217   A+ Partners in Education
       Linking Libraries to Education for a Flourishing Future
       Valerie J. Gross

223   Contemporary Forces That Supported the Founding of the
       Boston Public Library
       Grace-Ellen McCrann

229   Unintentional Recruiting for Diversity
       Denice Adkins and Lisa K. Hussey

234   Assessing the True Nature of Information Transactions at a
       Suburban Library
       Rhonda S. Boyd

IN EVERY ISSUE

188   Editor’s Note
       Renée Vaillancourt McGrath

189   From the President
       Daniel L. Walters

194   Tales from the Front
       Jennifer T. Ries-Taggart

196   Perspectives
       Hampton (Skip) Auld

205   Book Talk
       The Worst Day Writing Is Better Than the Best Day of Work: An
       Interview with Terry Trueman
       Stephanie Squicciarini

PLUS . . .

186   Readers Respond
192   Verso
       Instant Messaging: Quick and Dirty Reference for Teens and
       Others
       Sarah Houghton

208   Internet Spotlight
       Steven M. Cohen

210   Tech Talk
       A. Paula Wilson

211   On the Agenda

212   Bringing in the Money
       Stephanie K. Gerding

243   News from PLA
       Kathleen Hughes

244   By the Book
       Julie Elliott

247   New Product News
       Vicki Nesting

215   InterViews
       Copyright Concerns: The
       Copyright Implications of Blogs
       Carrie Russell

246   Index to Advertisers
A+ Partners in Education
Linking Libraries to Education for a Flourishing Future

Valerie J. Gross

In September 2002, Howard County Library and the Howard County Public School System in Columbia, Maryland, announced the formation of A+ Partners in Education, a formalized partnership designed to position the public library as a full partner in the education of the county's 48,000 public school students. The partnership promotes scholarship, assists with eliminating student achievement gaps, and expands the academic opportunities for each student. The partnership also heightens the visibility and importance of the library and school media centers, shapes the role of librarians as educators, links libraries to a commonly understood definition of education, and builds the next generation of library customers and supporters, ensuring the future of the library.

A few years back, a young journalist called me, eager to ask questions for a feature article. As the director of the Howard County Library (HCL), I was happy to oblige, and spoke with her for more than an hour about A+ Partners in Education, a newly implemented initiative between HCL and Howard County Public School System (HCPSS).1 Nearly three years later, I can still hear her concluding comments: “Wow! I grew up in Howard County. I wish all of this had been in place to help me when I was in school!”

In fact, much of it had been available—she simply had not realized it. And it is likely that her teachers and parents had not viewed the library as playing a major role in education either. Yet we, and most public libraries, have provided academic assistance that supports school curricula for years. Indeed, all library services and programs fall under the umbrella of lifelong education.

A+ Partners in Education capitalizes on the value the community places in education and serves as a catalyst to change public perceptions of the library. We repackaged traditional services for students and enhanced our overall program with innovative ideas and cutting-edge components. A comprehensive network of communication serves to connect the library with the entire school system. If our young journalist were starting school today, I am confident she would view HCL as an integral aspect of her twelve years of required education.

Now in its third year, the partnership has resulted in extraordinary gains for both the schools and the library. The schools benefit from students' improved academic performance. For the library, the partnership augments visibility and links libraries to a commonly understood definition of education and its indispensability, which we can then expand to our services for all ages. At the same time, the partnership is leveraging public funding, making school media center and public library jobs more rewarding, and developing new generations of library customers who will value and support the library.

The Essence of the Partnership

The overall essence of the partnership can be summarized with the example of a student, “Sara,” who is just entering kindergarten. When Sara’s parents register her for school in March, they will be asked to complete a HCL card application along with school forms. Sara will receive her new library card in the mail, along with an incentive to register for the Summer Reading Program and an invitation to “Kindergarten Here We Come!” at her liaison library. Sara and her parents will hear library staff speak at Sara’s Back to School night. In October, Sara’s class will take a field trip to the library as part of the full-day kindergarten curriculum. Throughout the year, Sara will experience library staff presentations in her classroom, and she will return to the library for additional curriculum-related field trips arranged by her teacher. Sara, her parents, and her siblings will have

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an opportunity to attend family night at the library hosted by her school's ParentTeacher Association (PTA). Through the schools, Sara will learn about extracurricular library services and children's programs; for example, children's books in Chinese or author programs featuring popular writers such as Linda Sue Park, Lemony Snicket, and Jack Gantos.

