A+ Partners in Education
Positioning Libraries as a Cornerstone in the Education Process
Valerie J. Gross

Must the word "education" be limited to mean teaching in schools? We at the Howard County Library in Maryland didn't think so. We set out to change that perception and include libraries in the vital education process, through our A+ Partners in Education program, launched in September 2002.

The prevailing image of libraries seldom includes education or educators. Because the general population understands and values education, libraries can only benefit by incorporating the image of libraries as a key component in the education process.

By assisting our county's sixty-nine schools and forty-seven thousand students through this partnership, we hope students, faculty, and the general public will view our county's school media centers and public libraries as an integral aspect of our students' twelve years of required education and as contributors to our students' overall academic success. So far, the benefits have been gratifying.

Benefits for libraries can include an increase in the number of cardholders, circulation, visits, reference questions asked, and summer reading participants. This, in turn, has financial relevance, since impressive statistics may translate well at budget time. We are also confident in a longer-term benefit—the students we delight today will go on to become library supporters when they become voters.

The partnership also makes librarians' jobs easier and leverages funding. For instance, all new students fill out library card applications in their school registration packets, eliminating the need for periodic card drives. Since all students will have a library card, media specialists can now provide additional resources during the school day by helping students access library databases from school computers. This expansion of resources allows media centers to maximize allocated funding. And, since media centers close early, the library extends student research time into the evening, weekends, and during school vacations.

Teachers are encouraged to forward assignment alerts to library staff. Knowing about school projects ahead of time allows library staff or media specialists to better assist students.

Perhaps the most remarkable benefit is that the partnership links libraries to education in a highly visible way, shaping an overall image that libraries are a cornerstone in the education process. This is important because people understand and value education—even people who have never set foot in a library. Being linked with education can only further elevate our
profession and make libraries more visible in the eyes of the community.

Furthermore, being part of a student’s twelve years of required education is an excellent way to build a solid customer base. Working with the schools in this manner, libraries can be constantly building the next generation of library customers who use, value, and love the library, ensuring the future of the library.

The Essence of Partnering

The overall essence of A+ Partners in Education can be summarized with an illustration. A 2002 article in the Baltimore Sun last fall began,

Although Dinora Quintanilla is an educated woman in her native El Salvador, when her sixth-grade son Jose has trouble with his homework, he rarely asks his mother for help. Jose—out of respect—doesn’t want to burden or embarrass her. So he goes to school, sometimes without having finished his homework. Through an interpreter, Quintanilla reveals how that worries her.

I called the principal the next day. Imagine how delighted she was to learn how our A+ partnership will help Jose complete his homework. Through the partnership, Jose will know that—in addition to guidance from his school’s media specialist—he can receive assistance from information specialists at the library, who will be able to plan ahead for Jose’s projects. Through the schools, Jose will obtain a library card, and with his new card, he can search full-text databases from school, home, or the library. To help him with specific homework questions, Jose will learn that he has access to a personal online tutor—for free—from 2 PM to midnight, seven days a week, in math, science, social studies, and English through a new library program called Live Homework Help. If Jose does not have Internet access at home, he will learn that he has access from any of our two hundred public access computers at our six libraries during prime homework time: after school, evenings, Saturdays, and Sundays. If Jose has a computer at home but no access to the Internet, he can sign up for free Internet access through the library. Jose will also learn that, for projects that must be typed (or when he can receive extra credit for turning in typed homework—as is the case with my own seventh grader), he can use the word processing workstations at any of our libraries.

While this example illustrates how a motivated student whose parents do not speak English is benefiting from the partnership, we are confident that all students—even students who are already doing well in school—will benefit academically.

A+ Vision

Our A+ vision is to promote scholarship and to expand the educational opportunities for each of Howard County’s forty-seven thousand public school students, providing for each student the best possible chance of overall academic success.

Maryland Librarian Named Educator of the Year

Hope Chase, Head of Youth Services for Howard County Library in Maryland, was named Educator of the Year by the Howard County Chamber of Commerce on June 9, 2003. The award is given to an individual who serves in a teaching or administrative capacity and helps to ensure educational excellence in Howard County.

“It is an immense honor for Howard County Library that Ms. Chase has won this prestigious award,” noted Howard County Library Director Valerie J. Gross. “We are proud to be a major contributor to excellence in education in Howard County, along with the Howard County Public School System and Howard Community College.”

Gross describes this honor as a new milestone in Howard County Library’s quest to be recognized by the general public as a major contributor to education. This is the first year that the award host granted the library the opportunity to nominate library educators, along with educators from the county’s school system and community college. Gross lauded Kara Calder, President and CEO of the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, for her vision to include library educators under the eligibility definition: “Anyone who serves in a teaching or administrative capacity as a full-time professional in a Howard County educational facility is eligible.”

While Chase was recognized, the collective contributions of Howard County Library employees shape the library’s overall image as an educational pillar in the community, especially the efforts to inaugurate the unprecedented A+ Partners in Education initiative with all sixty-nine public schools. “It is this enhanced educational image that allowed us to even nominate candidates this year,” Gross said.

