

Blast Off to Kindergarten

St. Paul Public Schools

St. Paul, Minnesota

St. Paul Public School District partnered with the local library, Mayor's Office, and United Way to help get 4,500 children ready for kindergarten. As part of the new Blast Off to Kindergarten program, a team of city officials developed and distributed 5,000 information-filled backpacks to families whose children were scheduled to enter kindergarten in the fall.

The St. Paul Public Library approached the district with the idea for the program. Library officials heard about a similar kindergarten-ready initiative in another city and thought it would work well in St. Paul.

The district partnered with several city offices. The Mayor's Office supported a VISTA member to help facilitate interdepartmental meetings and to coordinate the outreach effort. Staff from Title I, the district's Student Placement and Student Wellness offices, and the city's community relations departments worked together to formulate and design information about entering kindergarten for area families.

The biggest challenge for the collaborative group was figuring out how to consolidate resources. Before the program, information for incoming kindergarten parents was scattered across several web sites, which weren't clearly linked. In addition, there was a population of parents in the city that didn't have easy access to the Internet. The group settled on a two prong approach: a single web site that integrated all of the information for parents, a plan to prepare the backpacks that contained brochures and information for parents and school supplies for students, and a schedule to distribute the backpacks at various community events.

At the library's 150th anniversary celebration, the district's Parent Involvement Fair, and the Minnesota Children Museum's Get Ready for School event, staff handed out about 5,000 backpacks. Information inside the backpacks guided about 1,100 parents to the program's web site where they could learn more

about health screenings, enrollment processes, and advice for parents of multilingual students. The web site also includes a calendar of events and activities that parents can do with their children at home to help them prepare for their first day of school.

Activities include setting a regular schedule for children, reading stories before bedtime, and exposing children to different cultures so that they will adjust to their new peers. The web site also lists recommended books for parents and for children. All material on the site was translated in Spanish, Hmong, and Somali.

Although the district leaders view kindergarteners success in school as a long-term goal, officials across the state believe that the collaborative work in Blast Off to Kindergarten is a step in the right direction. Schools are distributing the brochures for parents in their monthly newsletters. Parents have commented on how easy the web site is to use.

United Way Twin Cities funded all material costs associated with the program. The Mayor's Office provided funding for the VISTA personnel. The public library donated their web hosting services for the program's online materials. The district paid for translation services using Title I funds.

Blast Off to Kindergarten is an important service for the families of new kindergarten students. District leaders are exploring ways to improve the distribution of backpacks to families for their students, and strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of the outreach and web site information.

Joe Munnich

Family and Community Involvement Coordinator

(651) 767-8109

Joe.munnich@spps.org