

Getting the Job Done: Making Literacy an Integral Part of Community Services

Steve Sumerford, Assistant Director
Greensboro Public Library
Greensboro, North Carolina
(336) 373-3636
steve.sumerford@ci.greensboro.nc.us
www.greensborolibrary.org/literacy

Greensboro, North Carolina

Greensboro is a city of 200,000 located in the center of North Carolina. The population is 60 percent White, 30 percent African-American, and 10 percent Other. For most of the 20th century, our economy was dominated by textiles and tobacco, but for the past 25 years those industries have declined or left the area. Lost jobs have not been replaced and our economy remains weak.

Greensboro has two great claims to fame:

1. In 1960 when segregation was still the norm, four Black students refused to leave the Woolworth's lunch counter without being served. This made the front page of the nation's newspapers. For many years this event was a great source of embarrassment to the citizens of Greensboro. Now, of course, the four students are heralded.
2. In 1979 a joint Ku Klux Klan/Nazi demonstration resulted in five anti-Nazi counter-demonstrators being shot and killed. Again, Greensboro made national and international news.

Compared to other cities in the South, Greensboro has a surprisingly high number of refugee residents, with 75 to 80 languages spoken in the schools. A driving force for this unusual demographic is Lutheran Social Services (LSS), headquartered in Greensboro. LSS is well known for its refugee resettlement agenda. Many LSS refugees go no further than Greensboro and the resulting diversity has influenced the library's literacy program significantly.

The Greensboro Public Library

Greensboro Public Library includes a central library and six branches. We have a \$7 million budget – a low per-capita allocation compared to other libraries in the state. This low allocation is due to the way we are funded. We are a city library and therefore funded by the city. However, we also are mandated to serve the county, albeit it with limited corresponding funding.

In spite of the limited funding, the library is remarkable at making commitments to things not considered to be essential to libraries. One such "nonessential" commitment was made to literacy fifteen years ago.

The library's director and staff try to think in a cutting-edge way. This kind of thinking and action has been recognized and rewarded over the years. The library enjoys broad-based community support, has won numerous awards, and does well with private fundraising.

Why Start a Library Literacy Partnership?

Fifteen years ago the community college delivered all of Greensboro's adult literacy services, which emphasized GED attainment and reached adults aged 16 and older. No services were available to adults whose low skills barred their ability to succeed on this GED track. Thus, many, many of Greensboro's underachieving adults could not make academic progress.

Before I moved to Greensboro, I had done literacy work and was passionate about its importance. I brought this passion to my new position at Greensboro Public Library and worked with the library director to "get literacy on the agenda." We saw eye-to-eye, sharing the belief that it was fitting for the library to take a leadership role in solving the community's adult literacy problem. The director also saw an opportunity to enhance the library's image – a nice combination.

We were a sleepy library system when we started formulating how the library would go about stepping into a community leadership role. The library never had reached out to the community in any way. By taking the lead, looking at the community's literacy problem, and offering solutions, the sleepy library's image transformed to that of community leader and problem solver. This transformation was evolutionary and took place over ten years. In the end, the library system emerged from obscurity to high profile.

What We Did

We decided that the best way to proceed was to involve as many people as possible. To do this, we developed a coalition and initiated a series of partnerships. We chose this strategy because we knew the library did not have a strong reputation in providing adult literacy services and we felt that it would be presumptuous for us to suddenly launch a new literacy program. We also felt that a true community-based approach would draw together existing literacy programs and help them improve the quality and capacity of programs rather than duplicate existing services.

Identifying and meeting with key stakeholders was a time-consuming process. It took two or three months. We hosted many meetings and made countless phone calls. In the end, we succeeded in getting buy-in from all of the key organization's executive directors.

Twenty-five organizations sent representatives to our first open coalition meeting in 1989 – representatives who were ready to roll up their sleeves and begin working. This ready-for-action success was directly related to the time invested in building essential relationships early.