Our A+ mission includes ensuring that every student has, and uses, a Howard County Library card to borrow materials and to access databases and Live Homework Help; and developing programs that encourage reading and assist with research and the completion of school assignments. In short, we are taking the library into all the schools, and we are bringing all schools—students, faculty, and staff—into the library.

The partnership is intended to assist with eliminating student achievement gaps, improving grades, and improving test scores in reading comprehension. Working at the library—or at home with a library card—all students have the same access to databases, assistance with school projects, and help with school assignments.
How the Partnership Began

When I joined Howard County Library in July 2001, individual partnerships were already in place with twelve of the county's sixty-nine schools. Activities included setting up library tables at back-to-school nights, periodic library card drives, and taking library programs into the schools. Some schools also brought their students into the library. Nevertheless, relations were less than ideal with other schools, where it was our perception that there was little interest in working together. In addition, any brochure or flyer we sent to the schools had to be individually approved, delaying the process and chilling efforts.

We began imagining a countywide partnership where working relations with media specialists, principals, faculty, and staff would be ideal, where students would receive library cards through the schools, and where library professionals would be viewed by the schools as adjunct educators. We pictured a world where students, faculty, and the community would truly view libraries as cornerstones in the education process.

After securing the support of the superintendent of schools, we met with library staff, media specialists, and key school administrators in November 2001. We needed to convince schools (especially media specialists) that this program was intended to supplement and enhance existing school and media center programs, emphasizing that working together would assist the media specialists. To our pleasant surprise, everyone at this first meeting saw merit in a partnership of this nature. The school staff suggested we set up monthly meetings to plan the partnership, aiming for a September 2002 launch. The initial handful of ideas blossomed. In true cooperative fashion, all parties shaped the A+ vision, mission, and objectives, which the partnership's title embodies: A+ Partners in Education.

Some ideas required extra convincing. For instance, initially the schools were skeptical about a key partnership component, the schools' involvement ensuring that all students receive a library card. Although they acknowledged this was a good idea, they were concerned about the time this process might take. School secretaries, however, were happy to take on the extra task, so the schools agreed to include library card applications in all new student registration packets. (The schools gather and forward the completed forms to the library and the library generates the cards and mails them to the students' homes.)

We invited media specialists to hold their spring 2002 meeting at our central library. The day's agenda included reviewing and shaping the A+ partnership objectives. Their experiences that day prompted them to add meetings at the library (for media specialists, principals, and faculty) to the A+ objectives. One media specialist said that a teacher had been taking her students each year to a nearby university library for certain highly specialized business resources. After she toured our central library, the media specialist accurately informed the teacher that the library has the very same resources!

Library staff also shaped the partnership's objectives. We held a meeting with approximately thirty staff members from all departments to discuss how the partnership would make their jobs easier, such as knowing student assignments ahead of time. We emphasized that we would always analyze any new idea that would come along, determining whether to move forward or to wait for additional funding.

We discussed ways the initiative would make our jobs more satisfying, such as the community's viewing us as educators and true professionals. Staff offered new ideas at this meeting, such as convincing the schools to show a video promotion of our summer reading program, allowing us to reach nearly 100 percent of the students instead of the typical 40 percent through in-person presentations.

We next finalized the agreement, sent copies to the school and library boards, and met with Irene Padilla, state librarian, and Nancy S. Grasnicki, state superintendent of schools, who both agreed to speak at our press conference announcing the partnership. The schools arranged for a signing ceremony where our agreement was signed by leaders in both institutions. We then mailed letters to all principals to inform them about the partnership and the press conference and reception. We also noted we would be calling them to set up individual meetings at each school. Even before we launched the partnership, we received a call from a principal who wanted to include library card applications in packets that all students received the first day of school. She had received her letter about the partnership and wanted her meeting to be as soon as possible.

Approximately 250 guests attended the press conference, including library staff, media specialists, principals, faculty, board members, and elected officials. Speakers included the Howard County executive, the Maryland State superintendent of schools, the Howard County superintendent of schools, and the state librarian.

Five Reasons A+ Will Succeed

Why will A+ Partners in Education succeed?

- commitment from our respective boards and top leaders of our organizations;
- support of school administrators, media specialists, and library staff, all of whom shaped the program;
A+ Partners in Education

- incorporation of library card applications into new student registration packets;
- commitment to regular communication (each school is linked to one of our six library branches, including a staff liaison); and
- development and maintenance of exemplary working relations with the schools.

Implementation

In four months (September through December), we met with all sixty-nine schools (principals, assistant principals, media specialists, reading specialists) to explain the partnership’s objectives and to emphasize how cooperation can enhance student academic achievement. Representing the library at these meetings were the designated library’s branch manager and partner-

ship liaison (usually the children’s or teen specialist) as well as a representative from the library’s administrative team who worked on the partnership’s development. Each meeting generated more enthusiasm and ideas. For example, principals suggested we devise a way to inform all new teachers and principals each year about the partnership’s objectives, and several suggested that the kindergarten curriculum include a field trip to the library.

