

## Partnerships with the USS *San Jacinto*

---

*Arrowhead Elementary School  
Virginia Beach, Virginia*

**A**rrowhead Elementary's simple partnership with sailors from the USS *San Jacinto* grew into a successful pen pal relationship and then a far-reaching lunch buddy program called the SanJac Shipmate's Club.

The partnership is benefiting everyone involved—schoolchildren and sailors alike. Many students have parents serving overseas in the Navy or other branches of the military. Others come from single parent households. The students like the attention and encouragement of the adult role models, and work hard to do well in school for them. The sailors enjoy the students' friendship and the different perspectives they offer.

In the spring of 2005, the school established a partnership with the *San Jacinto*, a Navy cruiser based in nearby Norfolk that brought sailors into the school to help teachers run copies, tutor, and read to students. When the ship was deployed to Iraq, the school wanted the partnership to continue, so it collaborated with the ship's representatives to set up the pen pal program. Teachers at Arrowhead used the project as an instructional tool, leading children through the writing process as they eagerly corresponded with the sailors. The children also learned about the sailors' daily lives, even seeing PowerPoint presentations of the sailors at work. The school provided the sailors with guidelines for encouraging students with test-taking tips and words of support.

Seeing how much the students liked communicating with these adult role models

through the pen pal program, the school continued and expanded the program when the *San Jacinto* returned to port. Working with representatives from both NNPS and the Navy, the school established a lunch buddy mentorship program called the SanJac Shipmate's Club. Sailors would come into school once a week to eat lunch and talk with their student buddies, and then read, study, or play. Those third graders who had been pen pals teamed up with the same sailors, while many at-risk students from all grades were also paired with mentors. The school encouraged parents to meet with their child and his or her mentor.

The *San Jacinto* program helped 140 participating students both academically and behaviorally. The pen pal activity allowed students to practice their writing skills in a way that connected to their real lives; teachers noticed improvement in writing skills and test scores. Students worked hard to improve their academic performance to please their mentor. Having a mentor also helped troubled students maintain self-control and strive to do their best in school.

The program cost approximately \$400, most of which the *San Jacinto* paid. Even more critical than the money, however, was the crew's unwavering dedication to the pen pal and mentoring programs. The school's contacts aboard the ship invested a lot of time and energy to establish the pen pal program and continue it once the sailors were ashore.

The Arrowhead students were not the only people who benefited from the program.

---

The sailors also enjoyed the partnership. As the ship's chaplain explained it: "We live in a gray world [the ship is painted gray, inside and out]. The letters from the students and their smiling faces bring color to our world."

*Mischelle Keller, Third-Grade Teacher and  
Partnership Coordinator  
(757) 473-5007, ext. 50964  
P.Mischelle.Keller@vbschools.com*