
INSPIRING ADOLESCENT READERS: A MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERACY PROJECT

A Proposal to the Verizon Foundation

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Executive Summary

In today's information driven, technology centered global economy, it is essential that adolescents continue to develop advanced reading, writing, and communication skills throughout their middle and secondary school experience. Literature also fulfills valuable needs for adolescents as they mature and learn about themselves and their relationships with others and society. However, research indicates that adolescents lose interest in reading outside the classroom and fail to develop the passion necessary to build and maintain superior lifelong literacy.

Recognizing the joint responsibility of parents and educators to prepare our youth for the future, the purpose of this proposal is to implement a literacy project designed to increase the reading motivation and engagement of middle school students in Randolph, New Jersey. In addition, the project will involve multiple segments of the school community, encourage partnerships between adult stakeholders, foster peer relations in an academic environment, provide a positive role model who demonstrates a commitment to lifelong literacy, and encourage students to bring literature outside the classroom. Coordinated through the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the project creates an exciting partnership between the school faculty, parents, and community. A team with representation from the key stakeholder groups of parents, administration, library, language arts staff, and guidance will finalize details, manage programming, and conduct assessment.

During the course of an academic year, a three phase plan including reading, writing, discussion, and multimedia activities will focus on the work of a well-known and respected author. Strategic guidelines are followed to ensure that student tasks align with New Jersey Language Arts Core Curriculum Standards and the school character education initiative. Activity is organized into six general programming components: writing workshop; peer group discussion; interdisciplinary projects; exposure to an inspirational role model; reading incentives; and personal reflection. The strength of this proposal comes from the combined benefit of these factors. The project culminates with a multi-day author residency including assemblies for all grades and writing workshops for seventh grade students. For students, the author as teacher experience "nurtures the student's growing independence as readers and writers"(Sanacore 392).

Central to the overall success of this program is author selection. This proposal recommends Todd Strasser. Well-known and respected by students and adults, he has written more than 100 books for teen and middle readers, and has substantial experience working with middle school students. The stories explore a wide range of adolescent issues that impact contemporary youth.

Once the residency has been completed, the project team will conduct an assessment to determine if, and to what extent, the proposal met objectives. Survey and focus group methods will be used to collect responses from students, faculty, and the project team. Results will be used to determine the direction of future programs.

Providing our students the opportunity to spend months exploring the literature and writing process of a specific author has substantial benefits. By incorporating this enrichment program into the curriculum and utilizing the resources of a volunteer organization, the financial

commitment required is extremely limited. The \$6880 projected cost includes all expenses, including the \$5100 author honorarium.

In addition to exploring the current state of adolescent literacy, this proposal details the objectives, project specifications, budget, assessment, personnel, and implementation schedule for this worthy program. By implementing comprehensive curriculum that includes an author residency and participatory activities, over 1200 Randolph Middle School students will receive a ticket towards lifelong literacy and the opportunity to become active members of adult society.

Taking Stock: The Adolescent Literacy Challenge

Adolescent literacy--defined as the “set of skills and abilities that students need in grades four through 12 to read, write, and think about the text materials they encounter” (National Governor’s Association 2005)--has become a significant educational and political issue. Statistics presented in a number of respected research studies paint a sobering picture of this national concern:

- High school student’s ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses.
- The twenty-five fastest growing professions have far greater than average literacy demands, while the fastest declining professions have lower than average literacy demands.
- About forty percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek (qtd. in “Adolescent Literacy”).
- U.S. eleventh graders placed near the bottom of international comparisons of reading assessment, behind students from the Philippines, Brazil, and Indonesia (Kamil)

How Did We Get Here?

By middle school, many students lose interest in reading outside the classroom. Experts are debating why this phenomenon takes place. One explanation involves “the fourth grade slump,” where the decoding skills used in the primary grades as reading tools are not sufficient for the complex content of fourth grade texts. Simply put, after fourth grade, students must make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Also, many middle and high school teachers are not properly trained or feel the responsibility to teach reading skills (De León). Learning literacy must become a lifelong process.

