12.nc.us.



FORT WORTH INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Fort Worth, Texas
 William Koehler, School Board President
 Joe Ross, Superintendent

Academic English for Success

The more than 80,000 students of diverse backgrounds in the Fort Worth schools are coming out a step ahead in oral and written communication skills, thanks to the district's Academic English for Success program. Recognizing that even many English-speaking students did not speak or write standard English, the district developed an innovative system for training teachers to teach students essential language skills. Academic English for Success uses grammar jingles to grab students' attention, with classes in participating schools devoting the first 15 minutes of each day to that task. Other exercises link a language skill with a grammar jingle. The school district's website is www.fortworthisd.org.

INDIAN RIVER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Selbyville, Del.
 Harvey Walls, School Board President
 Lois Hobbs, Superintendent

Experiencing Science Outdoors

Indian River's Board of Education had a dream of how its 7,800 students could actually experience science. Recognizing that children learn by doing, the board took an untilled field at the edge of local Ingram Pond and turned it into an outdoor education center—the first of its kind in Sussex County, Del. At the center, students from kindergarten through the 12th grade study everything from natural habitats to factors influencing the welfare of the whole pond. Science test scores have steadily risen in the district since the project began. The district's website is www.irsd.net.

LAPWAI SCHOOL DISTRICT 341

Lapwai, Idaho
 Julie Kane, School Board President
 Harold A. Ott, Superintendent

Creating High Performance Schools

Five years ago, Lapwai School District undertook an ambitious plan to increase student achievement. Drawing from a cross-section of community and school leaders, the plan stressed assisting teachers in areas such as literacy, curriculum development, and employing research-based learning programs in readings and mathematics. Academic improvement in a school district where 78 percent of the students live at or below the poverty level has been dramatic. In the past, several grade levels at Lapwai Elementary were between the 15th and 27th percentiles in reading, math, and language arts proficiency. Spring 2004 results on the Idaho Standards Achievement test indicated more than 75 percent of the school's students had reached proficiency, reversing a history of underachievement and low performance. The district's website is www.lapwai.k12.id.us.

NEW MIAMI LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Hamilton, Ohio
 Randy Cook, School Board President
 Robert Bierly, Superintendent
New Miami Community Center

The award-winning program, New Miami Community Center, is the result of the New Miami Local School District Board of Education's determination to create "a caring, nurturing and respectful environment" so that children would achieve high academic skills. The board wanted to provide a safe and disciplined environment promoting mastery of academics and minimizing risk factors. Starting in the 2000-01 school year with 50 to 60 elementary-aged students, the project partnered with local agencies to meet specific needs in a low-wealth school district. The program has expanded over the past three years and now offers students and area residents a menu of extended day programs, including fine arts and recreation. The district's website is www.new-miami.k12.oh.us.

OKLAHOMA CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Oklahoma City, Okla.
 Cliff Hudson, School Board Chairman
 Bob Moore, Superintendent
MAPS for Kids

The Oklahoma City Public Schools is a district spanning 136 square miles. Through its MAPS for Kids project—shorthand for Metropolitan Area Public Schools for Kids, the district's goal is to transform itself into a model urban school district. The project included two years of community meetings, passage of a \$180 million bond issue, and a seven-year, one-cent city sales tax. The long-range plan calls for rebuilding the district educationally and structurally with oversight for extensive construction, technology, and transportation projects given to a diverse eight-member committee. Over a decade, the district's goals include raising \$530 million, \$469 million of which will be used to build three new high schools and three new elementary schools and renovate 64 existing schools. The district's website is www.okcps.org.

PASSAIC VALLEY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, DISTRICT 1

Little Falls, N.J.
 Toni Belford Damiano, School Board President
 Viktor J. Joganow, Superintendent
Summer Performing Arts Program

School board members, staff, current and retired teachers, and community leaders joined hands to establish an education foundation in Little Falls, N.J., that supports enrichment opportunities for students. The first project, initiated in 2002, resulted in a Summer Performing Arts Program that also was offered in 2003 and 2004. School arts groups and the district itself have benefited. In evaluating the program over three years, the district found a 14 percent increase in enrollment in music electives, a 7 percent increase in band classes, a 16 percent increase in theater arts classes, and a 13 percent decrease in students opting to attend private high schools at the ninth-grade level. The district's website is www.pvhs.k12.nj.us.

ROANOKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Roanoke, Va.
 Drew Barrineau, School Board President
 Linda Weber, Superintendent
Roanoke County Public Schools Technology Program

The Roanoke County Public Schools turned to technology to advance and enhance learning for students while improving the effectiveness of schools. Through the Roanoke County Public Schools Technology Program, the district expanded its distance-learning program so

that it now uses six electronic classrooms, upgraded its existing instructional network, computerized school board operations, and instituted new strategies so that technology works for students and teachers. The district provides laptop computers to its more than 14,000 students and 1,230 teachers. This gives the students a competitive learning edge and allows teachers to experiment with tools complementing their teaching methods. The district's website is www.rcs.k12.va.us.

SCHOOL DISTRICT 45

Villa Park, Ill.
Linda Nystrom, School Board President
William Schewe, Superintendent

Adopt-a-School—A Personal Touch

The seven members of the District 45 Board of Education in Villa Park, Ill., put a personal touch on their work through their Adopt-a-School project. As each year starts, board members choose two schools to adopt. Board members attend assemblies, plays, and evening events and pop into classrooms during daytime hours. Their close involvement helps the district keep in touch with the schools, and brings community and school issues to the board's attention. The district's website is www.d45.dupage.k12.il.us.

SHERRARD COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 200

Orion, Ill.
Tim Arbet, School Board President
Robert Gillum, Superintendent

Fostering Accountability with Strategic Systems

Strategic planning transformed the Sherrard Board of Education in Orion, Ill., from a disorganized group into an efficient and effective school board. By creating a vision and mission for the 1,754-student district through a project titled Fostering Accountability with Strategic Systems, the board realized its job was to lead and not micromanage the district's day-to-day operations. Instead of attending frustrating and chaotic meetings, board members now listen to action team reports and make decisions based on information that is clearly outlined. The district's website is www.sherrard.us.

STATE COLLEGE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

State College, Pa.
Susan Werner, School Board President
Patricia Best, Superintendent

LifeLink

The State College Area School District collaborated with the Penn State University College of Education and the Association for Retarded Citizens to help students with special needs make the transition to adulthood and greater independence. Called LifeLink, the program provides an apartment for students to live in temporarily while they are still in high school so they can begin adjusting to living independently. LifeLink PSU, the district-university partnership, makes it possible for special needs students ages 18 to 21 to keep learning in a college setting. By continuing their high school education at a university, students with special needs have had a chance to study everything from German to ballroom dancing, attend club meetings and social functions, and share meals with other college students. The district's website is www.scasd.org.