We are energized by overwhelmingly positive responses from principals, teachers, and staff. One hurried principal, who said she had only thirty minutes for the meeting, was still envisioning ideas two hours later. Another principal, who initially did not want to attend, requested one thousand library card applications for a library card drive that would aim for 100 percent participation. She also said she would require students to use the library for certain assignments.

John R. O’Rourke, superintendent of the Howard County Public School System, said, “Open communication between the library and the school system can only mean greater success for students throughout the county. When our students succeed, we all succeed as a community. And that merits an A+.”

We are elated that principals are now scheduling faculty meetings at their designated library branches, including the A+ partnership on faculty meeting agendas, and inviting library staff to demonstrate Live Homework Help and library databases. Just as important, parent-teacher associations are now holding family nights at the library.

We are already noticing an increase in the number of school-age students at our libraries, and students are using Live Homework Help and library databases more frequently. Additionally, teachers are forwarding assignment alerts. For example, a middle school notified its library that students would soon be required to read books nominated for the Black Eyed Susan Award (an honor bestowed upon a Maryland author each year). As a result, we transferred many titles from our other branches to that library and arranged for a special table so that students could easily browse the titles and select books that interested them. Other assignment alerts included endangered species, folk tales, presidents’ biographies, and novels by African Americans.

Spreading the Word

Schools are now assisting with public relations efforts by publicizing the partnership and other library programs in their newsletters. Even programs not directly related to school assignments, such as an upcoming teen lock-in or the arrival of a new book or DVD in high demand (such as the Harry Potter series) are being included. Schools are beginning to equate increased library use with the increased chance for overall academic success.

Numerous principals have e-mailed their entire faculty, noting the wealth of information available at the library and through the library’s Web site, encouraging teachers to ask students to write their library card barcode numbers in their assignment books and emphasizing the importance of library databases and Live Homework Help. In addition, principals are asking teachers to give extra credit to students who use library databases and encouraging teachers to forward assignment alert forms to the library. Schools are printing inserts for student binders that list library databases, along with instructions, as well as information on Live Homework Help. Parent-teacher associations disseminate information about the initiative and the partnership has also received media attention.

Opening Doors

Even though the program is in its infancy, benefits can be seen over and beyond students incorporating our educational services and our programs into their twelve years of required education. Recognizing the importance of media specialists, the school system has included additional media center positions in budget requests. Library staff have been invited to serve on the school system’s district planning team as well as on its library media advisory committee and its technology advisory committee. Library staff are being invited to speak at back-to-school nights.

In his State of the County address, our county executive twice highlighted the county’s reputation of excellence in education and the importance of continued funding for education, both times noting consecutively “the school system, the library system, and the community college.”
In another first for Howard County Library, the Leadership Howard County program not only included the library as part of its Education Day, we also hosted the afternoon segment. We have been invited to serve on the chamber of commerce’s education committee, on the community college’s commission for the future, and on a joint committee with the county, the schools, and the community college addressing the direction of technology. And, at a recent citizens budget hearing, one speaker who got up to testify against the funding of a park, stated emphatically, “Don’t fund this park, fund education—fund the library!” In short, our community is already beginning to link the library to education in stronger, vital new ways.

Model Schools

The U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is interested in the A+ partnership as a case study, as is the Maryland State Department of Education and the Division of Library Development and Services (DLDS). IMLS and DLDS are assisting us in applying outcomes-based evaluation methods to analyze partnership activities to determine success through statistics. To measure effectively, three schools have agreed to serve as model schools: a high school (ninth grade), a middle school (sixth grade), and an elementary school (third grade). Serving as a model school involves a greater commitment on the part of the schools’ principals and media specialists. Our goal is to achieve measurable outcomes to support our assertion that our partnership effectively bridges achievement gaps, increases reading, and improves grades and test scores.

By the Numbers

As of June 15, 2003, we have processed 3,500 cards; 75 were for teachers. Since the launch in September 2002, we have presented in-person programs, demonstrations, and book discussions for 47,500 students, staff, and parents, including programs for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) parents and students.

Public libraries and schools stand to reap many benefits from working together. Here in Howard County, we have only just begun, and we are already experiencing many positives.

Our partnership expands the resources available to media specialists, who now view the library as an expansion of their services. Our jobs are more rewarding since there are unprecedented opportunities for staff to use their expertise and share their knowledge of resources with new audiences, including ESOL students.

This partnership links us to education in a powerful new way. We want libraries to be viewed by students, faculty, and the community as an integral part of the education process. This is particularly timely as this country is engaged in a national conversation about education thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act and where bridging achievement gaps is a focus across the nation.

The strongest and most visible statement of the impact the partnership has had in linking the library and education came when Hope Chase, Howard County Library’s Head of Youth Services, was chosen as Educator of the Year. This is the first year that the award host, Howard County Chamber of Commerce, granted us the opportunity to nominate library educators for the prestigious award, along with educators from the county’s public school system and community college. This honor is a milestone in our quest to be recognized by the general public as a major contributor to education. We celebrate this noteworthy success as an indicator that public libraries in general are fast becoming recognized for the key role they play as partners in education.

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