A 21st Century Necessity

Advanced reading, writing, and analysis skills are required for adults to become satisfied and productive members of our technology-driven, information centered society. In the 21st century, the electronic and multimedia delivery of written information also requires complex literacy skills. Literacy problems have dire consequences for both individuals and society. Economic concerns spurred by lost productivity and remedial costs of undereducated workers are described in “Reading to Achieve: A Governor’s Guide to Literacy” published by the National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices (National Governor’s Association 2005). Today’s occupations require the interpretation of journals, technical manuals, charts, and web sites. Employees must produce written documentation, conduct multimedia presentations, and utilize effective listening skills.

More significantly, literature itself can provide adolescents a window into the human experience, and help them learn more about themselves and their surrounding world. After all, adolescents are often experiencing a period of emotional turmoil. Reading and writing can become very personal for students in this age group. In her landmark book Literature as Exploration, Louise Rosenblatt discusses adolescent needs fulfilled by literature. When literature elicits an emotional response, students are likely to explore the ethical, social, and cultural themes internally or in responsive discussions. This process can help them understand culture and their individual role

in society as they mature into independent adults. Furthermore, literature can offer a temporary escape or personal identification with characters with similar qualities. Through imaginative writing, students can develop an appreciation for literature as an art form and the personalized nature of the writing process (7-52).

Making a Difference One School at a Time

As parents and educators, we must assume responsibility and provide opportunities to celebrate reading and to maintain the literacy learning curve throughout adolescence. This proposal outlines such an enrichment project for students at Randolph Middle School (RMS) in Randolph, Morris County, New Jersey.

With 1354 students attending grades six through eight (www.rtnj.org), this is a large, suburban middle school where large scale enrichment programs such as this are not often undertaken. RMS utilizes a team structure for the major academic areas of language arts, reading, math, science, and social studies. There are four teams in each grade. Within language arts and math, students are placed in accelerated, advanced, or standard level homogenous groupings. Average school class size is 21.2 students. English is the first language spoken at home for 88.7% of students (State of NJ Dept of Ed).

Although RMS currently hosts an author visit each year, there is no related programming, thematic connection to school curriculum, or mandatory participation by each student. Staff involvement and student enthusiasm are virtually non-existent. This project will seize upon a familiar concept and turn an ordinary author visit into a lasting literary experience.

Objectives

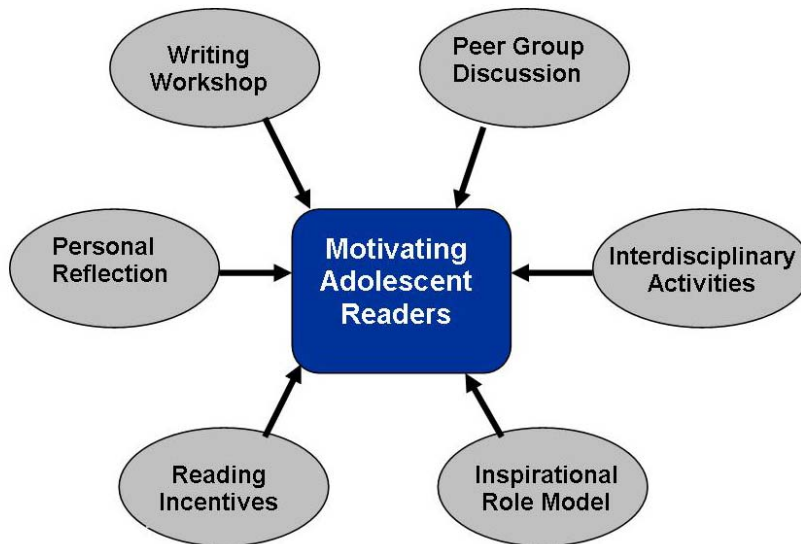
Addressing the challenge to improve adolescent and lifelong literacy, the primary objective of this project is to stimulate the reading motivation and engagement of students at Randolph Middle School. Secondary goals, listed below, will also be met through completion of the program components:

- Involve multiple segments of the school and Randolph community in an effort to promote lifelong literacy
- Encourage positive partnerships between adult stakeholders in the school community
- Foster student peer relations in an academic environment
- Provide students a successful, inspirational role model who demonstrates an enthusiastic commitment to lifelong literacy and the writing process
- Encourage students to bring reading and writing outside the language arts classroom

Project Specifications

In order to meet the above objectives, this enrichment project considers factors that will have a positive influence on adolescent readers.

Figure 1: Factors Used to Motivate Adolescent Readers



Individual activities are designed to reinforce six general motivational categories: writing workshop; peer group discussion; interdisciplinary projects; exposure to an inspirational role model; reading incentives; and personal reflection. The strength of this proposal comes from the combined benefit of these factors. A multi-day author residency provides the program highlight and maximum exposure to a positive role model. All students will be encouraged to read multiple books by the author, and will attend grade level presentations. Throughout the school year, students will participate in a variety of reading, writing, discussion, and multimedia activities focused on works of the visiting author.

Every seventh grade student will be required to read a specific book in preparation for class discussion and individual essays exploring character education themes. 100 seventh grade students (five groups of 20) will participate in writing workshops with the author. Workshop participants will be selected by language arts teachers from all three ability groups. Special consideration should be given to struggling writers who would benefit from exposure to the workshop, not just those students who already excel. A reading incentive program will give all RMS students the potential opportunity to attend a lunch or autograph session with the author.

Implementation Schedule

Continual exposure to the author and exploration of his books throughout the school year are critical to the success of this proposal. The implementation consists of three phases:

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Phase One:</i> | Before the Author Residency | Duration: 8 months |
| <i>Phase Two:</i> | Author Residency | Duration: 3 days |
| <i>Phase Three:</i> | Post Residency | Duration: 1 month |

Strategic Guidelines

In order to achieve maximum benefit from this project, I have considered the following criteria, based in part on author program guidelines suggested by Joseph Sanacore in the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy (Jan 1998):

1. *Form a committee of key stakeholders*

The project team will include representation from teacher, library, student, parent, and administrative groups. This team will finalize all aspects of the project plan. Responsibilities include author contract, book selection, activities, dates, and evaluation.

2. *Ensure a connection between the author project and school goals.*

All student activities align with New Jersey Language Arts Core Curriculum Standards.

3. *Develop the program based on a specific thematic structure.*

A character education theme is suggested for this program to parallel the new RMS character education program, "SPIRIT" being launched during the 2007-2008 school year.

4. *Motivate students to read the author's books ahead of time so they are adequately prepared to actively participate during the visit*

Students will have both required and optional opportunities to read the books. At program kick-off, all students and families will receive an information packet announcing a reading incentive program. Those students reading the greatest number of books (verified with parent signature and a very brief summary of each book) will have an opportunity to attend an informal lunch with the author, attend an autograph session, or receive autographed books (these incentives have been successful in the past). Secondly, a library display will include multiple sets of all (or many) of the selected author's works. Reading, enriched by participatory activities, will be required in seventh grade language arts classes.

5. *Carefully consider scheduling of the author residency and other program activities*

Assuming availability of the selected author, the residency will be scheduled during May when state testing and spring break are finished.

