

Collaboration in New York City: The First Five Years of CLASP

by

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<http://www.nypl.org/branch/services/clasp/clasp.html>

We called it CLASP (Connecting Libraries and Schools Project) because we liked the images evoked by the word "clasp". An adult clasping the hand of a child as they enter the local public library. The clasp of a handshake initiating the meeting of teacher and librarian. The hands of a student clasping a book signifying a love of reading. A necklace-type clasp linking the schools with public libraries.

The CLASP Pilot Project

The New York Public Library (NYPL) received the largest private grant ever given to support public library-school collaboration (*Public Libraries*, March/April 1992). The goal of the collaboration was to ensure that every school child in grades K - 8, received a basic array of public library services, including a library visit with card registration, orientation to the public library for their teachers and parents, a summer reading program, and afterschool library activities. The NYPL's tradition of programming to attract children and young adults into public libraries provided the foundation for CLASP. Preceded by a one-year planning grant (*SLJ*, November 1990), the three-year pilot project resulted in 4,465 programs, reaching 120,875 students, parents, and educators. New library cards were issued to 22,742 children, teenagers, and adults. In three NYC school districts, twenty-two librarians worked on the project — some for a few months — some for several years.

CLASP targeted public school students in kindergarten through eighth grade. However, student behavior and attitudes are influenced by adults both at home and at school. Parents provide a home environment that forms attitudes toward reading and are also a key factor in the ability of students to travel to the library. Teachers have daily, extended contact with students that can reinforce ideas introduced by librarians. School administrators set the tone for services within the schools. School librarians are the natural allies of public librarians and enhancing their status within the educational hierarchy is essential. CLASP developed programs to reach these significant adults as well as students.

The three school districts that were funded by the CLASP grant contained 107 schools and twenty-three of the eighty-two NYPL branches. Grant money provided an opportunity to try new staffing patterns, supplement book budgets, and provide program support. In addition to offering the basic program of library services, CLASP was able to implement several special projects. Now that the CLASP pilot is completed, what have we learned? What techniques can other librarians use? What is the future for CLASP?

Institutionalization of CLASP Initiatives

When we reported at the halfway point of the project (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, September 1993), we could already list successes. "Open School Nights", when schools are filled with parents meeting teachers, provide an excellent opportunity for library staff to greet parents and direct them to the local library. A poignant example is one of a parent, an immigrant who had never traveled more than five blocks from her new home, who met the local children's librarians at an Open School Night. The next day she traversed the seven blocks to the public library — confident that a friendly face would be waiting for her there. Because of the success of the pilot project, Open School Night activities were expanded from the twenty-three CLASP branches to all NYPL branches. By paying local branch staff members two or three hours overtime, information tables can be set up in schools on these special occasions without decreasing public service hours at the library.

When CLASP staff adapted the "Assignment Alert", we were hoping that teachers would warn the public library about upcoming homework assignments. We quickly learned, however, that school librarians share our problem of assignments that tax existing library resources and frustrate students. "Assignment Alert" has become a good focal point for faculty meetings where school and public librarians can discuss the impact of homework on libraries. The CLASP-designed form is now available system wide, receiving the legitimacy of an NYPL form number and distribution to all children's and young adult librarians.

CLASP-prepared summer reading lists, supported by a budget that allowed purchase of additional copies of books, were hailed for overcoming the problems of school reading lists with inappropriate or unavailable titles. Because of their success, the preparation and distribution of these lists was expanded to a citywide effort. In 1995, for the first time, lists were specifically designed for distribution by the public schools and the three New York City library systems. Jointly prepared by librarians of the Office of School

Library Services, The New York Public Library, Queens Borough Public Library, and Brooklyn Public Library, these lists provide a unified message about the importance of summer reading. In 1996, the impact was further enhanced by a budget to purchase copies of all titles for all eighty-two NYPL branches.

