

Queens Borough Public Library and the Connecting Libraries and Schools Project

Margaret Tice

Acquiring literacy is a continuing problem in our society today. While schools assume the major responsibility for teaching reading and information literacy skills to children, meeting the literacy challenge requires the cooperation of parents, caregivers, teachers, community groups, and librarians. In New York City, the three public library systems—New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Borough Public Library—cooperate with the elementary and intermediate schools through the Connecting Libraries and Schools Project (CLASP). By encouraging greater community use of the public library, CLASP and its coordinated program of activities make family literacy a reality in New York City. CLASP introduces students, parents, and teachers to opportunities for lifelong learning provided by New York City's three library systems.

New York Public Library created CLASP in 1991 with a grant from DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. CLASP initially worked with three community school districts containing twenty-three public library branches and 107 schools. The program was so successful that the three public library systems worked together to propose to the New York City Council that CLASP be expanded city-wide. In 1994, CLASP was implemented in all five boroughs of New York City. In Queens, the Queens Borough Public Library received funding to partially serve one community school district.

In the first year, almost 24,000 children were served in Queens in Community School District 30, an

extremely diverse school district with a large immigrant population and reading scores that range widely. The New York City Council has remained supportive of CLASP. Funding has steadily increased until, in 1999, city funds were allocated to expand CLASP to all thirty-two community school districts serving all students in kindergarten through eighth grade in New York City. For Queens, this means that CLASP now serves more than 240,000 students in seven community school districts with over 300 schools, public and private. In fiscal year 2000, CLASP librarians contacted more than 133,000 students and more than 10,000 parents and educators.

How does CLASP work? CLASP has three broad programmatic goals:

- To support collaboration and cooperation between New York City schools and public libraries.
- To encourage family reading and family literacy and make it enjoyable.
- To increase community awareness and use of public libraries.

These goals are met through a variety of programs and services. Students receive library cards and class visits, as well as access to library programs and library materials for homework and recreational reading and participation in the Summer Reading Club. Parents are made aware of the resources of the library and can participate in family literacy workshops. Educators also learn about library resources and technology and participate in staff development workshops. The sixty-two branch libraries and the Central Library in Queens receive additional materials and

programs support for children in grades K–8 as a result of CLASP.

At the Queens Borough Public Library, CLASP is administered by the Coordinator of Community Youth Services, who works closely with the Office of School Library Services and others at the Central Board of Education in New York City. Before CLASP began to work in each school district in Queens, we contacted the superintendent of the district and met with district staff. The Queens Borough Public Library and each community school district then signed an agreement stating that the school district would allow CLASP access to the schools and that CLASP would provide public library support to the schools.

There are now four CLASP offices that work with the seven community school districts at the district and building levels. CLASP librarians work with the districts and the schools to identify staff development needs and the literacy needs of students and parents. Small teams of outreach librarians work with the schools to make sure that all of the students have library cards and know about the resources of the library. CLASP librarians attend faculty meetings to tell teachers about the resources of the library and how CLASP can help. CLASP librarians attend parent meetings, open school nights, literacy fairs, and other events in order to educate parents on how they can encourage their children to

Margaret Tice is Coordinator of Children's Services, New York Public Library.

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love reading, science, and math, and about the resources for parents at the library. CLASP librarians promote the programs and services of the branches, especially the Summer Reading Club.

CLASP has proven to be very successful. For example, communication between the public libraries and the schools has greatly improved. School administrators, teachers, and school librarians now know whom to call in the public library and the public librarians know whom to contact in the schools. CLASP managers and the Office of School Library Services in the Board of Education now plan staff development calendars jointly. Last spring, the new Chancellor's staff contacted CLASP when they were organizing a town meeting; they wanted CLASP to provide information on family literacy for the parents who would attend the meeting.