6. *Conduct an evaluation and present recommendations for future programs.*

All aspects of the project will be reviewed by the team. Assessment methods include a survey for staff and focus groups with students. This analysis is crucial for determining the effectiveness of the project, and the degree to which the objectives have been satisfied

Author Selection and Recommendation

Selecting an appropriate author is essential for maximizing benefit from programming. A well-known and respected writer will bring immediate interest from skeptical students and staff. Based on meeting the following criteria, this proposal recommends award-winning author Todd Strasser (see Appendix A for further information about Todd Strasser):

- Both male and female characters are represented in the books.
- Stories explore thought provoking issues that impact today’s youth. As discussed earlier in this proposal, literature of this genre fulfills valuable needs for maturing adolescents.
- Literature themes correlate with the school character education program and will stimulate both group discussion and personal reflection.
- The author is experienced conducting school presentations and small group writing workshops
- The author enjoys engaging middle school students in discussion and question and answer sessions.

The diversity of Strasser’s experience is tremendous, having written over 100 books for teen and middle readers as well as movie novelizations. All attempts will be made to secure this author. However, if a substitution is necessary, the project team will research a comparable replacement.

Programming Detail

Specifics and dates for the suggested activities will be outlined by the project team and distributed to staff in the kick-off packet. The team will also develop criteria for selecting students for those components with very limited participation, such as the author interview and web site development. All student activities are designed to align with one or multiple New Jersey Language Arts Core Curriculum Standards.

**Table 1: Summary of Proposed Program Components
Suggested Author/Thematic Scheme: Todd Strasser/Character Education**

| Activity | Project Phase | NJ Core Curriculum Standard | Community Served |
|--|---------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Program kick-off packet distributed to students and parents | One | N/A | Students, Parents |
| Program kick-off packet distributed to staff | One | N/A | Teachers and Staff |
| Reading incentive program with opportunity for lunch with author | One | 3.4.17: Read more than one work by a single author | All Students |
| Class reading requirement | One | 3.4.22: Analyze text for the purpose, ideas, and style of the author | 7 th Grade Students |
| Class discussion on character education themes in the story | One | 3.4.22: Analyze text for the purpose, ideas, and style of the author | 7 th Grade Students |

| | | | |
|--|------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Write essay applying a story theme to a personal experience | One | 3.3.2: Write from experience, thoughts, and feelings | 7 th Grade Students |
| Develop/present short group skits based on character analysis | One | 3.4.22: Analyze text for the purpose, ideas, and style of the author 3.4.23: Understand the role of characters, setting, and events in a given work 3.1.5: Participate in collaborative speaking activities, such as choral reading, plays, and reciting of poems | 7 th Grade Students |
| Build web site including video and photos chronicling project to be linked with district site | One Two | 3.5.13: Choose and use multiple forms of media to convey what was learned 3.5.14: Integrate multiple forms of media into a single product | Students, Staff, Residents, Parents |
| Hallway murals depicting themes | One | 3.5.13: Choose and use multiple forms of media to convey what was learned | Students |
| | | | |
| Grade level assemblies | Two | 3.2.8: Demonstrate comprehension of, and appropriate listener response (e.g. listening attentively) to an oral report, discussion, and interview | All Students |
| Writing workshops | Two | 3.3: All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that carries in content and form for different audiences and purposes | Select 7 th Grade Students |
| Q & A lunch with author | Two | 3.1.6: Participate in discussion by alternating roles of speaker and listener | Select Students from All Grades |
| Videotaped author interview by students | Two | 3.1.17: Conduct an informational interview | Select Students |
| Autograph sessions | Two | N/A | Select Students |
| Evening author presentation at library | Two | N/A | Residents |
| Build web site including video and photos chronicling project to be linked with district site (continued from phase one) | One Two | 3.5.13: Choose and use multiple forms of media to convey what was learned 3.5.14: Integrate multiple forms of media into a single product | Students, Staff, Residents, Parents |
| | | | |
| Evaluation | Three | N/A | Parents, Staff, Students |

As illustrated in the above table, the students will engage in a variety of activities during the eight months in phase one in preparation for the residency (phase two) in May. Seventh grade students and faculty will become familiar with the author's style, character development, and themes. Through individual and group work, students will be guided to explore the literature in relation to themselves, others, and society. Students in all grades are encouraged to expand the diversity of their extra-curricular literature experience through an incentive program to read multiple works by the same author.