As years progress and homework mounts, Sara will learn that in addition to guidance from her school's media specialist, she can receive assistance from professionals at the public library, who will be able to plan ahead for Sara's projects thanks to Assignment Alerts her teachers forward to HCL. Sara will learn that her library card provides her access to full-text databases available from school, home, or the library. To help her with specific homework questions, Sara will learn that she has access to a personal online tutor—for free—from 2 P.M. to midnight, seven days a week, in the core subjects of math, science, social studies, and English. If Sara does not have Internet access at home, she will be able to use any of the library's 325 public-access computers during prime homework time (afterschool, evenings, and weekends) and that word-processing programs are also available at each branch for projects that must be typed.

The Partnership in the Making

Before the A+ Partnership, HCL had worked with twelve of the county's sixty-nine schools at varying levels. 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 students into the library. Nevertheless, relations were less than ideal with many schools, where it was our perception that there was little interest in working together. In addition, any communication, brochure, or flyer we sent to the schools for dissemination required individual approval, delaying the process and chilling outreach efforts.

We began imagining a countywide partnership where working relations and communication with media specialists, principals, faculty, and staff would be ideal, where students would receive library cards through the schools, and where library staff would be viewed by the schools as adjunct faculty. We pictured a world where students, faculty, and the community would view the library as critical to education.

After securing the support of the superintendent of schools, library staff, media specialists, and key school administrators met with us to begin plans. We set out to convince the schools (especially media specialists) that this program would supplement and enhance existing school and media center programs, and that we could implement the partnership with our existing staffs and budgets. A handful of ideas blossomed, and over the course of one year, we shaped the partnership's vision, mission, and objectives. Each of the county's schools was assigned a liaison public library, along with a staff member responsible for regular communication.

After the signing of an official agreement, public library staff met individually with principals, assistant principals, media specialists, and reading specialists at all sixty-nine schools to explain how the collaboration would enhance student achievement. Each meeting generated more enthusiasm. One hurried principal, who said she only had thirty minutes for the meeting, was still envisioning ideas two hours later. Another principal, who initially did not want to meet, requested one thousand library card applications for her school. She also said she would require students to use the library for certain assignments. The designated library's branch manager and partnership liaison (a children's or teen specialist) represented HCL at each of these meetings.

A+ Vision

The A+ Partners in Education vision promotes scholarship and expands the educational opportunities for Howard County's public school students, providing each student the best possible chance of overall academic success.

The mission includes ensuring that every student has and uses a HCL card and developing programs that encourage reading and assist with the completion of school assignments. The initiative applies a comprehensive approach to working with the schools, providing for a solid, unified, county-wide program.

In short, we are taking the public library into all schools, and we are bringing the schools—students and faculty—into the public library to assist with eliminating achievement gaps and improving grades. Working from school, at the library or from home, all students have the same access to databases, online tutoring, and professional assistance with projects and assignments. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the revised SAT test that includes an essay component, this initiative is especially important, as schools are focusing on improving student test scores, especially in reading and writing.

Key Components

The following components of the partnership play a major role in its success.

Library Cards

Students receive library cards through school registration. School personnel place public library card applications in kindergarten and new student registration packets, then collect and send the completed forms to the library. Library staff mail the cards to the students' homes. We have processed more than 14,000 library cards through the partnership, as well as 800 A+ Teacher cards, a special program for teachers that we instituted. While this systematic approach will eventually end the need for library card drives, until such time, the schools are coordinating drives, with many principals aiming for 100 percent participation.

Sometimes we get additional help. The grandfather of a third grader reported that a librarian had visited his grandson's class, asking how many of the children had a library card. All students, except his grandson, raised their hands. Hearing that his grandson was the only one who did not have a library card, the grandfather gave all of his grandchildren library cards as gifts. When asked how old his grandchildren were, he replied, "Five weeks to eleven years old. I guess I should start the little one now—I don't want her to not have something that all children have."

Commitment from Both Organizations

Commitment from both organizations contributes to the success of the partnership. One of the strongest indications of the commitment and value the schools place in the partnership occurred this past year. The school system decided to add an annual field trip to the library to
its kindergarten curriculum. In support of this decision, HCPSS superintendent Sydney L. Cousin said, “Establishing this academic connection with the library at the beginning of each child’s twelve years of education can only further one of our major goals: bridging achievement gaps among students.”

