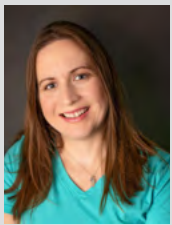


Cultivating Partnerships and Collaborating with the Community

Soline Holmes



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Recently, I realized that I have used the term “partnership” somewhat loosely when I talked about other libraries or non-profits with which I worked. Over my years as a school librarian, I have built up partnerships with our local libraries, independent bookstores, and local groups and organizations such as the New Orleans Opera, Project 826, and the Congo Square Preservation Society, among others. We partnered by working together to host an event or program.

Earlier this year, I read an article published by the Global Education Benchmark Group (GEBG), and it helped me understand that my idea of a partnership had been more one-sided. A true partnership is one where both partners have a goal or need that can only be fulfilled through working together, through the partnership and because of the partnership.

This past summer, I was able to see true partnerships come to life and flourish. Together with my principal, Shara Hammet, we piloted Books from the Heart, a summer community engagement project. Our school has a strong service learning program for our middle and high school, but we did not have many opportunities for our Lower School students. While the students would be engaging in service and would be learning in Books from the Heart, rather than calling it a service learning project, we called it a community engagement project. We wanted to highlight the partnerships and that through these collaborations, we would be bringing our school community together with the community of New Orleans.

As a librarian, some of my most important partnerships are with my colleagues and, as a school librarian, with my administration. To build this relationship, I have a monthly meeting scheduled with my administrator, and, throughout the year, we keep a running agenda on a Google doc so that we can both add items to discuss whenever they arise. This collaboration with my administrator is invaluable—she not only listens to my ideas and invites my thoughts and suggestions, but she is also always ready to help me brainstorm and asks questions to help ensure I have worked through all the details of a project or situation. (We are also both avid readers, so we regularly recommend books to each other!)

The idea for Books from the Heart started when I attended the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) conference in Tampa, Florida, in the fall of 2023. My administrator attended with me, and we were inspired by an idea that we saw at a poster session. (*Side note: When/if possible, I highly recommend attending with your administrator to be able to share what you do as a librarian!*) During the poster session, we met a librarian who had created her own bookmobile to deliver books to kids. My principal and I looked at each other, with our eyes aglow, and, at the same time, said “We WANT to do something like this!” We both had visions of our school bus with our school’s logo driving around New Orleans as we passed out books to kids. And, so the seed was planted....

But, just as seeds require sunlight and water to grow, our idea required brainstorming, fine tuning, and collaboration. We knew we could not do it alone. We wanted this to be a true community engagement project that highlighted our partnerships and community. We decided Books from the Heart would be a three-day program that would focus on literacy and allow our students

Quick Partnership Tips

- **Do not be afraid to reach out.** Remember that potential partners are looking for collaborations, too.
- **Be seen.** Attend events at your local libraries, bookstores, and in the community. Get ideas and make contacts when you can.
- **Keep in touch.** After you make those connections, follow up. This could be as simple as an email every now and then. I will often send people book recommendations when I read a book that makes me think of them or a project in which they are engaged.
- **Ask what your partner needs.** To make a true partnership, remember that both parties should benefit from the collaboration. To ensure that your partner's needs are being fulfilled, simply ask.
- **Be clear about your goals.** Do not forget that you/your library has needs and goals, too. Do not be afraid to share these with partners. You might find that you have the same needs or goals!
- **Say thank you.** At the end of your project or collaboration, send a thank-you note. Sending it via email is fine, but remember that everyone always appreciates a handwritten note, too!

to investigate the world with intellectual curiosity and cultural literacy; recognize and value diverse perspectives; communicate with agility; and take responsible action that promotes peace and justice.

On the first day, students would visit a chain bookstore, an independent bookstore, and a Black-owned bookstore—the Community Book Center—to learn about literacy and the different ways that people find information. On the second day, the students would visit two different library branches, the New Orleans Public Library and the Jefferson Parish Public Library. At the libraries, students would also attend a storytime and participate in a storytime workshop I led. On the third day, we would return to the libraries where the students would lead their own storytime before inviting attendees to choose a free book from our school bus-turned-bookmobile.

How could we make this happen? Partnerships! I reached out to our pre-existing partners, but I also needed to establish relationships with new partners. For example, in the past, my library collaborated with the New Orleans Public Library for Library Card Sign-Up Month and an author visit, but we had never worked with our other local library system, the Jefferson Parish Public Library. How do you establish new partnerships? Reach out! I had previously served on the board of the New Orleans Information Literacy Collective (nolaILC) with the Jefferson Parish Library director, so I reached out to her and shared our plan and goals. I also reached out to the State Library of Louisiana, which generously donated several boxes of books we were able to give out.

In building the program, it became clear that some of our goals were the same as those of our partners. We all wanted to educate children about the importance of literacy, access to books, and the value of community.

Each student received a journal I designed. It contained pages for reflections on each visit as well as pages of brain breaks with a maze (of a bookmobile trying to get to a library), coloring pages, and a free draw page. The journal was an important part of the community engagement project because it provided students with an opportunity and space to reflect on the roles that bookstores and libraries play in communities. For example, my students observed that people do not go to the Community Book Center just to purchase books, but our students noted that, while we were there, people came in to visit with one another, to find out the local news, and to look at community art. While we were there, an international author from Ghana was signing books and talked to the students.

The students also noted that not everyone has access to a bookstore and that some people cannot afford to purchase books. They learned the definition of “vital” and discussed how libraries are vital to communities. I wanted to cheer when one student said, authoritatively, “Libraries are more than just books!” The students were impressed with the seed library at New Orleans Public Library and the Library of Things at Jefferson Parish Library. They loved discovering that patrons could check out sewing machines, an air fryer, baking pans, and record players. I was so proud when a student said that it was good that the library offered these items because “everyone might not be able to afford them on their own.”

In addition to these realizations, the students also learned about the importance of literacy and how they can share books, stories, and information with others. On the final day of the program, the students took everything that they had learned and led a storytime that included songs, read-alouds, and crafts. At the end of the storytime, they invited all of the children to our school bus that was lined with boxes of books. Every child got to come on the bus and pick out a book to keep. The young patrons were so engaged in the storytime and loved working with our students to make breathing wands, but they were most excited to get on the bus and pick out a book. Kids were literally hugging books and running to sit down and read them.

After the program was over, it was important to me to follow up with our partners to say thank you. I put together a slideshow (complete with music!) which I shared with our partners. I now understand the true meaning of partnership.

We provided the bookstores, libraries, and their patrons with a storytime and provided the patrons with books to keep, but the bookstores and libraries that we visited gave us knowledge, understanding, empathy, and hope. The foundress of our school is known for saying that she would have founded the school “for the sake of one [child].” I would have committed to our Books from the Heart community engagement project for the sake of one child, but the beauty is that we reached so many children. &