The climax of this program takes place during the three day residency during in May. With the successful completion of phase one, the entire school community will be prepared to welcome the author and enthusiastically participate in assemblies and other activities. For 100 select seventh grade students, author writing workshops will provide a unique opportunity to explore the writing process.

It is important to emphasize the range of literacy skills reinforced during this program. Reading, writing, analysis, discussion, and multimedia core curriculum standards are incorporated.

Assessment

Once phases one and two have been completed, an assessment will determine if, and to what extent, the program met objectives. Data will be analyzed from the staff, students, and project team. A report containing results from the evaluation will be compiled and recommendations made for future programs.

The project team will conduct an evaluation of the student response to the program using a control-case design. A relevant literature review suggests that focus groups are an appropriate research tool for middle school students. Students in this age group possess sufficient analysis skills, enjoy participating in group discussions, and are willing to share opinions about their school experiences (Whitney 2005). Project team members will mediate four focus groups, each with eight students:

- Group 1: 6th Grade Students
- Group 2: 7th Grade Students – classroom activities only
- Group 3: 7th Grade Students – classroom activities and writing workshop
- Group 4: 8th Grade Students

Assessment will compare responses of sixth and eighth grade students (assembly and reading incentive program only) against seventh grade students who participated in phase one classroom activities and the writing workshop.

As well, team members and faculty will be asked to complete an online survey through the QuestionPro service containing scaled and open-ended questions.

Other than the author residency itself, no labor costs are associated with this project. Most programming will take place during school hours, and will be conducted by regular teaching staff or parent volunteers. The bulk of the cost of this program covers the author honorarium (including up to four assembly programs daily) and lodging expenses, together estimated at \$5400. The author will arrive the evening prior to day one and require lodging another two nights. An essential component of this program is student and faculty familiarity to the author's work prior to the residency. Five sets, 25 copies each, of select titles will be purchased and provided, rotating monthly, to seventh grade teams for distribution to students. In addition, 30 books (two copies each of 15 titles) will be purchased for the school library. All books can be purchased at a 40% discount from the publisher. Specific titles will be selected by the project team. Hospitality refreshments will be provided each of the three mornings for faculty receptions with the author. \$50 is allocated to rewards for the school-wide reading incentive program. Finally, faculty and team evaluations will be conducted using the QuestionPro web survey service. A two month professional membership will cost \$30. Refreshments for student focus groups are budgeted at \$50. In her research on middle school focus groups, Linda Whitney reports that refreshments created a comfortable atmosphere and contributed to spirited discussions (Fall 2005).

Implementation Time Line

Table 3: Implementation Time Line

| Date | Milestone |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| July 1, 2007 | Submit proposal to sponsor for review |
| September 1, 2007 | Assemble project team |
| September 10, 2007 | Finalize program components |
| September 30, 2007 | Decision due from sponsor |
| | <i>If program is approved by sponsor:</i> |
| October 1, 2007 | Formalize author visit with contract |
| October 15, 2007 | Kick-off program at RMS |
| October 15, 2007 - May 1, 2008 | Phase one programming |
| May 2008 | Phase Two – author residency |
| June 2008 | Phase Three - Complete assessment |

Conclusion

In summary, implementing a school-wide literacy project that incorporates a range of participatory activities and an author residency will increase student reading motivation and engagement at Randolph Middle School. The basic annual author visit becomes a long term, academically rich, community building experience. With a greater appreciation for reading and the writing process, RMS students will be better prepared to face the challenges and rewards of becoming adults in 21st century society.

Appendix A: Todd Strasser Profile

Todd Strasser has written over 100 books and movie novelizations for middle and teenage readers. His diverse range of work explores many issues confronting adolescents in contemporary society such as self-esteem, popularity, bullying, racial prejudice, homelessness, drunk driving, and school violence. Further information about Todd Strasser is available on his web site, www.toddstrasser.com.