Activities Targeted to Special Populations

Not all CLASP activities are feasible or appropriate for system-wide implementation. Some special projects require so much preparation time that they can only be accomplished with additional staff, such as CLASP librarians whose responsibilities do not include branch desk coverage. Other activities are specifically designed for special populations that reside in particular communities.

In northern Manhattan, where 85% of the students are Spanish-speaking, we were concerned not only about reaching students but bridging the generation gap between children mastering English and parents fluent in Spanish. Bilingual picture books, as well as titles available in both Spanish and English, provided the opportunity for "In Tandem Reading Aloud." One librarian reads a page in Spanish then a second librarian reads the same story in English. As the two librarians alternate, students enjoy the story in a language comfortable to them, but also learn new vocabulary in a less familiar language. For parents, we also suggested sharing books in this fashion with their children as a way of providing simultaneous English and Spanish lessons. When a parent reads in Spanish then the child reads in English, it demonstrates that a sharing of stories can transcend language differences.

Nothing is more heartbreaking to a librarian than the older child who has not mastered reading and now equates books with failure. The "Reading Helpers" program was piloted in Staten Island to attack this problem. Older children who are reading below grade level are trained by CLASP librarians in reading aloud techniques and then scheduled to share stories with small groups of children in lower grades. Preparation includes repetitive practice, reading the story to peers, and visits to the public library to select books. At the beginning of the program, children's librarians select a group of appropriate titles. But as the students develop evaluative skills, they begin to find other good books. Since the books are on grade for the younger students, the helper is not stigmatized by reading below level. At the end of the term, an awards ceremony provides a certificate of achievement and recognition — often the first time reading and success have been linked for these students.

The Joint Meetings of School and Public Librarians, initially scheduled in the South Bronx, had two goals: to bring together public librarians and school librarians from the same neighborhood, and to provide professional networking for school librarians. The biggest difficulty in holding these meetings is arranging the release of school librarians. By working with administrators in the district office, we could select dates that did not conflict with other school priorities. By making the programs so exciting that the principals did not want their school excluded; we were able to maximize attendance. Some programs attracting good audiences have included appearances by authors or illustrators, Internet or technology training, and book talks by young adult and children's librarians.

Although some activities provided support for school librarians or curriculum needs, we never lost sight of our primary goal — to bring children into the public library. With the help of school librarians, we designed the "Passport Project" to provide an incentive for visits to a neighborhood branch. The school librarians passed out "Passports to Reading" to every third grade student. On each visit to a public library branch, one page of the passport was stamped by the children's librarian. After six visits, the child brought the passport back to the school librarian who awarded a book as a prize. Enthusiasm for the project extended beyond the students involved, as expressed by the second grade student who could hardly wait for the chance to get a passport "next year."

Middle school students in all districts have been a particularly reticent group, resistant to any effort to excite them about libraries. We were therefore enthusiastic when Caryn Sipos and Gary Morrison described the "Stump the Librarian" contest that they pioneered in the Bay Area Youth-at-Risk project. Although implementation has varied from one site to another (*School Library Journal*, August 1995), the concept taps the adolescent I-know-it-all world view. Public librarians schedule a date to bring ready reference resources to the school and challenge students to ask a question for which the librarians cannot find the answer. Prizes are awarded, but the prize ticket must be redeemed at a local public library. Preparation requires speaking to faculty meetings and classes of students. Not only do the students become excited about formulating a stumper, but teachers learn what can or cannot be answered in a library inquiry.

Replication of CLASP in Other Locations

The CLASP private grant funding ended in 1994. Because of enthusiastic support from the participants, plans were developed to phase CLASP into

all New York City community school districts. Through the initiative of the New York City Council, CLASP funding continued uninterrupted in the NYPL pilot districts. A CLASP district was also established in each of the boroughs served by Queens Borough Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library. These five districts are the first phase of our city-wide implementation plan. The Tall Tree Initiative for Library Services was begun by the Reader's Digest Foundation in 1995. This model library services program for children in Westchester County is designed to build on the success of both the Library Power and CLASP programs, enhancing school and public library programs simultaneously. In Germany, the Bertelsmann Foundation was also interested in establishing "Public Libraries and Schools — New Forms of Partnerships." After hearing about CLASP success in New York City, they have launched their five-year project in six cities throughout the country.