Assignment Alerts
Teachers communicate with media specialists and library staff about upcoming assignments through online Assignment Alerts. One alert informed staff that 117 fourth graders would be assigned a Native American folktale to read. Advance notice allowed staff to bolster the branch’s collection with copies from other branches. One hundred books were checked out to the students. Another alert allowed preparation time to assist seventh graders with a history project. A student wrote, “Thank you for helping me receive an ‘A’ on my Cleisthenes project. Without your assistance, I would have spent twice the time getting half the work done.”

Online Tutors
Through the library’s Web site, students have access to online tutors—for free—from 2 P.M. to midnight, seven days a week. Tutors—who are graduate students, retired teachers, or teachers desiring supplemental income—assist with homework questions in math, science, English, and social studies. Students also may request homework help en Español. Students key their school, grade, and library card number into a computer, which launches a virtual classroom. Although students log on for tutoring in all available subjects, most log on for assistance in algebra, geometry, calculus, trigonometry, and chemistry. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from the nearly 20,000 sessions recorded since September 2002, as evidenced by the following sampling of comments:

- “Excellent tutor; great service. I’m glad my library is offering it!”
- “This was very helpful in the proofreading of my essay.”
- “A great resource when you’re stuck on something.”
- “[My online tutor was the] best math teacher I ever had.”
- “Never, ever, stop this. My mom does not remember algebra and I would be lost without this.”

The A+ Tool Kit
Howard County Library is compiling an A+ Partnership Tool Kit that will contain an agreement with the schools, as well as A+ brochures, forms, letters, and our catalog of programs plus a copy of a fourteen-minute multimedia presentation on DVD geared to sell the concept to the schools. If you would like an A+ Kit, please contact our lead A+ Partnership coordinator, associate director Liz Lancaster (lancasterl@HCLibrary.org). If you have any questions or comments, we would love to hear from you!

In true partnership spirit, the schools share in the expense of providing this service. Assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction Robert O. Glascock stated, “I truly believe that the more we can engage kids around libraries, the stronger their overall education will be. Online homework assistance through the library plays an important part in accelerating student success as we work toward the goal of eliminating achievement gaps among student groups.”

Full-text Databases
Online tutoring complements two other remote-access services available through the library’s Web site. Available 24/7, students search full-text databases for their research needs (for example, Encyclopedia Americana, Groves Dictionary of Art, Biography Resource Center, Access Science, 125,000 full-text poems, and thousands of newspapers and magazines), and use AskUsNow!, Maryland’s statewide virtual reference service.

Two-Way Communication
Library liaisons place high priority on maintaining ongoing communication with their counterpart school liaisons. School liaisons disseminate partnership information to the school’s faculty and administration, who, in turn, communicate the information to students and parents through school newsletters, Web sites, meetings, and classroom announcements. Numerous principals send e-mail to their entire faculty, emphasizing the importance of students capitalizing on the partnership, especially library databases and online tutoring assistance. Principals ask teachers to give extra credit to students who use library resources and encourage them to forward assignment alert forms to the library. In addition, the A+ Advisory Committee, comprised of school and library staff, meets monthly to continue cultivating close working relations, review progress, and discuss new ideas. We also keep board mem-

bers at both the library and the schools informed through regular updates, and library staff serve on the school system’s district planning team, media advisory committee, and technology advisory committee, which keeps the partnership visible among key school administrators.

Publicity
Publicity continues to build momentum. We promote the partnership through public speaking, television segments, newspaper articles, library publications, school newsletters, and conference presentations. (At a PTA council meeting last year, the audience of PTA presidents and school representatives seized every last packet of materials I had brought along the instant I finished speaking.)

At the conclusion of the first and second years of the partnership, we hosted celebrations that were attended by elected officials at federal, state, and local levels; library and school board members; community dignitaries; and leaders and representatives from the Maryland Department of Education and the American Library Association. The events featured presentations from school media specialists and library staff who shared stories illustrating the benefits of the partnership. At this year’s celebration, Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state superintendent of schools, described the partnership as “enhancing educational excellence.” Irene Padilla, Maryland superintendent for libraries, announced a $25,000 continuation grant in addition to the initial $52,000 grant for the development of the partnership during its second year, emphasizing the importance of producing an A+ Tool Kit for the benefit of other public libraries wishing to replicate the program.

Connecting with Students, Faculty, and Parents
By bringing the library into the schools and vice versa, we have connected with
programs have been overwhelmingly positive. The schools value the lineup of choices, and library staff appreciate that the catalog provides variety within parameters to facilitate consistent quality and adequate preparation time.