Book Awards

Can't Get There From Here

2006 IRA Young Adult Choice Award
2005 American Library Association Best Book for Teens
2005 American Library Association Quick Pick For Reluctant Readers

Give A Boy A Gun

2006 ALA Popular Paperbacks For Young Adults
2002 New York State Charlotte Award winner
2002 Rhode Island Teen Book Award Winner
2002 Maud Hart Lovelace Award Master List (Minnesota)
2002 Washington Irving Children's Choice Book Award (New York)
2002 Pennsylvania Young Reader's Choice Award Master List
2001 Ten Selection for Middle School/Junior High (Kansas State Reading Circle)
2000 Top Shelf Fiction for Middle Schoolers (Voice Of Youth Advocates)

Help! I'm Trapped (Series)

1998 Volunteer State Book Award Winner (Tennessee School Librarians)
1998 Young Hoosier Book Award nominee (Indiana Media Educators)
1998 Wyoming Indian Paintbrush Award nominee
1996 International Reading Association Children's Choice
1996 Children's Book Council Children's Choice

How I Changed My Life

1998 South Carolina Young Adult Book Award nominee
1998 Utah State Young Readers Award nominee
1996 American Library Association Best Book for Teens
1996 New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age

Hey, Dad, Get A Life!

1997 American Library Association Notable Book

Abe Lincoln For Class President

1998 Washington Irving Award (Westchester Librarians)
1995 New York State Library Association Award For Outstanding Children's Literature

The Accident

1988 American Bookseller Pick of the Lists

1988 Edgar Allan Poe nominee (Mystery Writers of America)

1988 New York Library Books for the Teen Age

Sample Titles

Con-fidence

Can't Get There from Here

Give A Boy A Gun

Close Call

The Accident

Cut Back (Impact Zone)

The Wave

Help! I'm Trapped in My Teacher's Body

Help! I'M Trapped in Obedience School

Help! I'm Trapped in a Movie Star's Body

Help! I'm Trapped in a Vampire's Body

Don't Get Caught in the Girl's Locker Room

Don't Get Caught Driving the School Bus

Kidnap Kids

How I Changed My Life

Movie Novelizations

Home Alone

Free Willy

Jumanki

Ferris Bueller's Day Off

(www.toddstrasser.com)

Appendix B: Proposed Residency Daily Schedule

| Time | Event | Location |
|------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Day One | | |
| 7:15-7:45 | Faculty reception with author | Cafeteria |
| 8:10-9:25 | Grade 6 assembly | Auditorium |
| 9:40-10:20 | Autographs | Library |
| 10:25-11:30 | Grade 8 assembly | Auditorium |
| 11:45-12:30 | Grade 8 lunch with author | Library |
| 12:45-2:00 | Grade 7 writing workshop #1 | Library |
| 2:00-2:25 | Autographs | Library |
| 5:00 | Dinner with Faculty | TBD |
| Day Two | | |
| 7:15-7:45 | Faculty reception with author | Cafeteria |
| 8:10-8:45 | Student author interview | Library |
| 9:00-10:15 | Grade 7 assembly | Auditorium |
| 10:30-11:40 | Grade 7 – writing workshop #2 | Library |
| 11:45-12:30 | Grade 7 lunch with author | Library |
| 12:45-2:00 | Grade 7 – writing workshop #3 | Library |
| 2:00-2:25 | Autographs | Library |
| 6:00 | Public Library presentation | Randolph Township Library |
| Day Three | | |
| 7:15-7:45 | Faculty reception with author | Cafeteria |
| 9:00-10:15 | Grade 7 – writing workshop #4 | Library |
| 11:45-12:30 | Grade 6 – lunch with author | Library |
| 12:45-2:00 | Grade 7 – writing workshop #5 | Library |
| 2:00-2:25 | Autographs | Library |

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