

The VISTA Family-School-Community Partnership Project

Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction
Madison, Wisconsin

Wanting to lead by example, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) created a family center at its state office building in Madison. Without enough money to fund a staff person, we took advantage of our relationship with the state office of the Corporation for National Service (CNS) to ask for a VISTA to staff it. To our surprise, the state program officer offered us not one VISTA but an additional eight to be placed in schools. All we had to do was to write a successful proposal, focusing on serving a low-income population. CNS worked with us in developing the proposal.

Because funding is from the America Reads Challenge Act, the proposal had to focus on improved reading for children. We tied in our family-school-community partnership program and focused on helping parents help their children from birth on to be good readers. Using the family center angle, the proposal called for the schools to place a VISTA in a family center or to have the VISTA help establish a family center. Each school is to use the center as the base to provide education programs for parents, and to recruit and train volunteers to help all children be independent readers by grade three.

Nine VISTAs work with the DPI to promote reading and volunteerism through family-school-community partnerships. Eight of the VISTAs are located in low-income schools, and one is at the DPI, providing leadership for the DPI family center and coordinating communication with the other VISTAs. Each site is expected to sustain its own project after one or two years with a VISTA.

Selection of the low-income schools was easily done through Wisconsin's SAGE program. SAGE is the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education program, a program unique to Wisconsin and funded with state revenue to provide kindergarten through third grade students in low-income schools with a 15:1 pupil-teacher ratio. SAGE schools also focus on a rigorous curriculum, comprehensive professional development, and a lighted schoolhouse to bring families and community into the school.

The VISTA located at the DPI has helped set up a family-community center and coordinate research and training efforts to build on programs locally. The DPI family center fits in with two of the State Superintendent's key priorities: literacy and

family-school-community partnerships. Long an advocate for school family centers, State Superintendent John Benson has allocated federal Title VI and Goals 2000 money for the broader family-school-community partnership effort at the DPI.

The VISTAs work closely with the school staff to reach out to families and the community, making connections with resources and programs already available to improve literacy opportunities. Using school and community resources and partnerships, the VISTAs are expected to:

- build school-community collaboration around the goals of America Reads;
- recruit and train parents and community members, including older adults and middle and high school students to help children read;
- enhance resources in and use of the school's family center;
- connect other partnership and learning efforts in the school and community, including Title I, public librarians, volunteer coordinators, youth service-learning participants, religious and service organizations, arts and cultural groups, and business.

Schools are encouraged to recruit within their communities for the VISTAs, preferably a parent who has volunteered in the school. VISTAs receive a small living allowance, medical/health coverage, and, at the end of their one-year service, a small savings account or money for education.

The DPI Family-School-Community Partnerships team works with the project, providing technical assistance and program support. This year, schools were encouraged to join the National Network of Partnership Schools; next year, schools will be *required* to join.

As a result of the project, we expect the participating schools to develop strong partnerships related to improved student and parent learning, particularly in reading. As long as we are funded, we look forward to adding more schools each year and the participating schools serving as leader schools in developing and sustaining partnerships. Because sustainability is a requirement of VISTAs, projects will have long-lasting impact on the schools.

Funding for the VISTA position comes from the America Reads Challenge Act; however, the DPI and schools provide space, materials and supplies, and appropriate training for the VISTA to perform the job. The Corporation for National Service also provides training of the VISTAs. The DPI allocated approximately \$2,000 for two annual videoconference meetings and the on-the-job orientation at the DPI for each of the VISTAs. Funding is also needed for on-site visits and resource materials.

As we help schools with partnerships, we recognize the difficulty of finding resources to allocate staff time to making partnerships happen. At the state level, we struggle with providing small financial grants, knowing that most of the work ends up being

done by volunteers or over-burdened staff. The VISTA approach is one way of making a person available for developing and sustaining partnerships. While we will not touch all schools in this way, it can be a highly effective approach to growing partnerships.

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