

## **Open the Door - Let the Real World In!**

**Active involvement between the school and the local business community can ensure a greater commitment to success for students with special needs and for all students. Activities such as incentive programmes which create links with local businesses can provide enriching opportunities for life skills development and positive community relations.**

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### **SCHOOL AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

In the past, the school was the community and social centre as well as an educational centre. The community was involved in the functions of the school and the school was aware of community needs. As societal needs changed, the community became more distant from the school. The school focused more on academic achievement with less application to real life situations.

In order to re-establish a functional working partnership between the community and the school, an outreach programme must be designed to allow for interaction, communication and understanding. This is imperative as we look to the future. It's time to open the door and let the real world in! Students with special needs have an even greater need to understand and to be understood. For this to take place, a greater awareness needs to be developed between the students and the community. Through a working partnership this understanding and awareness can really become a reality.

As the time of the teacher is often limited, it is important that the community supplements and extends the classroom learning by providing additional services. The following are some suggested ways to expand and enrich both the community and the school.



## **COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT**

### **Developing an understanding of what the world outside is asking of workers**

School and community planning is vital to provide the educational curriculum and experiences that support the growth of students towards functioning in the world today. Academic learning must have real life applications. A plan including the following components can be devised.

- 1 A parent/teacher committee needs to be formed. Its first function will be to survey community and business needs.
- 2 The committee will hold meetings with community and business leaders to learn expectations of job performance and the skills necessary in the work force.
- 3 The committee will explore ways to integrate the business and community needs into the existing curriculum.
- 4 Students with special needs will observe business and community functions which will further extend their understanding of life skills.
- 5 In developing an implementation process, the committee will take into consideration the school curriculum and the community needs as they plan for the future.

One community in Phoenix, after following the basic development plan, implemented exploratory classes in business and vocational areas as electives for students with special needs. These classes were co-operatively taught by personnel in the field and current instructional staff. The majority of the instruction took place in the classroom with some on-site work experiences. Due to the success of this programme it has been expanded to students outside special education.

By working through this process changes can be made that will have an impact on the lives of the students and their effectiveness as contributing members of the community. This is very important to students with special needs.

### **Business Connections With Schools: the "Adopt a Class" programme**

In the "Adopt a Class" programme one corporation or business "adopts" a specific special education class. Their role in the adoption is to provide funding, support and/or volunteers per proposed request by the teacher and/or



administrator. In order to approach a business, a proposal is developed to establish an action plan.

The following is one example of a proposed action plan.

## **READING PARTNERSHIP**

**Purpose:** To provide good literature for students to borrow for use with the family.

**Goal:** To create a school/home reading partnership.

**Objectives:**

- To promote family involvement in reading.
- To increase the reading achievement of students.
- To create a greater bonding between the parents and the child.
- To promote greater self esteem of parents and children.
- To instill a greater sense of responsibility.
- To develop a partnership between home and school.
- To expand literacy throughout the community.

**Participants:** Families having children with special needs.

**Proposed Needs:** Materials needed would consist of:

- hard cover quality literature books (at least 40 books per class)
- response journals for each student
- heavy duty bag for transporting books to and from school
- volunteers for reading support and record keeping
- estimated cost of the programme

**Programme:**

This programme begins with a meeting of the parents, children and teacher. The programme is explained and a commitment is made by all three parties to participate in a shared reading partnership. This commitment contains a promise by the parents and students to read together. The teacher's role is to provide support through careful record keeping and the provision of quality literature books.

Each student will have an opportunity to select one book to take home and read to/with the family. This book will be checked out through a simple management system that can be supervised by an older student or community volunteer. The book will be transported in the heavy duty bag to ensure proper care and to extend the life of the book. Each student will write or draw a response to the book in the response journal to be shared with teacher, volunteer or classmates.



**Anticipated Outcomes:**

- Families will become more literate through participation in reading/writing together.
- Student reading achievement will show significant gains.
- Better understanding and communication will develop between parents and children.
- Future community members will be better educated, more responsible and productive.

(The above programme has been successfully implemented in special education classrooms and has been extended to include an entire school population.)

When using the "Adopt a Class" programme a proposal may be developed for any area of need such as maths equipment, maps and globes, field trips, science equipment, cultural activities and any other specific classroom needs.

**INCENTIVE PROGRAMMES**

An incentive programme can be developed to provide various prizes for students with special needs to earn by exhibiting a specific skill. In order to receive incentives to use, the following steps can be taken:

1. Contact local businesses in the community that can contribute promotional items. Look up phone numbers and telephone these businesses. Ask for an address and person to contact concerning "freebies". Note: Very few companies will donate items as a result of a phone call; usually a letter is required.

2. Write a personal type letter. As companies do not respond well to form letters, make the letters personal and sincere. Be sure to have a contact name and the name, address and phone number of the school at the top of the letter. (Companies receive thousands of requests but do not mind contributing to legitimate causes.) Explain the programme - how many students will be involved and how the promotional items will be used. Close the letter by expressing your gratitude in advance for their kindness.

3. Follow up with a thank you note within a week of receiving anything. The best thank you note is handmade with the students personally signing it. Also, add a simple line at the bottom of the note stating that if in the future the company should have any additional promotional items please keep the class in mind. Keep the confidentiality of the company if asked not to reveal the source of the materials.



4. After the donations are received the teacher assigns a specific value to each item. These are displayed on notice boards and explained to the students. A point system is then created to allow students to receive coupons with a designated value for a specific achievement. Students accrue the points needed for their selection. Points are accumulated by the students and "spent" on a desired purchase.

This type of activity increases the students' understanding of the work ethic in our culture: rewards are given for tasks completed.

### **COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS**

Special education teachers can increase their effectiveness and ability to individually instruct students by seeking volunteers. These volunteers can assist by helping in the classroom or by making additional instructional materials at home. As a teacher's time is so limited the following suggestions can serve as a guide in the development of a workable, effective volunteer programme.

1. A liaison person is chosen to co-ordinate volunteer efforts.
2. The teacher submits to this contact person a list of volunteer services needed specifying the task and time.
3. The liaison person contacts the community members to establish a bank of volunteers.
4. The scheduling is co-ordinated and the parties involved are contacted.
5. Volunteer training is provided to explain duties and responsibilities.
6. Volunteers are rewarded for their efforts.

Not only will this increase the effectiveness of classroom instruction, it will also expand the volunteers' understanding of the school and its students.

### **CONCLUSION**

Community involvement in education, specifically involving students with special needs, is the key to helping students make the transition to the world outside the classroom. Through a better understanding of the needs of business and the community, the development of incentive programmes, financial support from business and assistance from community volunteers, students with special needs can have greater opportunities to understand their role in the community. This school and community connection is vital to the development of the life skills necessary for survival in the 21st century!