Library staff are frequently invited to present customized partnership programs for teachers. For instance, when speaking to English instructional leaders, we focused on assistance available to students working on research papers at both the media centers and at the public library; they were so impressed that we have been invited back to present the same program for all high school English teachers at their in-service day!

We aim to be responsive to teachers' needs. When teachers at an elementary school reported they were having difficulty motivating third-grade students to complete their curriculum's twenty-five-book reading requirement, we developed a reading game as an incentive. The game featured the school's mascot walking through the woods, encountering books along a path. As they read, students received prizes. Library staff visited the class, booktalking and bringing books the students could borrow. The school also brought the class to the library. As a result, all students are now on target for their mandated reading requirement. This program will be made available to all elementary schools in the county. The game board can be modified to feature the school's mascot, and the liaison branch library can provide ongoing assistance through booktalks and visits.

Also in response to teacher requests, we initiated an A+ Teacher Library Card. The card gives teachers who are employed in Howard County schools special borrowing privileges for materials used in preparing lessons or assisting students with assignments. Teachers may borrow materials for six weeks and renew materials once; they are given a ten-day grace period for fines. The cards were an immediate success. In the past eight months, we issued eight hundred A+ Teacher cards—including two hundred the first day of teacher orientation!

We are especially pleased about the increased opportunities we have to connect with parents. We now are invited to speak to parents about the partnership as part of the program agenda at First Day of School and Back-to-School Night meetings. In addition, family nights at the library sponsored by the schools' PTAs provide opportunities to
inform parents of the academic support the library provides for their students. While classroom presentations and PTA events grant us opportunities to connect with students and parents, we have also implemented the following programs.

**Dogs Educating and Assisting Readers**

In partnership with Fidos for Freedom, the school, and the Friends of HCL, the library offers Dogs Educating and Assisting Readers (DEAR). Third graders visit the library on Saturday mornings to read to a loving, nonjudgmental audience: therapy dogs. One parent wrote, "My daughter was a shy reader who blossomed into a confident one. She fell in love with ‘her’ dog and believed that the dogs needed to be read to as much as she needed to read.” Students begin the program reading two to five levels below their target level and usually read at or above grade level upon completion. Fidos for Freedom won Howard County's Community Organization of the Year award for this joint program with the library.

**Book Club for Boys**

We initiated a successful program for middle-school boys, Book Club for Boys. With statistics showing that boys score lower on standardized reading and writing tests than girls, it is especially important to facilitate programs intended to get boys excited about reading. The boys meet weekly after school. Mystery books are the most popular.

**A+ Summer Reading Program Promotional Video**

Our jointly produced A+ summer reading program promotional videos now bolster the in-person summer reading marketing we do each year in May. Library staff, school faculty, and students (who receive class credits for the projects) write and produce three videos—one each for elementary, middle, and high school students. The Maryland State Department of Education’s Division of Library Development and Services funded this year’s videos and distributed them to library systems throughout the state.

**Spelling Bee**

The new HCL Spelling Bee is inspiring students to improve their spelling, increase their vocabularies, learn word etymology, and develop correct English usage. Winners from the forty bees held in fall 2004 at public schools, private schools, and home school associations participated in HCL’s Spelling Bee on March 18 before an audience of 800 people. The overall champion represented Harford County at the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., all expenses paid. Sponsored by The Baltimore Sun, the HCL Spelling Bee is organized as a regional bee under the rules of the Scripps-Howard National Spelling Bee.

**English for Speakers of Other Languages**

To assist with bridging achievement gaps among English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, we expanded our outreach to the ESOL community, coordinating numerous tours and introducing library resources and programs to these students and their parents. The schools’ ESOL office translates library card applications, brochures, and other library publications into the top four languages spoken in the county: Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Urdu. This past year, the summer reading program game board was translated into three languages. We also are targeting schools with high ESOL populations for on-site summer reading program registration. Additionally, we visit Newcomers classes (high school courses for first-generation immigrants) every two weeks, bringing books at appropriate reading levels on topics suggested by the teacher. The classes also visit the library, and interested students participate in an evening program at the library with their parents. Teachers say the increased contact with the library has resulted in these students reading more and achieving better English skills.