Our partnership came to be called *Community of Readers*, a name we proposed at the first meeting. We felt that the name conveyed two things: First, that we planned to work together as a community. Second, it conveyed a positive image.

Our mission was very simple and direct: to promote reading and literacy in Guilford County. More than 30 organizations and agencies came to comprise this network, including educational institutions, non-profit organizations, human service agencies, government departments, and grassroots activists. The Community of Readers purposes were fourfold:

- To create and sustain opportunities for diverse organizations to collaborate on projects related to reading and literacy – particularly to connect reading/literacy organizations with organizations that do not have literacy as their primary mission.
- To provide technical assistance to organizations working in the field of literacy and human services.
- To raise the county's awareness of the problem of illiteracy.
- To identify gaps in services related to reading and literacy.

An important element of our effort was that Community of Readers as a group was able to focus solely on literacy activities – it did not get bogged down in administrative issues. It was the Greensboro Public Library that supplied money and leadership, until such time some 11 years later, when the network's literacy activities were pretty much institutionalized at individual organizations, that the library turned its attention to another pressing need: ESL services.

How We Launched Community of Readers: A Step-by-Step Approach

We gathered information. We conducted an informal survey to assess Greensboro's literacy needs by simply talking to people in the community. We talked with employers, school system officials, the Chamber of Commerce, the director of Head Start, leaders of grassroots tutoring and literacy programs, and neighborhood organizers. We asked them to describe the community's literacy needs, where they saw gaps in service, and what they believed to be the most promising solutions to these problems.

We wrote a broad concept paper. We prepared the concept paper as though it were a grant proposal. Drawing on our survey results, we defined the problem and described existing conditions and service needs. We developed goals and objectives, an evaluation plan, and a budget. We shared this with as many community stakeholders as we could.

We picked a core group of community organizations. In the fall of 1989 the charter members were invited to attend a meeting of the Community of Readers. Prior to the first meeting we wrote to each executive director reminding him or her of our previous

conversations. We also included the concept paper. Although an invitational meeting may not appear to be very democratic, we had a reason for doing it. The selection of the ten charter member organizations was strategic and reflected our personal commitment to be inclusive. Five of the ten organizations were African-American; we wanted to avoid the "adding them on later" phenomenon, which at the time typically happened in Greensboro. Further, we wanted to be sure we included organizations that worked with both adults and children. Finally, our original ten included agencies that had access to people with literacy issues.

Educating the library and Community of Readers about the literacy issue and remedies.

The agenda for each of the 12 year-one meetings included a literacy expert. The experts helped broaden our knowledge about the issue's complexity. As a result, we decided to take a more holistic approach to tackling Greensboro's literacy challenge. Rather than isolating adult literacy, we decided that we wanted to bring together everyone who cared about literacy for adults *and* children.

Expanding the Community of Readers. Before we announced the Community of Readers, we planned a series of exciting events and projects that encouraged immediate involvement of group members. These activities included a literacy Sabbath, a workshop on workplace literacy, a read-in at city hall, a tutoring workshop, a literacy night at the circus, and a marketing campaign to promote adult literacy services and participation. We invited non-profits and publicly funded institutions to participate in these activities, which were designed to make Greensboro a literacy-rich community. In that first year, the Community of Readers expanded from 10 to 25 organizations.

Community of Readers becomes the Multicultural Advisory Coalition (MAC).

For eleven years, Community of Readers' efforts were marked by high energy and significant accomplishments. We drove a citywide awareness campaign that stressed the importance of the city doing something about our literacy needs. The effort established an identity for the library within the larger community *and* created an incredible amount of momentum for the group. Access to quality adult literacy services at all levels is greater than ever before.

As part of its mission, Community of Readers searched for gaps in Greensboro's literacy services. Three years ago, lack of adequate English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy services was identified. We realized that the size and projected growth of Greensboro's immigrant community would result in severe under-service to those in need of ESL instruction.