Bringing CLASP Activities to Your Library

Although a large private grant provides an opportunity to demonstrate an effective collaborative program, school and public librarians should not wait to begin working together. Many successful CLASP activities were developed with skills that librarians already have and with small budget allocations. Book talking was used with teachers as well as students. Storytelling was modeled for parents as an introduction to literacy. Reading aloud was expanded to books in non-English languages.

In CLASP, we identified three levels of partnership: communication, cooperation, collaboration. Communication can be as simple as knowing the names and phone numbers of staff in your local schools and public libraries. Cooperation expands services as each agency maintains program control while inviting participation from the other. Collaboration requires joint planning and provides an opportunity to do something together that could not be undertaken alone. However, just as a pyramid requires each level to be solid in order to support the next, effective joint efforts require communication as a prerequisite to cooperation, and cooperative activities inevitably lead to collaborative undertakings.

As your first step toward climbing the partnership pyramid, identify the things that you are doing now. You may already mail program flyers to each other or schedule annual class visits. You could be surprised to find there is already more connectivity than you realize.

Review these activities to determine if a minor change will expand services. You may want to share subscriptions to professional journals or

prepare information packets to distribute to teachers during class visits. One key element in effective communication is maintaining continuity. When a good contact leaves, find out the name of the replacement so your organizations can continue working together.

For a first cooperative venture select a small project, such as an open house or teacher workshop, that you have always wanted to undertake. Develop a budget for it, including all the things you said you couldn't afford, such as "READ" posters for all classroom teachers, bookmark or pencil incentives for students, and light refreshments for parents. It is surprising how much can be done with a small additional allocation that can often be raised by parents or funded by local supporters. Test your expectations of each other as you implement the project. You will be able to establish trust as you learn about resources and constraints.

If you feel you are ready for a large undertaking, like the Passport Project or Stump the Librarian, allow plenty of time for planning. Since the project will be new, it will need to go through the official channels of approval in both organizations. Clearly define responsibilities and deadlines so that all necessary tasks are completed. Be sure to tell everyone about your new project — you will be the best one to excite participants and answer questions about impact. Schedule a review after the project is completed, but don't forget that we learn from our mistakes as well as our successes.

The Lesson of CLASP

CLASP began at NYPL before we had an on-line public catalog or access to the Internet. The lack of technology required us to develop connections that were personal — librarians visiting schools to invite children and teachers into the public library. Now with OPACs, CD-ROMs, and electronic mail, we have new ways to work together and communicate. This will enhance, but not eclipse, the success of CLASP in connecting people — librarians, students, parents, and educators — to create an environment that supports learning at school, at home, and at the library.

CLASP Chronology

"NYPL and Public Schools Forge New Ties to Solve Old Problems," *School Library Journal* (November 1990): 12.

One year of planning to develop formal working relationship between schools and NYPL begins with \$485,000 grant from DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

“New York Public Library Receives Grant for Library-School Initiative,”
Public Libraries (March/April 1992): 71.

Pilot project receives \$3.6 million to create new links between teachers, school and public librarians, and parents to encourage reading and use of neighborhood libraries.

Del Vecchio, Stephen. “Connecting Libraries and Schools with CLASP,”
Wilson Library Bulletin (September 1993): 38-40.

CLASP, half-way through its three year pilot phase, reports success with Summer reading lists, Open School Night outreach, and Parents and Libraries program.

Schaffner, Judith. “Yo! I Stumped the Librarian!” *School Library Journal* (August 1995): 42.

Middle school librarian describes excitement generated by CLASP activity.

Simmons, Jeff. “Library Program gets an A,” *New York Daily News* (April 14, 1996): 34.

City Council funds are sought to expand CLASP to five more NYC school districts.