**Measurable Outcomes**

While principals, teachers, and students have credited the partnership with contributing to improved grades, higher test scores, and increased reading levels, it is important to produce measurable outcomes that support these assertions. To this end, four schools have agreed to serve as models for purposes of evaluation. Serving as a model school involves a greater commitment on the part of the schools’ principals and media specialists to work closely with the library. Teachers submit assignment alerts allowing the library to measure the benefits of having staff prepared to assist with specific projects. Library staff is conducting pre- and post-surveys of students and faculty to find out how library use has changed since beginning the partnership. Measurable outcomes will support the assertion that the partnership helps bridge achievement gaps, increase reading, and assist in improving grades and test scores. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded the outcome-based evaluations we are using.

**A+ On the Rise**

As the partnership progressed, library staff offered a number of presentations to the library community. We talked about the partnership’s successes at the 2004 PLA conference, at a 2003 meeting of the YALSA executive board, and at numerous Maryland events, which led to inquiries from libraries across the state and across the country.

At PLA's conference, HCL led a session called “Changing Perceptions: Public Libraries As Partners in Education.” One of the attendees wrote, “I think the time spent at your program was worth the price of admission to PLA all by itself.”

The Wadsworth (Ohio) Public Library has launched its own A+ initiative. Director C. Allen Nichols confirms the remarkable benefits of the program, noting, "We will not likely discover a partnership that provides more benefits for our efforts than A+ Partners in Education." Commenting on changed perceptions, he added:

Now that Wadsworth Public Library is connected with education in this visible way, we are seeing far more students and parents using library resources. Just as important, the general public is beginning to view library staff as educators and is placing a higher value in the library and its contributions to quality of life in the community.

Charles County (Md.) Public Library director Emily Ferren, who is in the process of implementing a comprehensive partnership with the schools, observed:

Teachers, students and parents appreciate the variety of library programs that also reinforce the school curriculum. Even though our partnership is still in its infancy, we are already reaping the benefits of strengthened relations with the
schools and with the Charles County community including private schools and those home schooled.6

Extraordinary Gains

Howard County has seen extraordinary gains for both the schools and the library. The schools have acquired access to research materials, databases, online tutors, and an additional band of adjunct faculty (library staff) who provide homework assistance to students. Schools also benefit from the training and programs library staff provide for teachers and students. The partnership expands the resources available to media specialists, who now view the library as an extension of their services. Branch library hours extend student research and homework assistance time into evenings, weekends, and school vacations.

Although library professionals also care about more complete homework, better projects, improved test scores, and increased reading, there are other significant gains for school media centers and public libraries—and for the library profession in general. School media centers and media specialists have been recognized time and again since the launch of the partnership as an essential component of students’ overall education. Carol Fritts, coordinator of media and educational technology for HCPS, recommends the partnership to schools. “All schools should take advantage of the opportunities offered by the A+ Partnership because it greatly increases the resources available to students and teachers in our schools,” she said.7

From HCL’s standpoint, a library system that serves a county of 270,000 people, the gains beyond contributions to student academic achievement have been astonishing. Over the past three years:

- visits to the library more than doubled—from 1 million to 2.1 million;
- borrowing soared from 3 million titles to 5 million;
- program attendance climbed nearly 200 percent, from 60,000 to 177,000 participants;
- reference questions increased 41 percent, from 760,000 to 1,072,000;
- electronic visits nearly tripled—from 5 million to 12 million; and
- summer reading program participation rose by 50 percent.

In addition, 95 percent of Howard County residents now hold library cards—more than 10,000 cards have been issued through the partnership.

While many library systems across the country experienced budget cuts in 2004, Howard County government raised taxes to support education, the definition of which included libraries. The tax increase funded three additional full-time positions at HCL and an 8 percent salary increase for library staff. County executive James N. Robey justified the tax increase by focusing on the need to fund the county’s school and library systems. He stated, “the tax increase is vital to keep Howard County’s schools and libraries top-notch.”8

Since the launching of the A+ Partnership, HCL has won the Howard County Chamber of Commerce’s Non-Profit Business of the Year Award and the school system selected the library for its Accelerating Academic Achievement (Triple A) Partnership award. Additionally, one of the strongest and most visible statements of the impact the partnership has had in linking the library with education came when Hope Chase, HCL’s head of youth services, was chosen as Educator of the Year by the Howard County Chamber of Commerce. For the first time ever, the Chamber of Commerce allowed public library educators to be nominated for this prestigious award, along with educators from public schools and the community college.

The most remarkable benefit the partnership brings to libraries is the highly visible link to education, shap-

References and Notes

1. For further details regarding how the partnership began, the planning process, and struggles along the way, see also “A+ Partners in Education: Positioning Libraries As a Cornerstone in the Education Process,” Children and Libraries 1, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2003): 27–31.


5. Ibid.