In response, the library led in the formation of an immigrant and refugee coalition – the Multicultural Advisory Coalition (MAC) – to address literacy and other needs of the refugee community. Modeled after the Community of Readers initiative, MAC includes health, advocacy, and literacy groups. It is now among the library's priority projects. All Community of Readers activities were successfully transitioned to those member organizations best suited to sustain them. Many Community of Readers members are part of MAC.

Making a Difference in Greensboro

Community of Readers/Multicultural Advisory Coalition achievements:

- In 2002 the Library organized the first citywide read-in called *One City, One Book*. We used the structure and concepts developed through the Community of Readers to produce the event. More than 12,000 people participated including hundreds of adult literacy students.
- An entire branch of the Greensboro Public Library is a welcome center and ESL instruction site for immigrants and refugees.
- The number of ESL learners served by the library increased from 50 to more than 350 learners who visit the library every week for tutoring, citizenship classes, computer assisted instruction, and Woman's Literacy classes.
- The number of providers who serve ESL learners has increased from two in 1989 to more than 20 in 2003.
- All ESL providers in Greensboro receive ESL training from the Community of Readers/Glenwood Library.

Today in Greensboro, a large number of agencies do much more to promote literacy than ever before. This number includes agencies whose missions do not even mention literacy, yet they work to expose clients to books and libraries. For example, when our community opened a new department of social services building, its managers asked us how to design a learning center in the waiting area for children and parents. This is the sort of promotion that touches everyone in the community in many ways every day.

Keys to Success

- **Be inclusive and affirm everyone**, even the poorly performing non-profit if necessary.
- **Celebrate literacy by trying to create a literacy-rich environment in the city**. This "tone" was critical to our success.
- **Don't isolate adult literacy**. Bring together the issues of families and children. Children's librarians are powerful literacy promoters who do fantastic literacy work. Use them!
- **Manage change**. When it was time for the library to focus on emerging issues, such as ESL, the change naturally affected the Community of Readers. Important elements of adapting to this change were the following:
 - Willingness to change.
 - Ability to change by leveraging successes.
 - Transforming Community of Readers by keeping what worked, eliminating what no longer did, and by developing the Multicultural Advisory Coalition to meet emerging needs.

- **DO IT!** Demonstrate to community leaders and elected officials that your library is a community problem solver. Libraries don't have a lot of baggage and often are perceived as neutral. Bringing people and agencies together is one thing you can do for your community. And, it's a great way for libraries to enhance their image while doing something for literacy.
- **Carry out your unique charge.** The library is uniquely positioned and mandated to serve both children and adults in terms of education. There is not a single community in the United States that couldn't benefit from a literacy coalition and there is no better agency than the public library.

Lessons Learned

- **While Community of Readers was able to stay focused on literacy services** because the library managed funding and leadership, the downside of our structure (more a network than a coalition) is that it didn't take too much for Community of Readers to lose its identity and momentum once the library changed its role and focused its literacy-related energies on MAC.
- **Don't try workplace literacy unless you're qualified.** I stumbled into a workplace project only to discover that what we had to offer did not work in a workplace setting. Sure, you can have a GED in the factory, but what if the factory wants its literacy customized to what people do on the job? You have to have the skills, knowledge, and training to conduct an analysis of the job and create a curriculum. This was unrealistic for us. We had in our minds a holistic, learner-centered experience using pertinent print materials, like the newspaper. In this instance the company wanted its employees to learn to read specific manuals in order to operate machinery and equipment. The average adult literacy program is not equipped to do that kind of workplace literacy. We had to withdraw.
- **When money is put on the table, everything gets tricky.** Exercising my community spirit, I pulled some of the Community of Readers members together to write a proposal to access new community funding. When the grant guidelines became available, we learned that the grant was very specific to the library. Those who had helped earlier felt cut out. In retrospect, I was premature to involve other organizations before I understood the grant guidelines fully. The hard feelings this created could have been avoided.

How to Learn More About Greensboro Public Library's Literacy Partnership

Visit the Greensboro Public Library's web site at www.greensborolibrary.org/literacy.