School and public librarians now get together each year to compile a recommended summer reading list for all grades. The public libraries are able to stock the titles on the list so students will be able to find and read them during the summer months. This year, librarians also met to compile two special lists titled "New York Books for New York Kids" and "Read Your Way through NYC." The books on these two lists are set in New York City and celebrate the diversity of our communities in New York.

Community school districts and individual schools benefit from an increased number of staff development workshops. CLASP librarians have conducted workshops for teachers and librarians on how to search the Internet, how to use library technology, how to promote reading for fun, and how to do an author study. CLASP librarians have also conducted workshops for family assistants in elementary schools on how to work with parents and how to promote family literacy. CLASP librarians now annually participate in the Office of School Library Services Fall Staff Development Days. Working with the New York State Education Department, CLASP has also conducted workshops on materials selection for failing schools. New Visions (formerly Library Power)

works with CLASP to conduct workshops for school librarians and their principals.

A by-product of CLASP has been an increase in the stature of the school librarian in the various schools with which we have worked. The school librarian is no longer seen as a lone staff member with a cushy job but as a professional colleague with valuable resources and a connection with public librarians.

As far as the public library is concerned, CLASP has been successful in that public librarians have access to parents and students who have not yet visited the Queens Borough Public Library. Last year, CLASP librarians conducted summer reading programs in selected schools, reaching students with low reading skills who may not have ventured to the public library in the past.

Of course, CLASP has not solved all of our concerns in working with the schools. We still need to reinforce with school administrators that students need a good school library *and* a good public library. Neither the school library nor the public library can meet all of a student's library needs. Assignment problems have not gone away even though we have the Assignment Alert. The Assignment Alert works very well—when it works. Teachers notify the school librarian and the public librarian about a pending assignment and what library resources the students will need. Thousands upon thousands of the alert forms have been distributed and promoted, but only a very small number of assignments are relayed to the school or public libraries. CLASP needs to continue to develop strategies for working

with teachers to meet their students' assignment needs.

As a model of school–public library cooperation, CLASP shows how public libraries and schools can work better together. What follows are some tips for improving how public libraries and schools can work more cooperatively:

- Designate who is going to work with schools from the public library and who is going to work with the public library from the schools. Improved communication will follow.
- Visit your school/public library. Learn about each other's resources and collections and staff development needs.
- Recognize that schools and public libraries have different schedules; public librarians need to be able to flex their schedules in order to work more closely with schools.
- Set a goal of working more closely with schools/public libraries and develop strategies for accomplishing the goal. Strategies could include making school/public library cooperation a priority and mandating a certain amount of time per week for a public librarian to work with a local school or designating that working with local schools is a public librarian's full-time job.
- Determine what your needs are. Develop a few initiatives each year to address those needs. Review and evaluate, and then build on those initiatives for the next year.

Evaluation has been an important part of CLASP. We can pull out some

impressive statistics but a qualitative measure was eluding us. Last year, the three public library systems hired a consultant, Marie L. Radford, associate professor at Pratt Institute's School of Information and Library Science. She evaluated CLASP qualitatively using the critical incident technique. A sample of fifth and seventh graders was asked to describe a good public library experience and what made it good, describe a bad public library experience and what made it bad, and relate whether or not CLASP has made a difference. Overall, CLASP had a higher positive impact on fifth graders (39 percent) as opposed to seventh graders (25 percent), and 75 percent of all students surveyed were able to remember a CLASP visit to their class.

Many of the responses that the students gave in the survey go right to the heart of what CLASP is all about. One fifth grade student said, "I feel more comfortable using the online library." In response to a CLASP visit, one seventh grader said, "She made me more motivated and juiced me up and everything she said was true." Another student related how CLASP changed how her whole family uses the library: "I used it more for things and my family, too. I told my family that they learn a lot by going to the library. They used it for everything. Cooking, caring for a pet, and healthy foods." And, most important of all, a fifth grader reported, "Now I know what to do and I feel smarter." CLASP works, and students—our customers—are the beneficiaries. ●

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